

SACHA LAMB: SUPERNATURAL JEWS

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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 our conversation with Sacha Lamb. Sacha Lamb is a 2018 Lambda literary fellow in young adult fiction and graduated in library and information science and history from Simmons University. Their debut novel *When the Angels Left the Old Country* has won a Prince Honor, Stonewall and Sidney Taylor Awards and is a National Jewish Book Awards finalist in the young adult category. Sacha Lamb, thank you for joining us on the College Commons podcast.

Sacha Lamb: Thank you for having me. I'm excited to be here.

JH: So set the stage for us with a brief introduction to your debut novel, *When the Angels Left the Old Country*.

SL: I describe it as an Ellis Island era immigrant fairytale. It stars an angel and a demon who are Talmud study partners in a small village in Poland. And all the young people are leaving the village and one of the young women has gone missing on her way to America. So the angel and the demon follow her to America to try and find out what happened to her, and they discover that the streets of America are not paved with gold. It is a complicated place full of magic and mystery and murder.

[laughter]

SL: And so it's a story about immigration. It's a story about different kinds of community obligation and community ties, and it's a story about different forms of love as well.

JH: In an interview with geekout.org, you refer to Maurice Sendak as one of your many influences. I personally felt Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*, in particular in the beneficence of the demon, Little Ash, in a way that Sendak's *Wild Things* are also attractive and fun. What

drove you to make Little Ash the demon mischievous, more than powerful and a fundamentally sympathetic character.

SL: Part of it was growing up with stories like the Wild Things where you have these mischievous, childish, somewhat amoral kind of entities that are not malicious, but they're a little bit wild. And I've always found that kind of character very appealing. And another part of it was that there are places in the Talmud where demons appear and they are cast as being members of the Jewish community. There's one story where a demon named Ben Tamalion helps some rabbis avert a decree by the Romans against the Jews by staging a fake exorcism, where the demon possesses the daughter of a Roman governor and the rabbis exorcise him in a prearranged fashion, and that causes the governor to tear up the decree. And there's some other small mentions of a demon called Joseph who studied in the beth midrash. And one of the rabbis at least once, maybe twice, cites Joseph the demon in an opinion. And so the thought of demons that are part of the Jewish community in this way and that participate in resistance to antisemitism or who have halakhic opinions as well and that their halakhic opinions would be listened to, that's very fascinating to me. And I wanted to explore a character based in that dimension of a Talmudic demon as well as having that somewhat wild, childish, mischievous energy.

JH: Well, it comes across with a lot of rich character development and a lot of fun. And speaking about the demon as a member of the Jewish community, that the community from which we work it starts off in the shtetl. And they're studying Talmud and Torah in the back of the shtetl together the way we imagine the synagogue in our mind's eye. Despite that very charming setup, I read that presentation of the shtetl as a point of departure. But because of the premise of the book, I didn't read it so much as one of nostalgia. Do you have a sense of, or perhaps a reaction to our contemporary Jewish American tendency to sometimes romanticize and sometimes demonize the shtetl in very cut and dried terms?

SL: I do, and it comes partly from my training as a historian. As you mentioned in the intro, I have a degree in History, a master's from Simmons. And my point of study there was focused on Jewish migration from Eastern Europe to the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. And a lot of my reading has been about both what we remember and what we don't remember about the places that are left behind in migration. And a key thing that I think is often a little bit flattened in our collective memory of Eastern Europe is that the shtetls were also changing and evolving. They were also subject to forces of modernization, and people weren't only leaving to go to America, they were going to bigger cities. And there was sectarian conflicts within the shtetl between the more reform leaning Jews, who did exist in the shtetls. And things were just a lot more complicated than we sometimes remember. So although I don't spend that much time there, I did want to present a Jewish community and Jewish places that are in every place that the characters go, they are meeting Jews who have different approaches and sort of different relationships to the Jewish community.

SL: And that definitely is something that was important to me. Even within this context of a fairytale it's a little bit dreamlike in some ways, and it's not meant to be a really complicated and

deep exploration of history, but at the same time I wanted to show that it's also not two dimensional.

JH: And they also have varied reactions and sensibilities to and about gender and sexuality. And I'd like to speak for a minute about a particular choice you made literarily in that regard. Namely the namelessness and the genderlessness of the angel in particular, and your use of the pronoun it, in relation to the angel. And I'm also drawing on your answer to the question about the demon, in so far as you cited the traditional Jewish sources for demons that are a little bit counterintuitive. Did you feel it was important to ground specifically the aspect of the angel's identity fluidity in Jewish texts and tradition?

SL: Absolutely. And I would say that the queerness, if you will, of the angel character is deliberately a little bit stubborn. I am saying with this character that a divine creature that is sent by God, that belongs to God in this very strong way is also a queer character. And that its queerness is in a way inextricable from its identity as an angel, because I built the character using, again, Talmudic folklore and the idea that angels have a single task and they are defined and named according to that task. And in some descriptions of angels, it said that they cease to exist when their task is finished. In this case, I had it just change identities when its task is finished. And as it goes through the story, it begins to see that there are parts of its identity that it wants to keep and that it wants to hold onto.

SL: And a big part of that is its love for Little Ash, the demon. And it wants to continue to be the angel that is Little Ash's partner, while also being the angel that's on a rescue mission and also being an angel that's going to America and all of these other things. And to bring all of those together it eventually adopts a human name, and it's able to hold all of those dimensions within a permanent name. But at the same time, it's becoming a little more human, but it's also seeing that there are parts of being human that it's not interested in. There's a scene where it's reading its falsified identity papers, and it sees that Little Ash has written down that it's male, and it says to him something like, "Do I have to be a man to be a person?" And he misses the point of the question and he responds, "You've met women," you know.

