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# Q & A with Zeena M. Pliska

By Patricia J. Murphy | Apr 24, 2023

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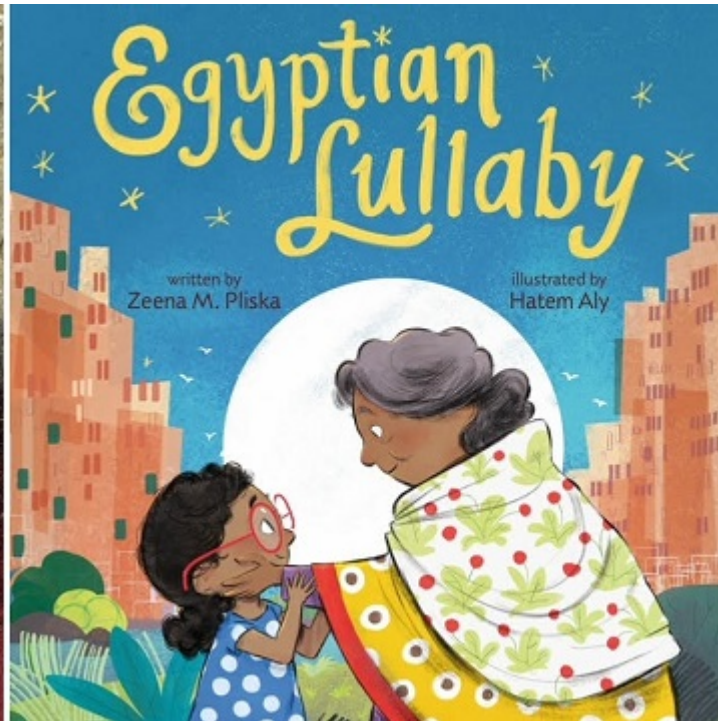
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Zeena M. Pliska.



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*Zeena M. Pliska is a kindergarten teacher, children's author, and activist. Her picture book titles include Hello Little One: The Story of a Monarch Butterfly, and her latest, Egyptian Lullaby. PW spoke with Pliska about the importance of listening as a teacher and writer, what her hopes are for her students and readers, and how*

*she is inspiring five-year-olds to create social change.*

**You have taught in the Los Angeles School District since 1985, and started as a substitute teacher. Can you talk about your teaching philosophy, and the best part of spending your days with five-year-olds, and the greatest challenge?**

I use a specific approach that comes from Reggio Emilia, Italy. It is a pedagogy of listening. I listen all day long, try to stay out of the children's way, and not impose my adult thinking. The curriculum is emergent. I listen, document students' words, facilitate discourse, provoke thinking, and design experiences that lead to more listening. We co-construct learning together. Because of this, there is a lot of social emotional learning that occurs overtly—and happens naturally. As a result, we pull together an entire community very quickly, made up of parents/caretakers, families, grandparents, and the children, that is steeped in listening. And I end up holding a sacred space around the students and their families as they transition into formal education.

The best part is how joyful children are. Children are that way inherently and intrinsically. So, as long as you don't tamper with that being around them every day is amazingly beautiful. The challenges are the politics, the businesses, corporations, and policymakers who have put their hands on primarily public education. For instance, their expectation that kindergarteners now should come to school reading! This expectation and others—including high stakes testing—are developmentally inappropriate. In the midst of this, I stay focused on teaching through creating experiences, building conditions for literacy, scientific, and mathematical processes to occur, and then getting out of the way. I'm always working in the zone of proximal development, and trying to extend the reach of the children who are in front of me at that moment.

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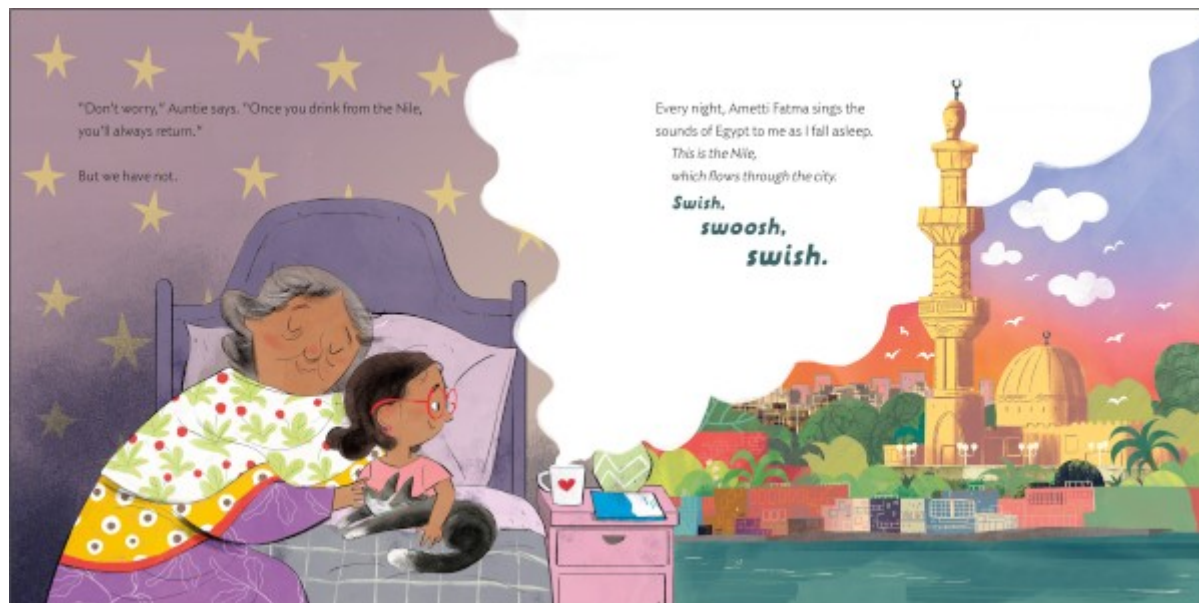
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**After exploring a variety of storytelling forms—journalism, theater, painting, and photography—how and when did you start writing books for children?**

