

A Q&A with



# You Are Stardust



illustrator Soyeon Kim and author Elin Kelsey

## SOYEON

**1. *You Are Stardust* is your first book. What is it like to have such specific direction for your art?**

To have such specific direction for my art was challenging but interesting. It is very similar to having an art project assigned in school. Everyone has their own vision of what the book is going to look like, but as the artist, it's my responsibility to take in those thoughts and share my own vision to make the book even better. Despite *You Are Stardust* being my first book, I felt that I was given a lot of freedom to explore the content of the book.

**2. You used flowers from your own garden to build the bear and pollen box. What other materials did you use to build the dioramas for *You Are Stardust*?**

In fact, all the flowers from the book, such as the yellow flower, purple lavender, and the leaves, are all from my garden. I dried them last year just before summer ended, and I thought it would really work well in terms of the context of *You Are Stardust*. To build the dioramas, I used wooden sticks (from Home Depot's gardening department) and got help from my brother and a friend to build each box. Across the top and bottom of each diorama I stretched linen fabric, so that the drawings can be hung with fishing line or stitched on.

**3. How many dioramas did you build for the book? And how long did they take you?**

I built seven dioramas for the book, and they took a solid one to two months. My days during those months were work, eat, work, sleep, and work, but I must say as tired as I was, I could not stop drawing because I was having so much fun.

**4. Which of Elin's concepts was the most challenging to build in 3D?**

I believe "Your body constantly changes. New cells line your stomach every three days. You'll replace your skin 100 times by the time you turn ten" was the most challenging to portray in terms of drawing, because I didn't want it to be just an image of a stomach. However, "*You are stardust*" was the most challenging to build in 3D. I actually had different shooting star shapes, which didn't really work out, and despite having a close deadline, I started over from scratch. I made the shooting stars narrower and splashed paint on acetate (see-through paper) to really push the sense of a star exploding.

**5. What do you like about building dioramas? Do you work in any other medium?**

I started working with dioramas with the purpose of working in 3D space. Dioramas allow me to play with depth and layering. For other dioramas, I have even inserted a LED light with a battery to give a different atmosphere. Before I attempted to build dioramas with wood, I also used cardboard boxes.

**6. What was the photoshoot for the book like? How does it feel to see your dioramas in a 2D book format?**

The photoshoot for the book was challenging, because the drawings were actually smaller than what one might think from seeing the book. Also, because the drawings were hung in 3D space, it was difficult to focus everything in one shot. The photoshoot required a lot of experimenting with angle, depth, and light. To see the dioramas in a 2D book format is definitely very different. I am blown away by what a 2D book format can do, because it really does the 3D dioramas justice. From full shots of dioramas to close-up shots of all the drawings and paper, readers are able to see both a big picture and the finer details of the artwork.



## ELIN

### 1. What was the inspiration behind *You Are Stardust*?

I love nature and I love children and I wanted to write a book that celebrates both. I had been collecting examples of the extraordinary ways we are connected to Earth and when my editor at Owlkids Books suggested we turn them into a picture book, I was very excited to try.

### 2. *You Are Stardust* contains some very big ideas for very small kids. How did you manage that as a writer?

Owlkids Books has years of experience sharing big ideas in ways that respect the depth of interest and capability of young readers, so I felt confident that the editorial team behind *You Are Stardust* could help me create a book that speaks to those relationships in a beautiful, inspiring, and age-appropriate way. The first drafts for *You Are Stardust* were filled with longer passages of scientific explanations. I worked with the editorial group and the illustrator, Soyeon Kim, to interpret these ideas through images and more lyrical, poetic text that I hope conveys the wonder of connection to very small kids.

### 3. This is your first picture book. How did this experience compare to writing for older children and adults?

In my experience, the biggest challenge is being clear about the science behind what you are writing. Whether you are writing for someone who is 3 or 83, once you know what you are trying to say, you can welcome a reader of any age into the subject. As a science journalist, I enjoy capturing the specific phrasing that a scientist uses to convey an idea. But you can't lose sight of the broader concept you are trying to convey. *You Are Stardust* challenged me to keep the focus on helping kids feel their innate connections to nature rather than peppering the book with detailed explanations of specific examples, which would have broken the flow for a young reader.

### 4. The idea that kids spend more time in front of a screen than out in nature is getting a lot of attention. What do you hope to achieve with *You Are Stardust*?

I get a little frustrated with the idea that kids today are somehow different from how children used to be — that too much screen time has made them less creative or less connected to nature. Recently, I accompanied a ship filled with teens to Antarctica. Most of that vast continent has no access to the internet. Some of the kids couldn't remember ever being without their cell phones and some hadn't ventured beyond New York City! Yet they all embraced the extraordinary opportunities to build snowmen on a drifting ice floe or to sit silently in the midst of hundreds of thousands of nesting penguins. The goal of *You Are Stardust* is to celebrate the fact that we simply are nature. I hope this book gets covered in grass stains — carted outside to be read in a tree or by flashlight in a tent.

### 5. You say every example in this book is backed by current science. Can you explain what you mean by that? What's the science behind the statement, "Your breath is alive with the promise of flowers?"

Scientists can now sample the microscopic world in such fine detail; they are discovering all kinds of new species of tiny plants and animals that naturally live in the air we breathe. I interviewed palynologists, scientists who study pollen grains, to ask them, "What happens to all the pollen in the air we breathe?" Every day, you breathe in more than a million pollen grains. The bigger ones get caught in the mucus or hairs in your nose and sneezed back out. Tinier ones may travel down your throat and eventually get pooped out. But a lucky few float back out when you exhale. So that's what I meant when I wrote, "Each time you blow a kiss to the world, you spread pollen that might grow to be a new plant."

### 6. Soyeon Kim's dioramas, which illustrate the book, are so incredible and unique. Do you have a favorite?

If I could convince Soyeon to part with her beautiful work, I would choose ALL of them! I was so moved the first time I saw the dioramas assembled as one collective piece. They filled an entire wall of the boardroom where we were meeting. I love the contrast between the heavy wood frames and the delicate threads, and the way the images and papers float and flutter with the wind.

