



## REBEL DAUGHTER: FIERCE ENEMIES FALLING IN LOVE

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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 meet authors recognized by the National Jewish Book Awards and discuss their celebrated books. My name is Joshua Holo, Dean of HUC's Skirball Campus in Los Angeles, and your host.

JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast, where we're gonna have a discussion with Lori Banov Kaufmann. Lori Banov Kaufmann grew up in Charleston, South Carolina. She received her undergraduate degree from Princeton, and a master's degree from Harvard, during which she and her husband wrote *The Ice Cream Lover's Guide to Boston*. After moving to Israel, she worked as a strategy consultant for high tech, helping military companies commercialize their technology for civilian applications. Upon retiring from consulting, Lori went back to her early love of writing and wrote *Rebel Daughter*, winner of the 2021 National Jewish Book Award. Lori Kaufmann, welcome to the College Commons Podcast.

Lori Banov Kaufmann: Thank you for having me.

JH: The setup for *Rebel Daughter*, which is the topic of our conversation today, is tremendously evocative. Tell us about the historical seed for the book.

LK: The inspiration for *Rebel Daughter* came from an amazing archaeological discovery, which was the 2000-year-old grave stone of a Jewish woman in Southern Italy. She'd been captured after the fall of the second temple, sold as a slave in Rome and freed by her owner who fell in love with her. And we know this because of the few lines that are inscribed on the gravestone. And when I learned about this very unlikely love story, I wanted to know more, I was just captivated. How did a Jewish woman and a Roman man whose peoples were fierce enemies fall in love? And then in addition to this love story, that is just incredible, there's also all the historical questions such as, why did the first century Jews who lived in a small remote province on the eastern edge of the Roman Empire, declare war on Rome, and they had no army? The combination of this personal story, of these real life characters, and this tremendously, interesting, fascinating historical period that I didn't know anything about, just captivated me and

it sent me on a more than 10 year journey with some of the world's leading scholars and archaeologists to answer these questions. I wanted to depict this era as accurately as I could, and I wanted to breathe life into a whole cast of real historical figures, including Josephus and Rebel Daughter is the result.

JH: You really captured the spirit of a family, that of Esther our protagonist, and her father Hanan the priest, in the sincerity of their religious feeling. Partly on the one hand, I think we today, recognize our fellow Jews in these characters, but also partly, they practice a sacrificial ritual that remains very foreign to us, and they fear demons quite literally in ways that most of us no longer do, for example, how does the tension of the identification and the alienation of the reader ultimately draw us more into your characters?

LK: That's a really interesting point, and it is something that I struggled with too as I tried to immerse myself into this world, because like you said, it was a very, very different, very violent society. On the other hand, I had to make the leap, and I believe this, that people and human nature are the same, and we even see today when we're reading the news about what's going on in Ukraine, people still want to live their lives in freedom and dignity, they still are willing to fight for their freedom, to protect their families, and those are just basic human characteristics that time cannot change, and I feel that that's the advantage of fiction, that fiction can take us places where history can't, it can take us into the soul of the people and the soul of men and women, even thousands of years ago, is very similar to people today. And while I've never obviously sat in my house waiting for Roman soldiers to burst in, I have sat in a bomb shelter in Israel waiting for the next Iraqi Scud to fall, I've sat in the waiting room waiting for the surgeon to come out of the operating room, and I know that feeling of fear and powerlessness that we've all experienced, so I think there is a tension between portraying the historical period, which is very foreign, but putting people in there whom we can relate to even today.

JH: So let's talk about two of those people, I wanna ask if I detect some oblique autobiography in the charm of Hanan and Joseph or Josephus, both of whom are storytellers in their own way, and if it is what I'm detecting, what is it about storytelling that drives you and drives them?

LK: Storytelling and stories matter, because what we talked about before, that human nature doesn't really change that much, and storytelling can bring us a new understanding of what brutality and war can do and what people go through and what they're willing to go through to, again, protect their families.

JH: Speaking of this extreme situation in which our protagonist finds herself, and as you indicated earlier, much of the backstory for this book lies in your painstaking historical research. Share with us, if you would, one of the hardest things to convey to us about this distant reality of Roman Judea and the Jewish condition and Roman culture, etcetera.

LK: I think the hardest thing that I wanted to convey was something that happened to me over and over when I was researching this book, and I don't know how to describe it, other than it's

that emotional punch to the gut that many of you have felt as well when you stand in front of the Western Wall, for example, the Kotel for the first time. Even if you're not religious, there's some kind of almost magical transcendent feeling that you feel connects you to these people and to this history. And because I live in Israel, that happened to me over and over as I was walking literally on the same exact stones that my characters were walking on, and seeing the sun bounce off the Golden stones, I just felt like I could be there. There's a museum in the Old City called The Burnt House. It's an archeological site. It is a house from that exact period.

