A PLAY FOR THE END OF THE WORLD: LOVE STORIES CIRCLING THE GLOBE

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons podcast, and our acclaimed author series, brought to you by HUC connect together with the Jewish Book Council. We'll need authors recognized by the National Jewish Book Awards and discuss their celebrated books. My name is Joshua Holo, Dean of HUC scribal campus in Los Angeles, and your host. Welcome to this episode of the College Commons podcast. And a conversation with author Jai Chakrabarti. Jai Chakrabarti is the author of the novel, "A Play For The End Of The World," which came out under the Knopf imprint in 2021, which won the 2021 national Jewish Book Award for debut fiction, was long listed for the PEN/Faulkner Award and was a fall 2021 Oprah Magazine pick. His forthcoming story collection is titled "A Small Sacrifice For An Enormous Happiness", also from Knopf, and it will come out in 2023. His short fiction has appeared in numerous journals and anthologies, and his non-fiction has also been widely published. Welcome Jai Chakrabarti to the College Commons podcast, and congratulations on your award.

Jai Chakrabarti: Thank you so much, it's a pleasure to be here.

JH: Your book, "A Play For The End of the World", is set in both the 1940s and the 1970s, and tells the story of Jaryk and Misha, two orphans who survived the Warsaw ghetto, and emerged in the post-war world with an abiding connection and friendship. That connection hinges on their experience in the ghetto, and in particular, on the play to which the title of your book refers. So I'd like to ask you to kick off the conversation by telling us a little bit about that play.

JC: So the play, as it's known in English, The Post Office was written by the Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore in India in 1911. It was translated into English by WB8 a few years after that, and translated into many other languages, and ultimately, ended up in the hands of Janusz Korczak, Born Henryk Goldszmit, and Janusz Korczak decided to stage this Tagore play in his Warsaw Ghetto orphanage in weeks before deportations to Treblinka. So this play is about a child, Hamal, who has a terminal illness and has been quarantined to his house, so all of his interactions are with people who either visit him through the window or his close family who come into the house, and so it's this experience of Hamal trying to understand how to live through his imagination and also wrestling with these questions about the afterlife.

JH: A central theme in your book is, the power of art to move people and events and to shape destinies. This play, The Post Office becomes the locus for that idea, but it also, more specifically in the plot development, serves as the bridge between India and Jewish Poland or between Indians and Jews, or perhaps Indians suffering and Jewish suffering. And I wanna know if in your mind, there is a common thread of the Indian and the Jewish experience beyond perhaps the happenstance of this play having been written by an Indian author and then famously performed the by Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto.

JC: I think there are deep and abiding connections between the Jewish and Indian experience, there is a particular community that's well chronicled in India in Cochin, who have been there since around the destruction of the second temple and are their own autonomous community, but in another city, Bombay nowadays called Mumbai, there have been really thriving Jewish communities, and so I think perhaps one of the more fundamental aspects of that connection is that you have two very old religions who have many similarities in philosophy in the approach of ritual as well, there's, I think many commonalities and ceremony between what you find in Hinduism and what you find in Judaism, as I have come to appreciate being married to a Jewish partner for almost 20 years now, so I think there is incredible connections both at the scriptural philosophical level, but also at the level of daily practice.

JH: Misha, one of your protagonists, we meet posthumously, and his story is that he's moved by a relationship with an Indian professor in New York to join the Naxalite rebellion in Bengal, or not necessarily to join the rebellion, but to serve in the midst of it. I'd like to ask two questions, first of all, for the sake of historical context, tell us a bit about the Naxalite and perhaps more importantly, the place they hold in the modern Indian imagination?

JC: Yes, so the Naxalite revolution begins in the late 1960s in a small village in Bengal by the name of Naxalbari, which is where the name Naxalite comes from, and it is, at a time in India in which ideas of communism are flourishing, in which there are questions about the castification of society, not only in the sense of a traditional caste system, but also in the sense of class hierarchies, and the villagers are wondering why they don't have more benefits from the land that they have taken care of, that they are stewarding for generations. And so begins a violent uprising in the small village of Naxalbari, and from that one uprising, a fire is stoked that then moves into the cities, and particular into the city of Calcutta, and it captures the imagination of many young people. So many college age people start to get involved, question. Typical hierarchies raise these existential questions about who gets to benefit and why. And so Jaryk comes into this situation not knowing the specifics and the complexities of the Naxalite revolution and how that's upended India, and he begins to find out through his relationships.

