



DEAR MR. DICKENS: A REAL-LIFE HEROINE FIGHTS ANTI-SEMITISM

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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, and our discussion with author Nancy Churnin. Nancy Churnin is the author of Dear Mr. Dickens, A Queen to the Rescue: The Story of Henrietta Szold, Founder of Hadassah, and many more picture books, highlighting themes of perseverance and pursuit of a better world. Her books have received many honors, including the 2022 Sydney Taylor honor. And our topic today, Dear Mr. Dickens, won the 2021 National Jewish Book Award. And this is something really great. You'll find free teacher guides, resources, and projects for each book on her website at nancychurnin.com. Nancy Churnin, thank you for joining us on the College Commons podcast.

Nancy Churnin: Thank you so much, Joshua. I'm so glad to be here.

JH: Introduce us, if you would, to Dear Mr. Dickens.

NC: Dear Mr. Dickens is very simply the story of Eliza Davis, a Jewish woman who lived at the time of Charles Dickens. She admired Charles Dickens just as everybody around her did, everyone from the chimney sweeps to the Queen. She admired his charitable spirit, how he cared for the poor, for the vulnerable, but she was very hurt by his portrayal of Fagin, which is an ugly Jewish stereotype in Oliver Twist. And Eliza Davis decided, even though she was not famous herself, [chuckle] she would try and do something about it, and she wrote him a letter. And this is a true story of what happened when this woman wrote Charles Dickens a letter and asked him to do better.

JH: So we're gonna jump into that story in a minute. But before we get to the story, I wanna say that I love the illustrations and I wonder all the time about the nature of the author-illustrator collaboration. How did you work and make decisions with your illustrator Bethany Stancliffe?

NC: That is a great question. The way it works with an author and illustrator is the editor is the one who reads the manuscript and tries to visualize it and finds the illustrator who would be the perfect fit. So I have to give the editor credit for finding Bethany. In this case the editor was Wendy McClure of Albert Whitman.

NC: Now, I got to see Bethany's work in the sketch stage, and I tried to confine my comments to whether she was getting things accurate or not. So we would spend time fussing over little things like the size of the magazine, *All the Year Round*, to make sure it was exactly the right size and the right color. And we would look at the size of the mail boxes. What I did not have to tell Bethany, 'cause I could see jumping off the pages, was how she had created an emotional narrative here in her pictures.

NC: And I would learn about Bethany, that she herself was a young mother, and she identified with Eliza wanting to leave a better world for her children. And so when we see that picture of Eliza with her son and the son looking up to her and giving the son the opportunity to mail that all important letter to Charles Dickens, that was Bethany channeling what she wanted for her child as a mother's. And that's something that I couldn't tell Bethany, Bethany found that herself. And in the best situations, and I think this was one of the best situations, the author and the illustrator are on their own tracks and they come together, I think much as a cinematographer and a script writer do in a movie.

JH: I wanna move to the theme for the moment. I love this line, "Eliza wasn't famous or powerful, but she had the same three things that Charles Dickens had: A pen, paper, and something to say." Tell us about the message of empowerment that is so prominent in your work and the ways you communicate it.

NC: It is so important to me that when children finish this book, the book doesn't end for them at the last page, that they think about, "Well, how can I be the Eliza Davis of my time? I also have a pen and paper and something to say. What do I wanna say to the people in positions of influence and power?" I want this to empower them to do what they can to change the world.

NC: You know, in many ways, I didn't say this explicitly in this book, you mentioned earlier my Henrietta Szold book, and it was called *A Queen to the Rescue*. Why is it called *A Queen to the Rescue*? Because Henrietta Szold took Queen Esther as her model, just the same way Queen Esther spoke up to someone in power who happened to have been the king, her husband, to ask him to do the right thing. That's something we can all do in our own way.

NC: And in the same case Eliza Davis, she spoke up to someone in power, Charles Dickens, who could have doubled down and made things even worse for the Jewish people and for her in particular, but instead she connected with him in a way that made him want to do the right thing. He did the right thing. And because of the way Eliza Davis changed his heart, he used his pen to change the heart of people in England. And I think that made England a very different place for Jewish people. The England before Charles Dickens and Eliza Davis was an England that

segregated Jewish people, had laws against Jewish people, that had been actually one of the most anti-semitic places...

NC: For Jewish people, had expelled Jewish people in the 1400s and forced them to wear yellow badges long before the Nazis did in World War II, but the post Charles Dickens and Eliza Davis world, and it wasn't just them, it was others too, but the post Charles Dickens, Eliza Davis world was the England of the kindertransport that welcomed so many Jewish children who were traveling alone to escape the Holocaust.