It came about when I did not have the space to paint or a darkroom to develop my photos, and my daughter was in middle school. And since there had always been some writing component to all the phases of my work, it made sense that I tell stories in a way that I could store in my computer. On top of this, being a kindergarten teacher, I was reading two or three picture books a day, so the rhythm was always in my head. And while I had a long way to go in developing my craft of writing for kids, stories just started coming out of me. It was definitely the initial kernel of hearing the rhythm in the books I was reading, and thinking “I can do this” that got me going—and keeps me going.

**Can you talk about your latest title, *Egyptian Lullaby*, and your hopes for this book—and all of your work?**



An illustration by Hatem Aly, from *Egyptian Lullaby*.

*Egyptian Lullaby* came to me when I traveled to Egypt. My dad had an apartment there that was two and a half blocks from the Nile River. And as I looked at the Nile from the bedroom where I was staying, the story just kind of poured out of me. It is really a

different kind of story than the immigration stories that are on the market today. My story's main characters are a child longing to go back to her homeland, and her aunt who creates an Egyptian lullaby out of the sounds of Cairo that the child misses. My hope for this title is to normalize Arab culture for those who are unfamiliar with it and to celebrate it for those who are. The Arab culture is often misunderstood and demonized in the media.

As an educator and an artist, I always want to provoke discourse. It is how I move through the world. I'm a big believer that if you can get people talking, you can facilitate social change. That's my hope with all of my work.

### **How are your teaching, writing, and activism intertwined?**

They are truly interconnected. When I sit down to write a story, my role as a teacher is there in the room with me and how I listen to children and come to know what is important to them. I am also always asking myself, "What do children need from my story? How will they receive this?" and, again, I'm never trying to impose my adult ideas on children. It's the same with my activism. I've been an activist for so long that I bring race, class, and gender analysis to everything I do. So, whether I'm sitting in front of my 20 joyful five-year-olds, attending a rally or a strategizing meeting, or I'm writing a book, these things all dance around and interplay with each other. And, at the end of the day, I'm always a little artist, a little activist, and a little teacher. These things are always at play in everything I do.

### **In what ways do you encourage "little activists" in your classroom?**

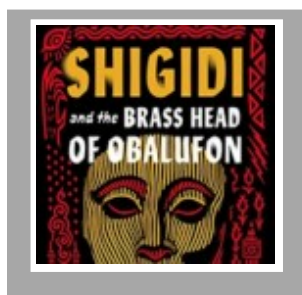
I'm always moving towards what's interesting and what they are willing to do. Teaching is an act of social justice. Building the conditions for empathy and ideas of fairness and equity to emerge in the classroom lays the foundation. This year, we started looking at climate activism. So I built this project that had a variety of buckets. These included an environmental engagement bucket where we have been going on field trips to natural habitats of Los Angeles. There's a literary engagement bucket whereby we developed relationships with three author-illustrators of the newly released picture book *No World Too Big* and created a launch event and an environmental poetry event at a local bookstore. Lastly, there's a civic engagement bucket where we're meeting with policymakers, going to a city council meeting, and attending a school board meeting.

Because of this, there are always things that come up in our classroom morning meetings. Recently, one of my students shared that she saw a mountain lion pelt up on a wall in Idaho while she was on vacation, and this really disturbed her. She wanted to find a way to make laws so they can't do that—and she just turned five! We talked about which policymakers we should go to—if it would be in California or in the whole U.S. She shared that she wanted it to happen in Idaho. And I said that we would have to contact congresspersons with our ideas. These are the types of conversations that I'm having with a five-year-olds. When you listen, the possibilities are endless.

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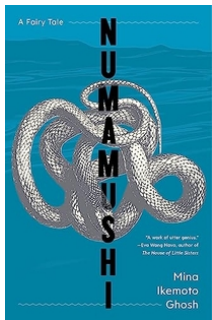


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*Mina Ikemoto Ghosh. Lanternfish, \$16 trade paper (112p) ISBN 978-1-941360-77-4*

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