JH: The second question I have is more of an authorial question. Is there a bit of Hemingway's mission to Spain in Misha's to West Bengal?

JC: Perhaps subconsciously. I'm a Hemingway fan, but I've never been asked this question before. I don't think I consciously made that choice. I think that there is perhaps also this aspect of, in general, a mythical quest, right? So when you have Jaryk who doesn't really know what he's getting into, and as he's developing a greater consciousness for where he's at, I think there is a lot of connections to his story and how many quest stories begin to unfold.

JH: The story, just to give a brief outline is roughly Jaryk's following of his friend Misha, who went to reprise the play in West Bengal, the play that so affected their lives. But Misha died in West Bengal undertaking that project. And Jaryk, his lifelong friend wants to recoup Misha's remains. And in the course of that is the stories are told both in the rearview mirror but also in real time. At the beginning, when we meet Jaryk, and he's just arriving in India on the trail of his friend, he says, thinking about the girlfriend he's left behind in New York, things change. And then Jaryk goes on to think, he Jaryk didn't for even a moment believe he'd changed. His history had surrounded him the way Steph Quilts had warmed his shoulders. But he believed that none of it had made him a different man. This counterpoising of on the one hand, the variability of time in history, and on the other hand, of Jaryk's unchanging sense of self, to me begs a counter question, which is, do things really change? And doesn't Misha's belief that a single play could speak equally powerfully to people in colonial India as it did half a world away to those in the Warsaw Ghetto, and then back again, as it did to the Naxalite and in West Bengal in the 1970s? Doesn't that seem to indicate that ultimately, if anything, things don't really change?

JC: I think you've pinpointed one of the central questions in the novel. And I suppose there's two ways to think about it. One is, do situations change? Do political environments change, or are we caught in a kind of state where we're gonna be repeating the failures of the past? But I suppose as a writer, I'm more drawn to this other question, which is, can people change? And that's what I think Jaryk is reflecting on in that moment, and his belief when he lands in India. And when he lands in India, he is in a state of deep grief. So the way in which he's expressing that statement is also through the lens of that grief. And as a fiction writer, I don't know ultimately where I fall on this question. But in my fiction, I'm interested in exploring the possibility that characters can change. And I think that is the joy of fiction, is that kind of like tug and pull where you think they might change and then they revert back. But then there's some hope. And I would say that I am a hopeful person. And much of that hope in this novel is around the love story, which is ultimately the thing that I think allows for the possibility of change for a character like Jaryk.

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JH: The College Commons podcast is proud to be part of HUC connect, the Hebrew Union College's online platform for continuing education. HUC connects features four programs. Webinars, live conversations with social and cultural influencers on topics of civil society, arts and culture, religion and redefining allyship, community connect, ready-made lesson plans for synagogue and community learning. The Master Class, live sessions of Judaica with HUC faculty exclusively for our alumni. Enroll soon because seats are limited. And of course, the

college Commons podcast, in-depth conversations with Judaism's leading thinkers. For more information about HUC connect and all it has to offer, visit huc.edu/hucconnect. And now, back to our program. In some measure, we've spoken about some of the great human truth that art can communicate or consider. But sometimes great art also conveys practical perspectives on life, even just advice. I'm thinking of 10th grade English class, when we learned of Polonius's famous advice to his son, Laertes, and Hamlet, neither a borrower or nor a lender be to thine own self be true.

JH: There's a scene that you wrote that I just love, and it takes place in India early on in his journey. Jaryk like Laertes is about to embark on a journey. This time, a journey inside of India, a day-long or longer bicycle journey to the interior of the country. And his Indian host who is a sympathetic character, his name is Mr. Paul, he sends Jaryk off with some advice of his own. He says, "Remember one thing, our people are basically nice, except when they are not. Do your best to be kind. All the hotel owners will help you. And for the others chances are good." So I wanna ask you, what about this advice is uniquely Indian or Bengali, and what about it is universal?

JC: What a great question. I think that almost everything in that is likely going to be universal, which is to say that most people when we approach them and encounter them with open arms with an unguarded sense about ourselves, are going to respond with kindness in turn, and that it's really a small percentage who are not gonna do that, and that's when we hope for serendipity. One of the things about this book and about Jaryk's character in particular, is that he believes he has the superpower. And as an author, he believed that he has a superpower of attracting people who service protectors, and Mr. Paul is a protector to Jaryk in that moment. But I think in general, for any one of us who can move into a new situation with that sense of unguardedness about us, I think so many wonderful things are possible, and when I think about that bike ride in a foreign country, and the fact that it's right after his friend's death, so of course, yeah, he's in a deeply vulnerable state, he's open to everything, what else can greet him but kindness in that moment.

