



**COLLEGE
COMMONS**

IMMIGRANT “ALIENS” – LITERALLY

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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.

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JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons podcast. And our conversation with author Helene Wecker. Helene Wecker's first novel, *The Golem and the Jinni*, was nominated for a Nebula Award and a World Fantasy Award. And won the Mythopoeic Award for Adult Literature, among many others. Wecker's work has appeared in literary journals such as *Joyland* and *Catamaran*, as well as the fantasy anthology, *The Djinn Falls in Love and Other Stories*. We'll discuss her most recent novel, *The Hidden Palace*, a sequel to *The Golem and the Jinni*, which won a 2021 National Jewish Book Award. Welcome Helene Wecker to the College Commons podcast.

Helene Wecker: Thank you for having me. I'm thrilled to be here.

JH: Introduce us if you would, to the world of these two novels, *The Golem and the Jinni* and *The Hidden Palace*.

HW: *The Golem and the Jinni* and its sequel *The Hidden Palace* take place at the turn of the 20th century in Manhattan, where a female golem created to be a man's wife arrives in New York on a ship from Eastern Europe. And now she is alone because the man who is supposed to be her master has died on the voyage. So she's alone and she has absolutely no idea what to do. She's completely new to society, to humanity, and now she has to sort of wander around New York to figure out what to do with herself. And she ends up on the Lower East Side where an old rabbi recognizes her for what she is and takes her in and begins to teach her how to fit in as human, how to pass. And at the same time elsewhere in Manhattan, in the neighborhood of Little Syria, a tinsmith is repairing an old copper flask that someone has given him and he accidentally breaks a seal and out-pops a jinni trapped in human form who has been for 1000

years trapped inside that flask. And now he too has to figure out how to live in this new human society that he finds himself in.

HW: And so the two of them in their human disguises, having more or less success sort of passing as human, feel their way around Manhattan until sort of the night when inevitably their paths cross, and now they have to figure out what to do about each other. In a nutshell, that's the first book, which is about sort of the shock of immigration and arriving in a new place, except using our two monsters as sort of the ultimate immigrants and learning not just how to get an apartment and find a train schedule, but how to eat, how to pretend to sleep if you don't actually sleep and learning to fit in.

HW: The second book, *The Hidden Palace*, picks up pretty much where the first book left off. The first book takes place over the course of a year. In the second book, we began in 1900, and it's a much longer time span in the book. It's from 1900 to 1915, because I wanted to make it more about the process of assimilation and the slow changes that occur as you get used to a new country and a new way of life. And how at a certain point for an immigrant, you might feel as though you're not the person you were just a few years ago.

JH: Jinnis and Golems, I suppose for that matter as well, in our popular imagination, they exist almost exclusively in relation to bottles that imprison them and some kind of deal that binds them to a human. We rarely if ever, I think, actually imagine them as social beings with lives, such as you've described. Tell us a little bit about what it meant for you to imagine such a thing of a Jinni and a Golem in a social context as a vehicle for examining the human condition?

HW: The way that I came to this was years ago, when I was at Columbia getting my master's in Creative Writing, I was working on these short stories that were tales from my husband's family history and from my family history. He's Arab-American, and I grew up Jewish. We grew up 45 minutes away from each other in suburban Chicago, but we didn't meet until college. And when we did, I was just sort of struck over and over again at the similarities between our family's histories, especially around issues of immigration and coming to America. And so I was working on these short stories, but they weren't working very well because they were... It was like stories that I knew already, and I really needed to figure out a way to discover them new for the first time. And so I was talking with a friend of mine in workshop about it, and she said "Helene, you're doing this very realist short story stuff like Raymond Carver-esque sort of MFA stories, why aren't you doing something more fantastical because that's what you're always talking about. And that's the stuff that you read. You're a big sci-fi and fantasy nerd, that's where your heart is."