JH: I'd like you to talk for a moment, if you would, about word choice and vocabulary. I love the fact that you aimed high using phrases like "dark, liquid, rippling", and "she blotted the ink", which is to say, not necessarily obscure or "big words", but evocative and specific words that otherwise would unlikely appear in daily speech.

NC: Thank you so much for noticing that and I'm so glad that connected with you. I think what it comes down to for me is I write always the book that is in my heart to write, and I try to write it in the way that I see it and that I feel it, and that feels true to me, and I worry less about, Oh, is it fitting in with this word vocabulary or not? I just wanna get it right. I feel a responsibility. I feel that I am being given the opportunity, the gift, to channel someone like Eliza Davis and what she may have been feeling and been trying to accomplish. I discovered Eliza Davis in an academic article, but she connected with a question I had burning in me from childhood on. I grew up in the Bronx, in New York City, in a home that was filled with books. I had a favorite room that we call the library that was filled with books from floor to ceiling, and one of the stories of my childhood was that when my parents didn't have anything in the Depression, the first thing that they bought was a book, my mother was a retired teacher, and my father like her, always just loved books.

NC: Books were always a yes. A little aside, I later found out that this wonderful room called the library was supposed to have been a dining room, but my parents were not into cooking, especially not my mother. So my father said, "Sure, great." And he just built her a library instead, and it was wonderful, and it was always a yes. Any book I wanted, I would fall in love with Louis Malecot, I got all Louis Malecot books. I fell in love with CS Lewis, I got all the CS Lewis books. I mean, everything was a green light, except when I fell in love with Charles Dickens and my mother hesitated, which she had never hesitate before, "Why Charles Dickens?" I said, "Well, he's wonderful. These characters are amazing, he has such a big heart, and he cares about children, he cares about the poor, the writing is so beautiful." And she says, "But what about Fagin?" And that stops me. I was reading these folks in elementary school, I was a very early reader, and I didn't really have an answer for that, and then my mother pointed out, "Don't you realize this ugly joy stereotype encourages anti-semitism. This is why people attack Jewish people."

NC: And I was so stunned, I had nothing to say because we had lost family in the Holocaust, even though my mother was born here in America, her parents had come here from Bialystok,

Poland, and family had been left behind, and they were among the victims. And my mother as a teacher, was aware of windows and mirrors before people were talking about them, the fact that a mirror is how you see yourself, so this ugly Jewish depiction was how a Jewish reader would see himself or herself, how I might see myself, and windows how other people saw Jewish people. So I really didn't have an answer for that, and I found myself sneaking Charles Dickens on the side and wishing I could have written him a letter saying how could somebody with such a big heart have compassion for everyone but the Jewish people. And I really didn't know what to do with those feelings and I didn't know how to respond to my mother, and I didn't wanna disappoint or hurt my mother. And so it was much later, when I was an adult and I was doing research, I came across an article that talked about Eliza Davis, this Jewish woman, who had written Charles Dickens, the very letter I had always wanted to write to him.

NC: I would not believe it. It was surreal. I just couldn't believe the whole thing, so I had to chase down this story, and this is why I'm so grateful to librarians because I said, "This article makes a reference to this letter, but it's only a couple of sentences from this one letter she wrote to him. Where can I find the letters?" And she helped me with the research and she said, "Well, you can go to England, they're in the University of Southampton library," and I actually did reach out to this library in England. You had to make an appointment and you had to be there in person and you couldn't take pictures of them, so you had to just take notes. I'm going, "They must be somewhere." And went back to the librarian and she said, "Well, I found copies of the letters and two out of print books in two places in America, and one of them is at the University of North Texas, which was 40 minutes from where I live." I mean, what were the odds? So I called the University of North Texas, it was in the rare book collection, the librarian there said, "Well, yes, they were... This book was donated to us in the rare book collection by Professor Dan Van, retired now. I will put you in touch with him because he likes to talk to anybody who's interested in Dickens." So then I spoke with him, he invited me to have tea with him and his wife. There's so much I can tell you about this journey, but the most important part to me was that...

NC: I was in a race to put this book in my mother's hands. And when I first wrote this story in 2013, Josh, when no one was interested, they said, "What kid is gonna be interested in Charles Dickens? Who's ever heard of Eliza Davis? And how can a story about Letters be of interest to any child?" I put it aside for while. I kept tweaking it, trying to always get it better, but I put it aside until my eighth book had been published. And one of my editors, Wendy McClure said, "What else do you have for me?" And I thought, "Alright, I've never shown this one to Wendy, I'll show it to Wendy", and she sees it, she wants it right away, and of course, this becomes a book and then it becomes a race, I got to put it in my mother's hands.