JH: You spoke about how at heart this book is a love story, and with that backdrop in mind, I'd like to ask this question because it relates to the arc of the story, narratively in relation to the love story. At the very, very beginning of the book, you inscribed it to quote, for anyone who's crossed a border in search of home, and in that quote, you reminded me of a dictum that I learned when I first spent significant time abroad as a young man, and it went like this, "A true journey only really begins once you return home." What do you think that might mean in view of this story?

JC: Well, "A true journey only begins when you return home." I love that, I love that so much. I think you're absolutely right. I think that the experience of travel is, of course, most interesting as the inward experience, as the kind of plumbing that we do inside of ourselves and the seeking of those deeper truths, and that can only be done with a certain degree of perspective, so when we're in the moment itself, when we're traveling abroad or gaining all of these new experiences,

performing bonds, and those are impressions that are left upon us, and then it's only when we return that I think we start to integrate that. And so I think in the case of this novel for Jaryk, and I should say that the novel starts in India but ends in New York. Hopefully, that's not giving away too much. And when he returns back to New York, what he has gained is this set of perspectives and what it means for him to be in a relationship, what it means for him to be in love, and I think that's one of those things when we talk about quest narratives, is that you're going away from what is familiar to gain this knowledge so that you can come back to the scope of your old life and encountered the new.

JH: You have a story of a Holocaust survivor, Jew Jaryk falling in love with a southern girl, Lucy, and there's a power of love and evolution of the self in love that has to do with falling in love with someone who's very different from you, and it seems like that might be part of your story if I may be so bold. But something authorial and personal in the power of bridging that distance.

JC: Yes, I will say that one of the great blessings of my life has been to get to learn about and become enmeshed in a new culture, a new religion through my partner, Alana, that had I not had that fortuitous moment in New York city many years ago when we met, my life would be much deplored. Sure, as authors, we are absolutely then translating some of our personal experience into the story, and I also spent years living in North Carolina. So Lucy, who is from the American South, I can relate to some of her experiences in that way, but the newness in which she discovers the story, and of course, Jaryk is holding many things back, which is very understandable, given his trauma, is something that I think, many people coming into this larger narrative would relate to, perhaps something of my own experience is reflected there too.

JH: For those of us who are not authors, we hear sometimes about the creative process that writers go through, and sometimes if you listen to interviews like this, you'll hear authors talk about the characters living on their own as if they don't just inhabit your head, but in your head they inhabit reality, and if that's so with you, I'd like to ask my last question, what about one of your characters surprised you?

JC: Firstly, I'll say that the process of building a character is to me the most vital part of writing a book. And that deep relationship that I have with my characters, if I feel like that relationship isn't there, nothing else works. And the process that I undertook here, because I am not a Jewish, middle-aged man who is a survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto. I am not a woman from the American South. So how could I become close to these characters? For me, that process involved a lot of journaling, where I would sit down and write in their voices. And I probably have a book-length journal of Jaryk and of Lucy, just trying to understand how they would react to situations. And through that process, a deep intimacy formed in me to these characters who have very, very different backgrounds and experiences than I do, personally. So one thing that surprised me in the writing of this novel, specific to Jaryk, is that he has undergone this extraordinary, traumatic event in the ghetto. And initially, when I began writing the novel, there was a lot of attention that went into that backstory, into what happened in Warsaw, given the gravity and the importance of that narrative to his consciousness.

JC: And what I began to understand is that while the backstory is of course important, what was more important for Jaryk in that moment was his relationship with Lucy, was his relationship with Misha. And that reframing that here is someone who is trying to find the arc of their life in the moment, who has this deep trauma, but who despite it, is trying to make a life that is full and worthy of living, it seems very obvious now talking about it, but that was the great surprise because I didn't know that in the beginning.

JH: Well, it sounds like it was a journey for you, and it certainly was for those of us who've had the pleasure of reading "A Play for the End of the World." So Jai Chakrabarti, I wanna congratulate you on your well-deserved honors and to thank you for the pleasure of your conversation.

JC: Thank you so much. This has been a wonderful conversation.

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JH: We hope you've enjoyed this episode of The College Commons Podcast, available wherever you listen to your podcasts. And check out HUC Connect, compelling conversations at the forefront of Jewish learning. For more information about all that HUC Connect has to offer, visit huc.edu/hucconnect.

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