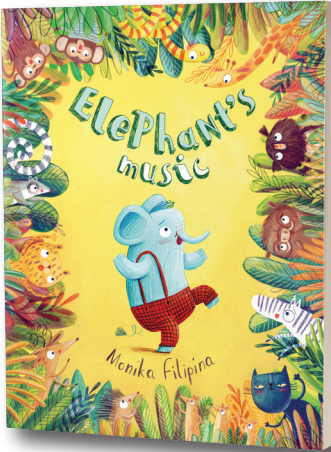




Elephant's Music: Interview with the Author



We all need to belong, but it can be hard to find a way to fit in. In *Elephant's Music*, Edward, the elephant loves music, but has no musical ability at all. This lovely picture book explores how Edward and members of his favorite band find a way for him to be part of the performance. We've interviewed author and illustrator, Monika Filipina, about the process of creating *Elephant's Music*.

Magination Press: What inspired you to write *Elephant's Music*?

Monika Filipina: I usually take inspiration from my own experiences and the world around me. For this story the main character is a little bit like myself. I always wanted to have talent for music, but sadly I am terrible at singing or playing any instrument. I tried to play guitar and flute in the past, but it just did not work! I had to accept that I am tone-deaf and that I will not make it as a singer. I tried to find the crowd that likes to listen to the terrible noise, but that did not happen.

MP: Why did you choose animals instead of people as your characters?

MF: I love animals. They are fun and very playful to draw, they can have imaginary colors and fantastic shapes. Drawing the animal characters will always be my absolute favorite, and I believe that it shows in the artwork, when the creator had fun making the art. For some reason when I think about a story, the first thing that comes to me is the main character is an animal – the lion, the cat, the owl, the rabbit, the elephant... It works subconsciously, it just happens in my mind. Animals are perfect for exaggerating specific features without offending anyone. This time the main character happened to be an elephant because it all started with a single drawing of an elephant who had no fingers to play violin. The funny thing is that in Poland we have a saying that “an elephant stepped on one's ear” which is a humorous idiom for someone who sings off-key or is very unmusical, and another one “to move like an elephant in the porcelain warehouse” about someone being very clumsy. So, the elephant seemed to be the perfect character for the story!

MP: Why did you choose music instead of sports, art, or some other activity?

MF: It is very difficult to explain. This idea of a clumsy elephant trying to play violin came to me. Sometimes it is very hard for me to tell where the idea comes from... It just happens. I walk, or sit, or read a book, or exercise, and suddenly, I have an image in my head and it all begins. I have to stop and write it down so it doesn't go away.

MP: Edward found a way to participate in the concerts by being the band's biggest fan. But it wasn't until the other band members recognized his percussion abilities and the monkeys gave Edward a drum, that he joined the band. Why was it important to show Edward in his biggest fan role?

MF: I think that it shows that Edward was very true to his passion. He accepted that he is not part of the band and learned to appreciate it. It means that if you stay true to what you love, your dream can come true.

MP: Have you ever had an experience like Edward's, where you wanted to belong to a group but couldn't find a way?

MF: Many of my stories and ideas are based around the subject of belonging. I would say that it is the story of my childhood! I always felt I had to belong. When I was growing up I tried to change myself and pretend to be someone else to feel accepted, but deep inside me I never did feel this way. It was not until my adulthood that I understood that the reason I did not feel accepted in a group was that I did not accept the real 'me' myself. Now I do not feel the need to belong anymore, because I have learned to accept who I am. I found what I love doing and do not need the consent or approval from the outside to know that it is okay. However it took me a lot of work and time to get to this point. I would not have gotten here without my husband and my kids. Thanks to them I now know where I belong.

MP: Why do children need books about inclusion and belonging?

MF: Growing up is difficult. At first children are open and honest and carry their feelings and emotions and dreams 'outside'. Then they meet other people and experience new things. Some of these people are not nice, experiences are tough, and kids can start to feel lost and feel that what they thought and felt is not okay anymore. I think it important to show children that whatever it is they want to do — it is good. Even if you are a clumsy elephant, you CAN make your dream come true. It is very important to encourage children to do what they want.

MP: When you create a picture book, which comes first, the story or the pictures? Or do they evolve at the same time?

MF: It always starts with the pictures.

MP: Many of your books have been translated into different languages. What is that experience like? Which languages do you speak and write in?

MF: It is wonderful and very rewarding. Being an author and illustrator has been my dream, and now, knowing that children in so many countries read my books and look at my drawings makes me want to sing (but I won't, don't worry!). I was born and live in Poland, but I studied in the UK. Polish is my first language, but I write my stories in English! It is just a habit from the university. I am also currently trying to learn some Greek.

MP: What do you like to do when you aren't writing?

MF: I like playing Lego with my children. I also exercise a lot — I run and do HIIT training and yoga. It is necessary for me as I have always trained sports from the youngest age. I just do not feel good when I do not exercise.

MP: Is there a fun fact about you that readers might not know that you'd like to share?

MF: As a girl I trained sports — mainly karate. I competed all over Europe and had won many competitions. In 2000 I won a gold medal at FSKA World Karate Championships.

I am still afraid of the dark, and it is only for my children that I pretend I am not.

I start to run and scream when I see a bee or a wasp. I then drop everything I have in my arms; it is actually a little dangerous.

I like the color pink and sparkles.

I ALWAYS eat yogurt with honey and cocoa and fruits for breakfast, and I have a terrible day if I can't have my yogurt!

You should really ask my husband for more of these, it could be fun.

MP: What was your favorite children's book when you were growing up?

Green Piglet with a Button In Its Nose — I do not think it was published in English though. It is actually a very deep book with a lot of political context hidden in the story. When I was a little girl the political situation in Poland was very difficult and this book was actually showing the injustice of what was happening at the time. I did not see this as a child, but I remember feeling all the emotions when reading this book.

I also loved *Winnie the Pooh* and my parents read me *The Hobbit* — still one of my favorite stories of all times!

This Article's Author

Monika Filipina is an award-winning author and illustrator. She earned a master's degree in Children's Book Illustration at Cambridge School of Arts. She lives in Toruń, Poland. Visit her on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.