

Greenfield native thinks outside the box with new play, children's book

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For the Recorder

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Greenfield native Winter Miller's latest projects, both in theater and literature, can be linked together by one overarching message: Do not let yourself be defined by labels.

In her complex play "When Monica Met Hillary" that is being performed in Miami, Florida through March 27, and in her lighthearted children's book "Not A Cat: A Memoir" that will be released by Tilbury House Publishers on March 21, characters wrestle with the labels and expectations of society, as well as the consequences of not falling in line. But, as "Not A Cat"

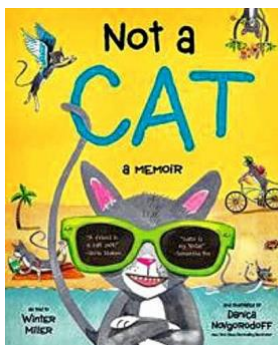
demonstrates, happiness comes from within and from the freedom of self-definition.

In "Not A Cat," Miller's first children's book, we meet Gato, a quirky feline who defies all notions and rules of cathood. Through his various interactions, readers come to realize, Gato is not a cat. Gato is just Gato — a tautology that illuminates just how empty mere words can be. Gato is not "Gato" because the name means something that defines him — it is he who gives meaning to the name.

The story's protagonist is based on Miller's real-life companion animal, Gato.

"In 2008 I adopted a rescue cat, whom I fell in love with, and I named him Gato," she recounted. "And he became my best friend. I took him everywhere with me."

Gato received his name because Miller was looking for a way to bond with her half-Dominican nephew, since "gato" means "cat" in Spanish. In October 2021, shortly after the book was completed, Gato died. Thus, Miller sees the book as a tribute to him and his idiosyncratic nature.



During his life, he was not a traditional house cat. Having to move so much herself, Miller brought Gato with her from apartment to apartment, town to town, and on all manner

of adventures. Comfortable on a leash, Gato was able to accompany her on such exciting endeavors as play rehearsals and to The Montague Bookmill.



"I have pictures of him there reading books about cats, dogs and Jewish cooking," Miller said. He even accompanied her canoeing in the Adirondacks.

“He’s a terrible paddler,” Miller said with a laugh. “He looked like the paintings of George Washington crossing the Delaware.”

“Everyone was always commenting on how he didn’t act like a cat,” she said. “They would say he seemed like a dog or a person. He defied expectations of what people think cats are. I felt like saying,

Miller, who is the daughter of Corky Miller and local activist Al Norman, spent her childhood in Greenfield and Montague and returned to the area to attend Smith College in Northampton. Most of her family lives within the same few streets of each other in Greenfield, so — despite her travels and moves across the country — she returns to the area near-monthly.

She acknowledges the influence of her father’s work in Greenfield, with Norman being most known for his opposition to having a big box store in the city and advocating for the citizen’s referendum process, as well as his work as an elder advocate. Miller said her father does most of his work unseen and uncredited.

“The amount of time he devotes to making Greenfield a livable place, with mom-and-

‘It’s just Gato.’ This resonated with me, because growing up, people would always call me a ‘tomboy.’ I always felt that I’m not a tomboy, I’m just me. This is just who I am and how I am, and I find your label to be sexist.”

Additionally, Miller said it’s important to her to “get to the fluidity of all labels.”

pop shops and good governing, he doesn’t get paid for. He does it because, if he didn’t, who would?” Miller went on to say, “I have great respect for someone who says he’s going to improve the lives of people he’s never even met, and he’s going to do it in a hands-on way and in a thankless way.”

After graduating from Smith College, Miller moved to New York City and worked as a journalist for a variety of news outlets, including NBC and Fox News. However, she dreamed of getting back into theater, saying “this was what I had always wanted to do.”

“The first time I was in a play was in Old Deerfield when I was 7,” she recalled. “From then on, I wanted to be an actor. I moved to New York to be an actor, but I needed to pay the bills.”

Still, she thoroughly enjoyed her journalistic work,

“People should be able to change their labels,” she said. “When I was at Smith in the ’90s, there was this question ‘Are you a lesbian or are you bisexual? Make a choice!’”

She added, “I felt Gato has a possibility to represent any of us in the world who don’t want to be labeled anything but ourselves. I hope it finds the people who need it.

especially when she got to work at the international desk and later with Nicholas Kristof at The New York Times.

“I got to meet the smartest people in the room and I did a lot of listening,” she said.

During this time, she began switching gears, auditioning for acting roles and studying playwriting at Columbia University.

Compared to writing plays, Miller said, children’s books are pretty wonderful, if only because “if you ask someone to read your children’s book, people say ‘Sure!’ whereas a play takes longer to read and is a bigger ask. With a children’s book, you get to see the joy immediately.”

“Children’s books come with illustrations,” Miller continued. “With plays, once they’re up, they’re up, and afterwards they just exist in a book as text.



“Don’t get me wrong, I love to have my plays published for anyone to pick up and read. I think that’s amazing. But these illustrations that Danica Novgorodoff made (for ‘Not a Cat’), I think they’re incredibly beautiful and funny.”

Miller’s play, “When Monica Met Hillary,” is currently being performed in Miami, Florida. Like “Not a Cat,” it tackles issues of identity, though on a more mature and complex level.

The play centers on the fictionalized meeting between Monica Lewinsky and Hillary

Clinton years after the scandal with former President Bill Clinton. Both women wrestle with the multitude of layers to their personas, personal and public, that are at odds and at stake in their confrontation. How, for example, can a wounded wife reconcile being a feminist leader and supporter of all women? How does a young woman deal with her past as she matures into a voice for justice?

Miller tries not to have too many expectations about the reception of “Not a Cat” once it is released on March 21.

“I made this thing that is beautiful and tender and heartfelt, and it’s going to find its way in the world as it is meant to,” she said.

Because of the way books are marketed, the work will be advertised toward a much narrower age range, but Miller thinks it realistically connects with at least children between the ages of 3 and 8, and idealistically with all ages.

“I hope to someday see people reading the book at the World Eye or The Montague Bookmill,” she said. “Who knows!”