

DANI SHAPIRO: WHAT MAKES A NOVEL "JEWISH"?

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons Podcast and our acclaimed author series, a partnership between HUC Connect, the online learning platform of the Hebrew Union College, and the Jewish Book Council, featuring conversations with authors recognized by the National Jewish Book Awards. My name is Joshua Holo, your host.

JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons podcast, in a conversation with author, Dani Shapiro. Dani Shapiro is the author of 11 books and the host and creator of the hit podcast, Family Secrets. Her most recent novel, Signal Fires, was named a best book of 2022 by Time Magazine, Washington Post, Amazon, and others, and as a national bestseller. Her most recent memoir, Inheritance, was an instant New York Times bestseller and named the best book of 2019 by L, Vanity Fair, Wired, and Real Simple. Both Signal Fires and Inheritance were winners of the National Jewish Book Award, and Signal Fires is the topic of our discussion today. Dani Shapiro, thank you so much for joining us on the College Commons Podcast.

Dani Shapiro: It's great to be with you, Josh.

JH: Introduce us to the premise of Signal Fires.

DS: Signal Fires is really a story of a constellation of characters who all encounter each other over time because they live on the same street, a street called Division Street, in a town that is really like a Westchester suburb that is kind of an amalgam of many different suburbs that I call Avalon. And it's the story of the ways that members of these two families who live across the street from each other, who are essentially divided by being on one side or the other of Division Street, the way that they impact one another's lives over the course of a span of 50 years. But the story is not told chronologically, it's told in what I think of as a kind of kaleidoscopic fashion. We see them at different key moments in their lives. And central to the story is one of the families named the Wilfs. The book opens with a terrible accident that the Wilf teenagers are involved in, and the family chooses to keep the events of that evening secret, and the aftermath of that secret keeping and the way it impact their lives over the course of decades.

JH: So let's talk a little bit about that opening scene, which is quite powerful and some of the dynamics in it. The story opens with the car accident as you described, and it sets the stage for the family secret. But I couldn't help noticing that you also set the stage such that there's enough guilt to go around in this tragedy. It's not merely son, Theo, who is behind the wheel in the accident, it's also the sister, Sarah, who chooses not to drive when she might have, presumably because she'd been drinking. And it's also the father, Ben, the otherwise hyper reliable doctor who mistakenly moves the victim who has suffered a neck injury and who should have been immobilized. What is it about tragedy that seems to implicate all of us?

DS: I love that question. There's a kind of shame for having been part of a tragedy or not just responsible for a tragedy, but also somehow for a tragedy to have been visited upon one. That sort of makes no sense intellectually, but I think it has a very deep imprint on our psyches. And in the case of all the Wilfs, yes, there's the boy who's driving who shouldn't be driving because he doesn't have a driver's license and he's 15 years old, that's Theo. There's the girl who could have been driving but has been drinking, and does have a driver's license and tosses the keys to Theo and says, "You drive," that's Sarah. But there's also Ben, their father, who is a very good doctor and a very responsible citizen, and absolutely knows better than the actions that he takes in the split second that evening when he sees that a girl has been injured. And he's doing this because his impulse is to protect his children at all costs, whether it's the moral or ethical or medically correct thing to do, his entire focus is as a father in that moment.

DS: And then there is also their mother, Mimi, who in a way is sort of, as I've come to think of it, at the center of this, because she's the one who really, really wants to make it go away and somehow believes that if they never speak of it again, their family will remain unscathed by it, which of course, the opposite is what ends up happening. But I do think that there's something really powerful about when misfortune is visited upon us, whether in the form of war or illness or something debilitating or an accident. Really, any kind of tragedy that visits us, there's this feeling of shame around it, which is just a very interesting thing to explore to me as a writer.

JH: The story, *Signal Fires*, also contains all kinds of crosscurrents of emotion that royal within and around all the characters. When, for example, another father figure, from the other family across Division Street named Shenkman, when he scolds his young son, Waldo, he's aware of the impossible oxymoron of parenting. You write, "His love for his son is a vast and forceful thing. Whatsoever threatens Waldo must be destroyed. But given that it's Waldo who threatens to hurt himself, what can Shenkman do?" Or later when you describe a grown Sarah who comes to visit her dad, she's embarrassed to ask for a drink, but she does so anyway, and you write, "Shame versus craving. Craving trumps shame every time." Why are these internal contradictions and dilemmas the stuff of compelling literature? Do they reflect reality with great accuracy or in opposite fashion do they artfully and therefore artificially heighten it? What's going on from a writer's perspective?