LK: And you see that the walls are still black with the soot and the fire, the ash from the destruction in the year 70, and there's a skeleton of a young woman on the ground and she's holding a spear. And you're a few feet away from this, and you just realize that you're standing in the exact place where this young woman stood as she was waiting for the Roman soldiers to burst into the house, and she tried to get away and she tried to run up the stairs and she didn't make it, the fire engulfed her. And again, it was that not the intellectual understanding of what happened, but the emotional connection that I felt to this history and to these people.

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JH: Speaking about the resonance of the past, the theme of slavery doubles back on itself in your book, from the Roman Empire to the Exodus from Egypt, and back again at this climactic moment that you coincidentally just described as Esther muses. While Jerusalem lay under siege, "Maybe this was how the Israelites had felt the night before they'd fled from Egypt. The Israelite dwellings had been marked with blood, and theirs would be too, once the Romans attacked, they read the story from Deuteronomy, but Esther couldn't bring herself to utter the Biblical words, 'You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt.' She didn't wanna think about slavery." What did you learn about slavery in particular as an historical phenomenon that surprised you in researching this book.

LK: A lot surprised me. First, I'd like to say that the Jews were also slave owners, and surely Esther's family, as an aristocratic family, would also had had slaves and some of them may even have been Jewish slaves. The other thing that I thought was very surprising was when I first learned about this gravestone, I learned that it was a very important archaeological discovery because it was the first physical evidence of Jewish slaves brought to Italy, and we know now

that it was actually Jewish slaves who built the Coliseum. Slavery enabled a culture in Rome that was very decadent, people worked till about 2:00 PM, and then they sat around in the baths and did sports and went to the gymnasium in the market, and it was a vast slave economy. Very different from American slavery in that people could move in and out of slavery in a way that they couldn't in American slavery where you were basically pretty much always a slave, but people were buying their freedom and they were being manumitted by their owners. That means set free.

LK: And that is what happened to Esther. We know that from her gravestone. It was put up by her owner, and we know that he freed her because she was given his middle name, and freed slaves are given the middle name of their former masters, and again, Romans weren't in the habit of commemorating their liberated slaves. And so this gravestone, which her owner erected, Tiberius, does indicate this very special connection between the two of them. So that was just another interesting story about the slave experience, which is so different than what I always associated as the slave narrative.

JH: And it forces us to reckon with the other theme that you mentioned, which is that while the social and religious context may differ wildly, there are core human tendencies and relationships and ways that we relate to one another that can often penetrate the social structures that seem so different.

LK: I think that's a really interesting point. And one of the ways that I used to get into, I'd say the mindset of what it would have been like to be a slave was that I did read diaries and narratives of American slaves, and to understand even what it would be like to be in a siege, I read diaries of some of the Jews in the Warsaw ghetto. And I think, again, these universal human struggles really do transcend the time period.

JH: Tell us a little bit about choosing a woman's point of view in a context that we, maybe in a knee-jerk fashion, assumed to have been a muted voice in the pre-modern world. What did you do to adopt that voice? What were you thinking? And what choices did you have to make?

LK: So much of history is told from a certain perspective, and many voices are lost, women, children, slaves, and it was very important to me to show this momentous event from the viewpoint of someone who was a participant in it and a viewpoint that we don't get very often, which is a young woman. I think that it is important to re-imagine history, not only from the socio-economic factors or the political factors, but look at it, how would it have affected a real woman who lived through this. And maybe because I'm a woman writer, that's the voice that I naturally inhabited, but just felt as I was getting into this story and learning about my characters that she was the person whom I needed to inhabit.

JH: I'd like to ask you to bring the interview home, if you would, with some thoughts about romance, that is to say about romantic emotional love in this ancient setting, a setting which we

often assume doesn't have room for romantic love and in which we assume, marriage, for example, was a purely social contract.

LK: Well, I think that it was a social contract in many instances, but there were examples in the Rabbinic literature and also in Roman history of people that were in love. [chuckle] Obviously, love has been something that's been written about for centuries. The love story here of a Roman master who frees a slave in order to marry her because he loved her to me was just something that I wanted to understand more. It said on her gravestone that she died at the of 25, and according to Roman law then, it was illegal to free a slave under the age of 30, and there were only certain exceptions that you were able to free a slave under the age of 30, and one is if you wanted to marry them, so we know he must have married her in order to free her. And there would have been no reason for him to do that unless he loved her, because as his slave, she had to do anything he wanted her to do, including bearing him children. So the only plausible reason that scholars have come up with that he would have married her was if he wanted to have legitimate Roman children with her and if he had loved her, so I found, again, this love story for the ages just so compelling and proof that however unlikely and however long ago, it's a pretty strong force.

JH: Well, on that force then and with my shared love that you have for ice cream, I wanna thank you for a wonderful conversation and to offer hopes that either in Los Angeles or Israel, we get to share a love of ice cream together and have another conversation. Thank you so much.

LK: Thank you so much for having me.

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JH: We hope you've enjoyed this episode of The College Commons Podcast, available wherever you listen to your podcast. 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](http://huc.edu/hucconnect).

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