NC: And what has happened in 2021 as this book is scheduled to come out is my mother is in the early stages of dementia, very early. So I said to my editor, I have to have an early uncorrected proof of this, I have to get her a draft, I gotta put this in her hands. They got me uncorrected proof in August. I was able to put this in my mother's hands in August, she read this, she read it over and over, she kept saying, "This is so important". And her eyes were filled with tears, and I have to say this was such a healing moment, not only for my mother and for me

because she had finally understood why I had loved Charles Dickens, but also that people do have the potential to change.

NC: And this was something she had believed as a child, something that I think that had been taken away from her by the ugliness of the Holocaust, when she stopped believing that people could change or be good, that there were some people you just could simply never trust, and who knows, maybe there will always be some people you can never trust. But someone that she had given up on turned out to be someone who could change and do better, and it restored something in her heart and in her soul. It was almost as if I could see some idealism of her youth coming back to her again, and that we connected in that place, because then the dementia started really escalating after that. By the time I was able to put the hard copy in our hand when it came out in October of 2021, she started getting confused.

NC: And she thought I had written the letter. She thought I was Eliza Davis. She said, "Did Charles Dickens, did he answer your letter?" And she was so anxious about it, "Has he answered you yet?" And I said, "Oh, it's all in the book. Yes, yes. He answered, he's doing better now, he's doing better. He's changed the words of Jew to Fagin in the book so people won't think that's all Jewish people, and he's speaking up for Jewish people in his magazine." And she was so happy about that. And I have to tell you, by January when I found out the book had won the National Jewish Book Award, and it had won, the Sidney Taylor honor, that meant nothing to her, she didn't understand that at all. But it didn't matter because she had already understood that this book was in the world, that Charles Dickens' heart has changed because Eliza Davis had written that letter and that he was changing hearts, and that was everything to me. On one of my last trips, when my mother still really knew me, she gave me a statue she had saved for me, it was a little Yatra she had had for many, many years of a mother reading to her child her daughter, 'cause this was us, and she had wanted me to take it home, remember that always.

NC: Because that was my mother and me, and where we had split over Charles Dickens when I was a child. Now, we were one again.

JH: Thank you so much for sharing that. And by the by, your expression of gratitude for librarians and librarianship, I wanna echo that. In our business, the world turns because of librarians, so here's to the research and the love and the story. Thank you so much.

NC: I have to tell you of all my books, I'm so grateful to librarians, to the librarians when I was a child, who put books in my hands, to the librarians as an adult, who helped me do the research that put books in children's hands. Thank you.

JH: Hear, hear. Hear, hear.

JH: The college Commons podcast is proud to be part of HUC Connect, the Hebrew Union College's online platform for continuing education. HUC Connect features four programs,

webinars, live conversations with social and cultural influencers on topics of civil society, arts and culture, religion, and redefining ally-ship. 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, and real 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.

JH: You refer to Dickens' iconic character, Ebenezer Scrooge in the book, 'Dear Mr. Dickens' as a counterpoint to his explicitly Jewish and anti-Semitically stereotyped Fagin. I'm wondering, have you heard the literary theory that Scrooge was also a Jewish archetype? Not explicitly Jewish, but no less stereotyped as resistant to Christianity, charity, etcetera. I must say, I heard that theory, and when I did, I found it hard to read Scrooge as anything other than anti-Semitically stereotyped as Jewish, so I'm wondering if you're aware of it and your thoughts...

NC: I had not been aware of it. I have read about other characters in other people's works being used as stereotypes or archetypes. I don't really engage in that. It doesn't really seem meaningful or a good use of my time. I just try and think about the characters and are they good, are they doing what they should be doing to be good people to heal the world? If they are not, is there something that can be done to make them better? And I think the most important part about Scrooge is that Eliza appealed to the way Charles Dickens saw and interpreted the world. The fact that he saw a character changing because of engaging his past and present to thinking about his future, that's what she tried to do engaging him in his letters and that's the parallel that's meaningful. And we talked earlier about Bethany Stancliffe and one of her illustrations that I love the most, which is the very last page, because you see Charles Dickens in his home, this Christian man, you see Eliza Davis in her home, this Jewish woman. You see the letters and the words crossing over the center of that book where you separate their two worlds and how these words bring them together. I like to focus on the ways in which words can bring us together and not get lost in the weeds of how words can pull us apart.

JH: In your author's note at the end of the book, you give us some historical background and among other things, you point out that Eliza's family had bought their house from Dickens. And I have two questions for you. The first is, have you heard that Davis's dealings with Dickens directly in this transaction impressed Dickens with their uprightness and that the sale of the house itself and that transactional relationship also contributed to his thawing attitudes towards Jews?