DS: I've had the opportunity to hear from a lot of readers, and in the case of Shenkman, some readers are almost angry at me for having created a character who is such a bad father. And yet, the thing that was really poignant to me about Shenkman, and this will also reflect on Sarah as well, is that there's a lot of self-knowledge there. He knows that he's not doing a good job. He

knows that he's being ruled by his anger, and that his anger is really, his powerful love for his son somehow getting perverted and turned inside out. But he can't help himself. He counsels himself to go buy anger management books, at the end of the day before he comes home, he gets it. And in a way, with Sarah, I think that that is also the case. She clearly has a drinking problem, but she's not in denial about the fact that she has a drinking problem. She's aware of it, and she's not gonna be able to get out from under it, at least not in that moment, any more than Shenkman is gonna be able to get out from under his own sort of rageful worldview and the way that impacts him as a dad.

DS: And I think one of the things that literature can do most directly more than any other art form is it can turn our interior lives, the interior lives of characters visible, make them accessible so that what the reader gets to see and feel are both the way that these characters move through the world, perhaps impenetrable, undecipherable. We walk past people on the street all the time who might seem to have absolutely everything about their lives together, and maybe their internal lives don't match their external lives. And in literature, there's a way that we can get at that.

DS: I think in the case of both Sarah and also her brother, Theo, who are the teenagers who originally cause this accident, they grow up to become very successful people externally. Sarah becomes a very successful television executive. And Theo becomes an extremely, almost improbably successful chef with a really hot restaurant in Brooklyn that everybody's clamoring to go to, sort of becomes a celebrity despite himself. And I didn't realize it at the time as I was creating these characters, as I was writing the book, so much of it becomes clear later for me as a writer. But it was important that they have this outward success because the outward success, it doesn't protect us from whatever might be going on internally that's difficult and I wanted to explore that in both of those characters as well.

JH: Certainly, we as readers not only engage with that inside outing of the characters, but we also surely sometimes accurately and sometimes inaccurately attribute the same thing to the act of writing to the author. So cultural and religious references to Jewish life pepper the story and the personalities of both of the central families. What is the texture or valence that Judaism brings to you and to your writing?

DS: It's in a way inseparable from me and my writing, because I was raised so steeped in Jewish culture and also religion. I was raised in an Orthodox family. It was complicated. My father was Orthodox and my mother was not, in fact, was an atheist, which is something I didn't know for most of my life until I became an adult but she agreed to become Orthodox to marry my father, so there was a lot of conflict there. And the conflict in many ways pointed itself at me, their only child, and how to raise me and how religious. And so all of that was very confusing for me as a child. And this may be a gross over-generalization, but I don't think simple happy childhoods tend to produce artists.

DS: There's a way in which all of that became part of the stew from which my writing life emerged, my own evolution as a Jew from growing up in that world, and yet not in a world where we were, as opposed to some of my cousins, in communities where everyone was

Orthodox, that was not remotely the case. I grew up in a neighborhood that was very assimilated, not entirely Jewish. In fact, a really significant amount of antisemitism in the neighborhood that I grew up in, which my family experienced directly, not wanting to be Orthodox from the time that I was probably old enough to think for myself because it felt like it was just surrounded by a lot of conflict.

DS: I think if my father had had his way, I would have gone to Stern College. I would have lived a modern Orthodox life. And instead, by the time I was in high school, I didn't want any part of that. And I went to Sarah Lawrence College. I always identified as Jewish through and through and culturally, but I was not practicing in any kind of religious way and I found other halves. I developed a meditation practice, a yoga practice. I wrote a memoir called *Devotion* when my son was very small because he started asking me what I believed and I realized that I had opted out in a way of all the questions, and I wanted to opt back in and really think about all that.

DS: I then discovered in my early 50s that my dad had not been my biological father, which was the family secret that I knew nothing about. And that in fact, biologically I was able to discover that I am half Jewish. I in fact am Swedish, French, English, German, Irish, and half Ashkenazi. So that was also there somewhere in all of that. And I've written about this extensively, but I didn't "look Jewish", and people commented on that all the time, which also contributed to my feeling of not really being sure where I fit in or how I fit in. So all of this plays into all of my work.

DS: But I think in *Signal Fires*, I was conscious that I wanted the atmosphere, the energy, the neighborhood, the worlds in which all of these characters lived to be a Jewish one, but not overtly so. These are assimilated families. Their references are very Jewish. You know, Sarah's memories have to do with, you know, that's the azalea bush that Noah Kantrowitz threw up in the night of his bar mitzvah. Or when she moves to LA very much thinking about, you know, what synagogue and what preschool her young children will go to. And Shenkman and Ben Wilf have memories of growing up that stretch all the way back to their ancestors in the shtetls in the old country.