HW: So as soon as she said it, I was like, okay, what if we did that? What if we took, instead of the Arab-American boy and the Jewish-American girl, what if they were a male golem and a female jinni. And so once I had that and I started playing around with it, and the ideas of these supernatural creatures, sort of standing in for humans, I had to do the research of, "Okay, what is a jinni? What is a golem, and what are the issues that would pop up for them? And like you

said, the issues for jinn, especially in relation to humans, it's always about being bound or being trapped. And so, it became about, "Okay, what does that mean? What does servitude mean to a jinni, to this very free spirit? And, what does that mean in the context of immigration and having to enter a new society? And then on the other hand, a golem, which is a creature that is created to be a servant, to be... To respond to a master's commands. And, now you've got a female golem who is released from that servitude and now has to figure out what to do with herself, and has enough self-awareness and enough of a personality, even maybe if you wanna call it a soul, to be able to think about that and reflect on it and wonder what to do with her life. What is her purpose if not to serve?

HW: So, the two of them are coming at it from these very different directions, from these opposite directions, and what it meant to me was you've got one preacher who is built to serve and now doesn't know what to do about it, and another who is built to be free and is now trapped. And together the two of them average out to the human condition where it's, "How much do you give of yourself to others? How much do you keep of yourself?" How much do you do what you want to do because that's what you want to do, and how much responsibility do you have to your community around you?" So it's... The difference between someone who is the ultimate loner and someone who is the ultimate, desiring to give and give and give and give of themselves. And so the two of them when they come together, basically all they do is argue.

HW: They are brought together by circumstance, they have absolutely opposite views on themselves, on their relation to these crazy humans that they find themselves among. But the one thing that's keeping them together, that's stronger than that, is that they're the only ones who know what the other person's going through. Their secret is safe with each other basically because they don't have anyone else to really connect to over this stuff. And there's varying layers of how much do immigrants understand about each other just because of the context that they find themselves in, and how much can another person not know an immigrant from one place and an immigrant from another place just because some of those details are so evocative to them of the place that they came from that... That's where the difference is lying. So when you've got say an immigrant from Pakistan and an immigrant from Germany, there's gonna be some similarities and there's gonna be some differences, and maybe that context of being in America is the thing that can bridge you.

JH: So let's follow that thread. You've spoken already really beautifully about this world of travelers and adventurers as a vehicle for self-discovery and self-awareness, and the fact that these mythological creatures inhabit the role of immigrants, elaborate for us a bit about the allegorical thinking in another direction, not of self-awareness and self-discovery, but rather of radical otherness and dislocation and alienation.

HW: It's hard to put that into words. My whole feeling is we should be able to bridge it, but then sometimes you just can't. And then the question is, "Okay, how do you write about that? How do you write about that alien alien feeling?" I decided, because I can't make things easy for myself, that for the second book I would add a male golem named Yossele and a new jinni, a female

jinni named Dima. And, my purpose in this was to hold them up as mirrors to the other characters - and possibly with some romantic implications, at least for one pair, but for both of them being like, "Have I assimilated? Have I changed so much that I've become more human than the thing I was before? Am I still recognizable to my own kind? Do I see myself mirrored in them or not?" And the problem with that was that I had to write these very, very others, in order to do that. I had to write Yossele who is a much more brutish, more traditional golem. He can't talk.

HW: He's more just there for protection, he's very sort of crude looking, but he's been linked, he's been... He's now the servant of this young girl who lives in an orphanage in Hamilton Heights in New York. And then on the other side Dima who is a non-bound jinnia who is pretty much amoral as far as we would be concerned. And these two characters were some of the hardest characters to write that I've ever had to write because they are so far and so different from humans, and I had to figure out what could their relationship possibly be? What would their reactions be to this new human society they find themselves in? And there is a lot of the shock of immigration, I think, in the portrayal of those two. They just don't fit in, there's nothing but mayhem as soon as they arrive. And even if that isn't the literal sort of thing that happens when immigrants arrive from one country to another, that's... That absolute bafflement, that especially Dima has.

HW: She arrives and she ends up in Washington Square Park, and she's just sort of floating above the park looking down at all of these humans, and thinking, "They have overrun every direction. And the air, the earth, the water, they are just everywhere," and she's just sort of physically horrified, in a way that we would watch ants take over a house. Sometimes in our worst moments of being in a new place where we're like, "Oh my God, I cannot deal with this anymore. There is nothing I can relate to here. Nothing feels right. I just wanna go home." I think there is some of that in the immigrant experience, and even just the tiniest amount of it, where I felt when I've gone to a new place, moved somewhere new, there's the excitement of exploring somewhere, but then by day four or five, it's like, I don't even know how to go to the grocery store anymore. I don't know where anything is. Everything feels like a trial and a chore, and these people are saying things that I don't understand.