NC: That is absolutely true. Yes, yes, yes. I didn't focus that on the body of the book because I wanted to just focus on her speaking up, but I wanted that in the author's note and that was a very important part of things. She and her husband bought Tavistock from Charles Dickens. There is a letter that Charles Dickens wrote to a friend of his when he found that the Davises were interested in buying the house he had for sale and Charles Dickens writes to his friends,

"Oh... " In so many words, "Oh, these Jewish people, they wanna buy my house. It's gonna be terrible, it's gonna be so ugly, it's gonna be a horrible situation. I have to sell this house 'cause there's another house I wanna buy. I have to deal with these horrible Jewish people." And then they buy the house. Everything is so upright, so pleasant. Later Charles Dickens writes back to this very same friend and you could almost tell that he's embarrassed in the letter. He says, "Well, that was actually one of the best business dealings I have ever had."

JH: Given your comments, I wanna point out to our audience that the illustrations of which we spoke earlier, now in light of the sale of the house, they acquire a much deeper level because there's a quality of homeyness to many of the illustrations, to the spreads as we see Dickens and Davis and the notion that the physical house may have been the bridge that allowed this to go in the right direction is really beautifully evoked in the book.

NC: That's such an interesting observation. I hadn't even picked up on that and now I'm gonna be looking at that in a more profound way. So thank you for that insight, which I will now also share with the children that I share this with. Yes, I must say he must have looked back at that she is living in the house that he associated with hearth and love and raising a family there just as he had raised a family. So yes, I think that probably did build the emotional connections and it makes that last spread even more moving. Thank you very much for that observation.

JH: It really is a wonderful book, a delight to read. And I wanna pick up on something I mentioned in the introduction, which is the teacher guides, for which I'm so grateful. One of the questions in the teacher guide for Dear Mr. Dickens points out that the book itself opens with a question. "Think of someone famous you admire. What would you do if that person said or wrote something unfair?" The themes of your books seem to indicate that you write almost perhaps with the teacher guides in mind as you're writing. Do you in fact participate in their development? Is this part and parcel of your process and your choice of topic?

NC: I can tell you that I am very moved by issues of social justice. I feel that we are all here only for a brief speck of a speck of time and that it's important to use this time to try to heal the world, but I don't write the teacher's guides. I always hire a teacher, and in this case, Marcy Colleen, who happens to be a wonderful author herself but also was an educator, she did the teacher's guidance and many of my teacher's guides. I did help her with issues about anti-semitism and history, but mainly I left it to her because she knows how to connect teacher to teacher. I am proud that every one of my books, 10 are out, more are coming out, but all 10 of them are on social justice lists. I don't do that self-consciously, but I think it's because it's my passion. I think those are the people I write about, people, again, who seem ordinary, who are not the biggest and the strongest. Their strength is their heart, their perseverance. They don't give up and they leave the world better than they found it and I hope inspire others to as well.

NC: My mother, whom I love so dearly, my mother was a teacher and passionate about what she did and the importance of what she did in shaping hearts and minds to go out into the world

and make this world better and it was always my dream that I would be able to supply books that would help in her dream and her goal and to bring our dreams together as one.

JH: You draw on much of your human and justice themes from history and historical biography across the many books you've written. What either in your research, your writing or perhaps in people's responses to your books, has surprised you most over the years?

NC: I wouldn't say it surprised me, but it doesn't surprise me at the same time if you'll allow that. I was told so many times children won't understand this, children won't get this, children might not relate to this. And the children are so much smarter and wiser than so many adults give them credit for. I was at a presentation for another book and I cannot tell you how many children came up and pointed to Dear Mr. Dickens and told me that was their favorite, that she had a paper and pen and something to say and that made them feel powerful and they love that she spoke up. Over the years, they have taught me more than ever when I doubt myself because of something an adult might say, I trust the kids, and the kids are telling me to trust my heart, so I will continue to write what's in my heart and I thank the kids for guiding me.

JH: Well, we thank you for writing the books and thank you for challenging us. It's really been a pleasure to speak with you, Nancy Churnin, on the College Commons Podcast. Thank you so much for joining us.

NC: Thank you, Joshua. It is a joy and a pleasure. I also wanna say thank you to the Jewish Book Council for this great honor. I could not get these books into children's hands and into adults' hands. These are really for all ages. Without you, without the Jewish Book Council, association with Jewish libraries, the librarians, the teachers who bring these to the attention of readers and I am so grateful and thankful to you and for us all to be on this journey together.

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