DS: And, you know, it was so interesting to me that I won the National Jewish Book Award for fiction, for *Signal Fires* and so meaningful to me. I mean, for many reasons. But one of them was in the speech that I gave when I accepted the award, I posed the question, what makes a novel a Jewish novel? Because it's not an overtly Jewish novel. I think it's almost a subversively Jewish novel. And I loved that the judges got that and felt that yeah, it, you know, it counted.

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JH: Arguably the dynamic of Lost and Found drives the thematic direction of Signal Fires. A direction, by the way, set also even at the outset with the poetic epigraph at the beginning. And I suppose that I personally associate the fear of loss of either oneself or one's loved ones with being very young and at the whim of the greater forces of the adult world. And Signal Fires certainly draws on those fears of childhood, but it also forces us to reckon with the distinctive vulnerabilities that pertain to literal and figurative losses that are associated with aging as well. So I wonder for you personally, has the looming fear and vulnerability of loss increased or receded with age?

DS: In a way I wanna equivocate, that's a very Jewish thing to do.

JH: That's right. We could take both sides of it.

DS: In certain ways it hasn't receded or maybe softened. I'm certainly very aware of time. And, you know, it's interesting to me that this novel was a long time in the making. When I began it, I was younger and I was closer to the age of the Wilf kids, you know, as young adults. I was closer to their age than to Ben and Mimi will, who I saw as this sort of spry handsome couple in their early '60s. By the time I returned to Signal Fires, I was heading toward the age that the Wilfs are when we first encounter them, or at least when we encounter them during a significant part of the novel. And I was like, wait a minute. They're not so old. They're, you know, they got a lot left to do. They've got a lot of life left in them. And I think it contributed to my being able to lend a real aliveness and very similar to the characters at all of those different ages, because they were ages that I have touched in my life that I have experienced. Although I've always been interested in writing older characters, maybe as my way of exploring in some way, or making an inquiry into what's ahead.

DS: To go back to your question, the acuteness, the kind of panic about loss has receded. That young feeling that you're describing, I know it really well and experienced it, both the fear of it and the fact of it because I lost my father when I was 23, suddenly in a car accident. I think I would say, you know, for me, like live long enough, and there's this understanding that, you know, the great Jewish Buddhist teacher, Jack Kornfield has this wonderful phrase that I think of a lot, which is this too, this too, this too. That this is a part of life. Nobody gets out of this without that. So there's a kind of softening that I feel, but it's tinged with a kind of melancholy that I didn't feel as a young person. I think it's a different relationship to that feeling of loss.

JH: I'd like to close with a question about surprise. You mentioned a couple times how Signal Fires emerged in ways you didn't necessarily predict. And as a general matter, I'm often moved by how alive fiction often is in the mind of the author. And these two things seem to combine to really leave open the possibility for surprise. So what surprised you about Signal Fires?

DS: It surprised me at the very start when Sarah takes the blame for the accident, you know, and immediately just says, it was me. I was driving, which is a lie. Theo's success as a chef surprised me. He didn't seem to be heading in that direction. Without delivering a pretty big spoiler, Sarah does something fairly late in the book that really saves her and maybe sort of

saves all of them in a certain way and I didn't see that coming. It happened for me as the writer, very much as it was happening for her.

DS: I mean, one of the great pleasures of writing fiction, and you know, I've written both fiction and memoir, and one of the biggest differences is that when you're writing memoir, you know what happened. And so invention isn't really a part of it. Memory is the driver. It's really the discovery of the how and the why and the what belongs to what in the storytelling. But in fiction, you're creating a world and it's all up for grabs at the very beginning. And then as the story progresses and the characters become, you know, so incredibly real to the writer, the feeling for me is that I'm in a way keeping up with them, that I've created them, but I don't have agency over them. They have their own agency.

DS: And so really all of them, I mean, Waldo is for me, the beating heart of the book. And he constantly surprised me in I think the deep spiritual sort of thread that he mines in the book. I didn't know that starting out. And I also didn't know that the year 2020 was gonna be part of the book. I didn't know that until there it was. And it, it was as if it always had to be there. Just a very thin layer of it. I didn't wanna write about the pandemic, but I felt that I wanted to explore who these characters would be at that moment in our, in our world.

JH: Well, Dani Shapiro, thank you so much for the conversation and learning about your writing in general and Signal Fires and for the pleasure of getting to know you.

DS: I so enjoyed the questions and talking with you. Thanks, Josh.

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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