

Writing and publishing advice for picture books, middle-grade, and young adult storytelling.

BY SANDRA EBEJER

Ani Di Franco: The Songwriter on Her Debut Picture Book

Ani Di Franco has never shied away from a challenge. In 1990, five years after becoming an emancipated minor at age 15, the Grammy Award-winning singer/songwriter released her eponymous debut album on her own record label, Righteous Babe Records. Now, more than 30 years, 22 studio albums, a book of poetry, and a *New York Times*-bestselling memoir later, she's tackling a new endeavor: authoring children's books.

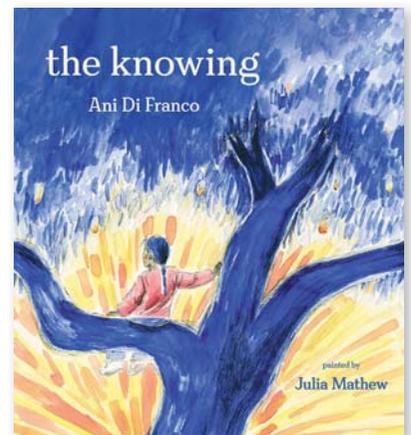
On March 7, Rise x Penguin Workshop, an imprint of Penguin Young Readers, will publish *The Knowing*, Di Franco's debut picture book. Featuring art by first-time illustrator Julia Mathew, the book is written as a rhyming lullaby and is designed to be read or sung; a companion song performed by Di Franco is available for purchase through RighteousBabe.com. The book is the first in a two-book deal, with the second book (and its accompanying track) due to be released in fall 2024.

WD recently spoke with Di Franco about her creative process, working on a strict deadline, and the welcome challenge of writing a seemingly simple lullaby.

LET'S START BY TALKING ABOUT THE TITLE. WHAT IS "THE KNOWING"?

It's awareness, consciousness, which I think exists at a level even more primary than all of the signifiers of identity. People have so many different words for it. Some people call it God, and that means many things to different people. My word for God is *light*; I feel like light is that energy of consciousness that beams through and from us. I think the younger you are, the more tapped in you are to that essential spirit in people around you. All of these uniforms that we wear and labels that we put on each other mean nothing to very young beings, which is such a wonderful state of existence. I mourn the fact that we lose it as we get sucked into culture and defined as this, not that ... Meanwhile, we're all one thing; we're just refractions of this light. I wanted to communicate with young people in a way that affirmed their experience of people's essence, their essential being, their spirit underneath all the uniforms and all the stuff.

DID YOU READ ANY CHILDREN'S BOOKS OR LISTEN TO LULLABIES AS A



WAY TO PREPARE FOR THIS PROJECT?

No. I mean, having two kids, I certainly have read a lot of children's books. When you have kids, you get into kids' books, and you find the ones you love and the ones your kids love. I didn't want to study in order to calculate the magic formula. I can't be Mo Willems, you know? There's only one Mo Willems and there's only one Dr. Seuss. I've been there with two kids over and over, so I had a sense of what kind of pace worked for me and my kids, and when there's too many words on one page, that kind of thing. I worked mostly on instinct.

YOU'RE ALSO A VISUAL ARTIST, BUT JULIA MATHEW DID

THE ARTWORK FOR THE BOOK. WHAT WAS THAT PROCESS LIKE? DID YOU WORK WITH HER DIRECTLY?

The publisher was the one who decided that I should be just the author, not the artist as well, which was surprising and a little bit disappointing at first because I was looking forward to that aspect of it. But I'm of that age where saying yes is easier. I've done so much on my own, so when somebody says, "Hey, how about you delegate this aspect?" I think at this point in my life, I'm more prepared psychologically and emotionally to say, "OK, we'll try that idea."

They did whatever process they do to find the artist that they think was suited to the project and they presented me with one artist: her. [Laughs] I looked at her work, and I was like, "It's beautiful. Let's go for it." In terms of working with her, they asked me what direction I wanted to give her, and I said, "None. This is why you would bring in another artist, to get their perspective and their soul involved. What does she see when she reads the words or hears the recorded version? That's what I want: I want her to bring herself to it." I have so many years of collaborating with musicians and I have experienced many times that if I try to get somebody else to do what I would do, you don't get anybody's vision. You get something halfway in between. I didn't want to do that. I just said, "I have no direction. I want to her to express herself. That's my direction."

Honestly, the publishing company was the one to really get involved with the finer details—a little to the left, a little of this, a little of that. I appreciated their atten-

tion to consistency, things that my eye was not trained to notice. Like, "The protagonist looks to be 6 here and looks to be more like 9 in this bit. The braid is up here and now it's down here on the same day." They were very attuned to all those little details. It was really a back and forth between the publisher and the artist and I was just witness to it.

SO MUCH OF YOUR WORK IS DONE FOR RIGHTEOUS BABE RECORDS, WHERE YOU'RE YOUR OWN BOSS. DOES WRITING SOMETHING LIKE THIS THAT IS DEADLINE-DRIVEN CHANGE YOUR CREATIVE PROCESS?

It's really different because I am so used to just doing my art off in my own little private Idaho. So yeah, even this book, the publisher worked with me through a lot of details. And it's super different for me to have somebody involved in the process and giving feedback and asking for adjustments. Once again, I'm glad I'm 52 doing it this way and not 25 because I think I would have been way more resistant to other people's input, but with age comes a little more flexibility, a little more humility, at least for me. I've written hundreds of songs all on my own with nobody saying anything, and recorded, produced, and released them that way, too. [Now], I'm like, "OK, let's try input. Let's try collaboration." That's a new territory for me, really.

THIS IS YOUR FIRST CHILDREN'S SONG. HOW WAS IT TO WRITE A LULLABY VERSUS ONE OF YOUR USUAL SONGS?

It made me realize my writing incorporates a lot of things on the

regular that are meaningless to children. I like to mess with social conventions, I like to turn clichés on their head, I like to have double meanings—all of which mean nothing to children because they don't know the original cliché, they don't know the double entendre, they don't operate in that world of cultural reference and deconstruction, and all of that stuff I do all day long when I'm making songs. So, I have to write from a different brain [with lullabies], just try to put myself in a world where none of that exists and say things much more simplified.

WHAT DO YOU WANT READERS TO GET FROM THIS BOOK?

I want both parent and child to remember that no matter what you're called or not called, no matter how you're defined or what box you're put in, you're more than that. I tried to include in the book all the ways that people are defined, that a child might be described or told, "This is what you are. You're smart, you're pretty, you're dumb, you're bad, you're Black, you're white, you're exceptional, you're a problem." Whatever it is that you're told you are, know that you are more than that and that your possibilities are really endless. **WD**

Sandra Ebejer is a freelance entertainment journalist whose work has been published in *The Boston Globe*, *The Washington Post*, *The Cut*, *Shondaland*, *AARP*, *Next Avenue*, and *Writer's Digest* magazine, among others. She lives in upstate N.Y. with her husband, son, and two cats who haven't figured out how to get along.