HW: And then I guess, what do you do about it? Do you fight against it? Do you decide to settle in and go along with the ride? I tried to build these characters who, even in their extreme reactions, there's a frame of reference for the reader that they understand why someone is having this extreme reaction. Because even the antagonists, I don't like moustache-twirling villains that really don't have a reason for being the villain, except that, "I'm evil and I just feel like it." There's gotta be some context. Villains aren't born in a vacuum. It's what you do with the shock, it's what you do with the alienation that sort of determines your course in life.

JH: I think you very much succeeded in giving us a frame of reference for understanding this kind of alienation in multiple directions. Not least of all, because most of us in the United States, but certainly many of us in the Jewish community in particular, have our immigrant experiences

still in our consciousness, even if it's been two or three generations in the past. There is a phenomenon of the Jewish-American experience, which is also deeply rooted in our communities, which is in fact completely removed from our consciousness, and it is the phenomenon of Jewish orphanages. Most of us alive today in the United States don't even remember Jewish orphanages, but it was a feature of the Jewish-American community, as it was for all immigrant and indeed any community in the United States. Tell us a little bit about your orphan character and the world she inhabits.

HW: Her name is Kreindel, and she is the daughter of a poor orthodox rabbi, who decides after the Odessa Pogroms of 1905, that he is going to build a golem. And that is going to be his response to the Pogroms, to the hatred and violence against Jews. He's going to build this golem and sort of test it out. And if it all works out well, he's going to go to Lithuania and give his knowledge to the leaders there, so that they can build golems for protection against Czar and his men. Of course everything goes wrong, and Kreindel, who has been helping her father build this golem, ends up bound to the golem herself and ends up at this orphanage in Hamilton Heights that's called... Well, the actual orphanage that I based it on was the Hebrew Orphan Asylum. And it was actually very well known. It was the, I think, the biggest Jewish orphanage in New York at the time, and it had been around since the 1860s, this giant gothic-looking huge building. It was like this island in the middle of the Upper West Side. The way that this place came about was, the German-Jewish philanthropists who had come to the US first and are now seeing more of the Eastern European-Orthodox Jews coming to the US. Basically the country Jews with their country ways and their Yiddish and their poverty.

HW: And so the German-Jews are looking at this new population and they decide, "Well, we have to do something about this." And so they start these charities, including an orphanage, that is there first and foremost to rescue children, it has to be said, they saved the lives of countless children. But the other side of that was that they were explicitly there to turn them into good Americans, which meant no Yiddish, no orthodoxy, it was all reform, and you had to learn English and you had to basically be immersed in American life as a patriotic American-Jew. And so part of that meant that you had these kids who had been given up as babies or just really young, and then once or twice a year, they'd have visiting day and the families would come up from Brooklyn or from the lower-Eastside, and come and sit in this room at a table with their kid. Well, now their kid's maybe six or seven, and they don't know any Yiddish anymore, and the family hasn't learned enough English yet, and so you've got these really poignant stories of these kids not being able to communicate with their own parents anymore.

HW: It's like they just live in two different worlds now, so for Kreindel, I added this extra layer of, she grew up Orthodox with now this deep feeling of loyalty to her father who has died and who has left her this golem. And now she has to hide the golem in the basement of the orphanage. And this golem is the thing that is going to keep her true to her beliefs and to her father's ways, and so she becomes like this little island of stubborn orthodoxy in the middle of a reformed orphanage. And she was a lot of fun to write. Because I usually knew what she was going to do, she's very stubborn and single-minded, but very thoughtful as well. And she fights in herself,

sort of the draw to become modern, to speak English instead of Yiddish and to give up the ways that her father has taught her.

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JH: You begin *The Hidden Palace* with a prologue that tells a parable of sorts, which is a kind of mythologize rashomon, which is to say the story varies considerably depending on the person or the character who tells it. Why is this subjectivity so important?

