



Zilpha Keattey Snyder

THREE-TIME NEWBERY HONOR WINNER

# ANTIQUES GUPIOS USED MERCHANDISE



## EGYPT GAME

#### Zilpha Keattey Snyder

Illustrated by ALTON RAIBLE

ATHENEUM BOOKS for YOUNG READERS
NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY

#### Contents

THE DISCOVERY OF EGYPT

ENTER APRIL

ENTER MELANIE—AND MARSHALL

THE EGYPT GIRLS

THE EVIL GOD AND THE SECRET SPY

**EYELASHES AND CEREMONY** 

**Neferbeth** 

PRISONERS OF FEAR

SUMMONED BY THE MIGHTY ONES

THE RETURN TO EGYPT

EGYPT INVADED ELIZABETHAN DIPLOMACY MOODS AND MAYBES HIEROGLYPHICS THE CEREMONY FOR THE DEAD THE ORACLE OF THOTH THE ORACLE SPEAKS WHERE IS SECURITY? CONFESSION AND CONFUSION FEAR STRIKES THE HERO GAINS AND LOSSES CHRISTMAS KEYS

William S. and the Great Escape

### Excerpt About Zilpha Keatley Snyder

### To the boys and girls I knew at Washington School and to Susan and Tammy for the loan of some secrets

# INTRODUCTION BY THE AUTHOR

Over the years since *The Egypt Game* was first published, I've heard from a great many readers. Their letters have been wonderful, telling me how much they enjoyed the book and how they made up their own versions of the game, and almost always asking me the following question: "Where do you get your ideas?"

That question is perhaps the one fiction writers hear more frequently than any other. But it's the wrong question. A better one would be "How do you get

is pretty much a matter of habit—the habit of taking interesting, but rather ordinary, bits and pieces of reality and building on them, weaving them together until a story emerges. Ideas can come from anywhere. Everyone has good sources of ideas. But the building and weaving part can be hard—fun and

exciting but also difficult and

your ideas?" Because getting story ideas

demanding.

I've often used *The Egypt Game* to illustrate how any story can have "idea roots" that go back to different periods in one's life. The longest root goes back to when I was in fifth grade and became fascinated by the culture of ancient Egypt. I read everything I could find on

own rather simple, and very private, Egypt Game, which included walking to school like an Egyptian—imagining myself as Queen Nefertiti, actually.

A somewhat shorter root goes back to when I was teaching in Berkeley, California, while my husband was in

the subject, made up my own hieroglyphic alphabet, and played my

graduate school. My classes usually consisted of American kids of all races, as well as a few whose parents were graduate students from other countries. All six of the main characters in *The Egypt Game* are based, loosely but with

ethnic accuracy, on people who were in my class one year—even Marshall, whom I had to imagine backward in time And the shortest root goes back to when my own daughter, a sixth-grader at the time, became intrigued by my stories

about my "Egyptian period" and started her own version of the Egypt Game. Her game was much more complicated than mine and involved many of the activities I described in the story, including the mummification of our parakeet, who,

like Elizabeth's Prince Pete-ho-tep, died by feline assassination. A few years later, when my daughter was in her teens, she sometimes threatened to go through every one of my books looking for all the good ideas she had given me —and charge me for them! But as I said before, all these idea roots came from rather ordinary sources that needed to be built on and woven together until they became the story of

The Egypt Game.

Zilpha Keatley Snyder

#### The Discovery of Egypt

Not Long ago in a large university town in California, on a street called Orchard Avenue, a strange old man ran a dusty shabby store. Above the dirty show windows a faded peeling sign said:

A-Z
Antiques
Curios
Used Merchandise

Nobody knew for sure what the A-Z meant. Perhaps it referred to the fact that all sorts of strange things—everything from A to Z—were sold in the store. Or perhaps it had something to do with the owner's name. However, no one seemed to know for sure what his name actually was. It was all part of a mysterious uncertainty about even the smallest item

Nobody seemed certain, for instance, just why he was known as the Professor.

The neighborhood surrounding the Professor's store was made up of

of public information about the old man.

The neighborhood surrounding the Professor's store was made up of inexpensive apartment houses, little family-owned shops, and small, aging homes. The people of the area, many of whom had some connection with the

every continent, and just about every country in the world.

There were dozens of children in the neighborhood; boys and girls of every

size and style and color, some of whom could speak more than one language when they wanted to. But in their

university, could trace their ancestors to

schools and on the streets they all seemed to speak the same language and to have a number of things in common. And one of the things they had in common, at that time, was a vague and mysterious fear of the old man called the Professor.

Just what was so dangerous about the Professor was uncertain, like everything else about him, but his appearance thin beard straggled up his cheeks like dry moss on gray rocks. His eyes were dark and expressionless, and set so deep under heavy brows that from a distance they looked like dark empty holes. And from a distance was the only way that

most of the children of Orchard Avenue cared to see them. The Professor lived somewhere at the back of his dingy

undoubtedly had something to do with the rumors. He was tall and bent and his

store, and when he came out to stand in the sun in his doorway, smaller children would cross the street if they had to walk by.

Now and then, older and braver boys, inspired by the old man's strangeness, would dare each other into an attempt to Their absolute failure to get any sort of a reaction from their victim was not only discouraging, it was weird enough to spoil the fun for even the bravest of

tease or torment him—but not for long.

bullies.