HW: I think the subjectivity is important because that is the way that we live. I can only see through my eyes, you can only see through your eyes, in order for us to both understand the same thing that we're looking at, we need to be able to explain to each other the differences in what we're seeing. I think you see this a lot in the language of conflict, in the way that someone will be described as a terrorist by one person and a freedom fighter by another person. I think you see this in anything down to the most intimate relationships, the difference between a discussion and an argument, one person might think you're discussing something, another person might think you're arguing, and our reactions to these things end up being entirely subjective. The title, *The Hidden Palace*, there is a slightly literal hidden palace in the book, but another sort of idea of that title is the hidden palace that we all carry around in ourselves, and that no one else really knows about because no one else has the same experience of the world as you. So it becomes a question of how to bridge perspectives, and story is one of those things that can help bridge perspectives, but never quite 100%, and that I think, became one of the main themes of this book, especially around story and language, and there's a theme that runs in the book of the way that different languages describe things in slightly different ways.

HW: What happens when you lose a language, have you lost perspective, have you lost a part of yourself, and what happens if you can't communicate with a loved one in the language that you grew up with, do they not know you fully as a person? There's a whole side of you possibly that they don't have access to, so really a lot of the whole book is about that exercise and perspective taking, and the way that a story will alter depending on who tells it, because it can't

help but do so, because everyone's perspective is just so slightly different, and how can we end up understanding each other fully given that basic fact of life and communication?

JH: One of the other aspects of having to inhabit someone else's perspective is the degree to which you've undertaken an historical novel that lives in a world foreign to our own, by virtue of 100 plus years of time having passed, and indeed your settings and stories are rich with detail and color, all of which reveal a great deal of historical research which you and I have spoken about already a little bit, and something that reviewers have also frequently noted and appreciated. What surprised you in your research for *The Hidden Palace*, especially after having already researched so deeply for *The Golem* and *the Jinni*.

HW: I don't know how much surprised me so much as gave me things that I hadn't thought about before. One thing that didn't make it into the book that I really wanted to, but I just couldn't really find a way to do it, was the degree to which silent film was a tool for immigrants to immerse themselves in American culture and develop a shared experience, shared dialogue with every other immigrant culture, as well as the people who had been here for generations, because of the silent nature of the film that things like a man clasps... Is standing next to a woman, and he clasps his hands by his heart, he's in love with her. If a man turns his pockets inside out and shrugs, he's broke, so the way that anyone could go to the theater and see a movie and have pretty much the same experience as the person sitting next to them, even if they didn't speak the same language, and what a tool for assimilation and just feeling like you belonged to a place. That became for the immigrants. One version of the book, an earlier draft had a character who was a theater operator in the Syria neighborhood, and I just had to cut it out because the book was just too big and shaggy of a thing, and a few people just needed to go and he didn't make the cut.

HW: Another thing was, there's a character in the book who did stay in the book, who is a Western Union delivery boy, a messenger boy, and learning about the culture and the role of telegram delivery boys who were almost all boys, how they were like a function of the city, the same way that a telephone was or a bench, or a water fountain, that these boys were everywhere and they just sort of blended into the landscape, and if you were a boy with the Western Union cap on and a satchel over your shoulder, you could go anywhere. It didn't matter if you were from the Hells kitchen, from the slums, from wherever, you could go knock on a door at City Hall, and they'd have to let you in because you had a message for someone.

HW: And how this became, in some ways a key to the city, but on the other hand, also de-individualized the boys quite a bit, and there was this sort of Horatio Alger-style myth that if you were a good delivery boy, you could get far, someone would see you in an office and say, "Say, young man, you're a helpful lad, would you like to have a job as my..." And that was how you're going to progress in the world, and it really wasn't true, and they were just sort of disposable labor as far as Western Union and the other Telegram companies were concerned. And so on the one hand, they were the kings of the city, and on the other hand, no one saw

them, and that dichotomy just really struck me as fascinating, and so I did manage to work in a good deal of the delivery boy life into the book which were some of my favorite parts to write.

JH: There's a lot to enjoy in the book, and Helene Wecker, thank you so much for the conversation. Congratulations on your National Jewish Book Award, and we look forward to the next installment.

HW: Well, thank you very much for having me on. This is a lot of fun.

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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