Since there were several antique stores in the area to draw the buyers, the Professor seemed to do a fairly good business with out-of-town collectors; but his local trade was very small. It was said that he sold items that were used,

for grown-ups the prospect of a bargain was often not enough to offset the discomfort of the old man's stony stare.

It was one day early in a recent September that the Professor happened

but not antique, very cheaply, but even

beginning of the Egypt Game. He had been looking for something in a seldom used storeroom at the back of his shop, when a slight noise drew him to a window. He lifted a gunnysack curtain, rubbed a peephole in the thick coating of dirt, and peered through. Outside that particular window was a small storage yard surrounded by a high board fence. It had been years since the Professor had made any use of the area, and the weedgrown yard and open lean-to shed were empty except for a few pieces of forgotten junk. But as the old man peered through his dirty window, two girls were pulling a much smaller boy through a hole in the fence.

to be the only witness to the very

girls before. They were about the same age and size, perhaps eleven or twelve years old. The one who was tugging at the little boy's leg was thin and palely blond, and her hair was arranged in a straggly pile on the top of her head. Her high cheekbones and short nose were

The Professor had seen both of the

was a strange droopy look to her eyes. The old man recalled that she had been in his store not long before, and along with some other improbable information she had disclosed that her name was April.

faintly spattered with freckles and there

The other girl, who had the little boy by the shoulders, was African American, as was the little boy himself. A slender arching eyebrows indicated that they were probably brother and sister. The Professor had seen them pass his store many times and knew that they

were residents of the neighborhood.

similarity in their pert features and

The fence that surrounded the storage yard was high and strong and topped by strands of barbed wire, but one thin plank had come loose so that it was possible to swing it to one side. Both the girls were very slender and they had apparently squeezed through without much trouble, but the boy was causing a problem. He was only about four years old but he was sturdily built; moreover, he was clutching a large stuffed toy to his chest with both arms. He paid not the

two girls that he, "Turn loose of that thing for just a minute, can't you?" and, "Let me hold Security for you just till you get through, Marshall." Marshall remained very calm and patient, but his

slightest attention to the demands of the

grip on his toy didn't relax for a second. When the little boy and his huge plush octopus at last popped free into the yard, the girls turned to inspect their discovery. Their eyes flew over the broken birdbath, the crumbling statue of Diana the Huntress, and the stack of fancy wooden porch pillars, and came to rest on something in the lean-to shack. It was a cracked and chipped plaster reproduction of the famous bust of

Nefertiti. The two girls stared at it for a

turned and looked at each other. They didn't say a word, but with widening eyes and small taut smiles they sent a charge of excitement dancing between them like a crackle of electricity.

The customer, an antique dealer from

San Francisco, was stirring restlessly in the main room of the store. Hearing him, the Professor was reminded of his errand. He replaced the sacking curtain and left the storeroom. It was more than

long breathless moment and then they

an hour later that he remembered the children and returned to the peephole in the dirty window.

There had been some changes made in the storage yard. Some of the ornate old porch pillars had been propped up

statue of Diana had been moved into position near this improvised temple; and in the place of honor at the back and center of the shed, the bust of Nefertiti was enthroned in the broken birdbath. The little boy was playing quietly with his octopus on the floor of the shed and the two girls were busily pulling the tall dry weeds that choked the yard, and stacking them in a pile near the fence. "Look, Melanie," the girl named April said. She displayed a prickly bouquet of thistle blossoms. "Neat!" Melanie nodded enthusiastically. "Lotus blossoms?"

April considered her uninviting

around the lean-to so that they seemed to be supporting its sagging tin roof; the bouquet with new appreciation. "Yeah," she agreed. "Lotus blossoms." Melanie had another inspiration. She stood up, dumping her lap full of weeds,

and reached for the blossoms-gingerly because of the prickles. Holding them at arm's length, she announced dramatically, "The Sacred Flower of Egypt." Then she paced with dignity to

the birdbath and with a curtsy presented them to Nefertiti. April had followed, watching approvingly, but now she suddenly

objected. "No! Like this," she said. Taking the thistle flowers, she dropped to her knees and bent low

before the birdbath. Then she crawled backward out of the lean-to. "Neat," back, she repeated the ritual, adding another refinement by tapping her forehead to the floor three times. April gave her stamp of approval to this latest innovation by trying it out herself, doing the forehead taps very slowly and

dramatically. Then the two girls went back to their weed pulling, leaving the

Melanie said, and, taking the flowers

thistles before the altar of Nefertiti.

A few moments later the blond girl sat back suddenly on her heels and clapped a hand to her right eye. When she took it away the Professor, peering through his spy hole, noticed that the eye

had lost its strange droopy appearance. "Melanie," April said. "They're gone.

I've lost my eyelashes."

him to leave his vantage point at the dirty window. So he missed the frantic search that followed. He also missed the indignant scolding when the girls discovered that April's false eye lashes

had fallen before the altar of Nefertiti, where Marshall had found them and quietly beautified one of the button eyes

At about that point, a customer, entering the Professor's store, forced

of his octopus.

When the Professor finally was free to return to his peephole the children had gone home, leaving the storage yard almost free from weeds, and a thistle blossom offering before the birdbath.