[laughter]

SL: But I very deliberately wanted to have this character developing its identity and becoming more human, but to reject the idea that becoming more human requires it also to have a gender. The pronoun set it/its, we did consider other pronoun sets. We thought about changing it to they/them or maybe using the Yiddish pronoun or something like that. But in the end, it/its, to me, is a pronoun set that actively rejects the possibility of gender in a way. It sort of pushes away the idea of gendering. And to me that was important to have it very, very clear that it's not just that this angel has a non-binary gender. It absolutely has no gender at all, which was sort of drawing again on folklore where we sort of say that angels don't necessarily have a gender, although in Hebrew they are gendered masculine almost all the time, just because of the grammar. We also say that God has no body and God doesn't necessarily have a gender. And in Kabbalah God has aspects of multiple genders. So I wanted to bring all of that together and have it be a character who actively rejects the possibility of having a gender. While at the same

time being a character who is defined by kindness and openness and dedication to community, and all of the things that you imagine in an angel.

JH: So I wanna drill down, if I may, and follow this decision to narrow and specify the angel's gender and identity despite its underlying fluidity or indeterminacy or non genderedness. In particular I'm thinking of your decision to keep the angel not only masculine, but also adult-ish by contrast to Little Ash who feels much more juvenile. In this vein, even though the angel is presented as a youth, you speak of, it's taking the form of a man. Elaborate a bit on that storytelling choice. Did you need a foil for Little Ash's mischievousness, or was something else altogether at play?

SL: A big part of it was that the two characters are foils for each other. Their relationship is really kind of the core of the story, and the tension between them brings a lot of the narrative energy. Because of the way that angels are usually presented and gendered as masculine in relation to their Hebrew grammatical gender, I was using that, but trying to suggest a character or an angel or a person. In all outward aspects, you might see them as being male, but maybe that's not the truth of that person.

JH: The College Commons Podcast belongs to HUC Connect, the online platform for continuing education from the Hebrew Union College. HUC Connect includes webinars, syllabi for community learning, and masterclasses for HUC alumni, with interviews, expert panels and classroom materials on topics ranging from the arts to civil society, Israel, and much more. Check us out at huc.edu/hucconnect. Now back to our interview.

JH: I love your roguish humor throughout. It's delightful. I'm thinking of the protagonist's encounter with Yossel at the beginning. Yossel's trying to rope them into his con. And to achieve this, Yossel has to keep them from going to another cat named Red Fishel. And he also says, Red Fishel, may his name be trampled in the dust. I mean, no disrespect. You're engaging in this classic central and Eastern European Jewish humor and you can hear the tone in your voice as you're reading it. Or for example, when you refer to Little Ash as a socialist, because he is willing to fraternize with ghosts, divine or supernatural beings of a lower order. But he's a socialist, so he is egalitarian in that regard. Whose voice was speaking in your ear for this really lovely humor?

SL: I am a big fan of classic Yiddish literature. Sholem Aleichem, Isaac Bashevis Singer. Motl the Cantor's Son is one of my favorites, a mischievous child character, and his journey to America certainly influenced me. That sort of sly dark humor, I just really enjoy it. And I think that being told that you're funny is one of the best compliments that you can get. Because if you try to be funny and you don't make it, that's embarrassing. So to have the humor land is very, very good.

JH: I want to go back to some of the deeper themes of identity. The Angel and Little Ash as a duo unto themselves have two foils in Dinah and Rose. As distinct from the identity fluidity of the divine beings, Little Ash and the angel, you cast these two women, Dinah and Rose with very decided and strong feminine identities. And even Rose's father says, in one of the most

charming quotes, "Blessed be the God who gives men daughters." What does feminism mean to you in relation specifically to the cultural and moral context of queer and non-conforming identities, and why is this perspective so important for young adult literature in particular?

SL: I think that the struggle for liberation for queer people and for women and really for everyone alike, they're all intertwined. Even antisemitism and racism also have gendered aspects and bigotry sort of collects everything together in one and says everything that is other is wrong. And so to me, it's important to have solidarity with each other and to say as we are othered in one aspect, we should not be othering people who maybe share that aspect but don't share something else. If we're all Jewish, we shouldn't be othering queer Jews. We shouldn't be othering women, we shouldn't be othering disabled people, we shouldn't be othering Jews of color. So we're all having the same struggles. And so that was part of it and part of the characters of Rose and Dinah is also the strength and presence of young women in this period of history and in the history of migration and the history of the Labor movement.

SL: Rose's first name I gave her in honor of Rose Schneiderman, who was a real life, probably lesbian labor activist. She became a union leader quite young. She was, I think 19 or so when she became a prominent figure in the Garment Workers' Unions, around the time of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire. I tried to be a little bit cautious in putting labels on historical figures, but she had significant relationships throughout her life with women.

SL: And so I used her name for my character in her honor to sort of remember that aspect of our history, that young women specifically have been very active and very prominent in historical movements that are so central to American Jewish identity, that the memory of the labor unions and all of that. Teenage girls were right at the forefront, and I wanted to honor that with those characters. And I also just had a lot of fun writing Rose as a person who in some ways is very confident in her identity, but in other ways she doesn't know what her identity is. So it's this conflict within one person between absolute certainty and complete obliviousness. So she's a lot of fun. I like her a lot.

JH: Where should we read you in this story?

SL: Well, I wrote this manuscript originally for fun. It was a decompression project after I had finished writing a completely different story that was very difficult. And I took my love of the history and my love of folklore and fairytales and my feeling that it is important to build a queer and Jewish identity in which queerness and Jewishness are not in conflict and they strengthen each other instead. I took all of those things and put them into one book.

SL: And so it's hard to say any part where I am not, it's all... Everything that I love all put together and I'm so, so happy that my agent, Rena Rossner and my editor Arthur Levine understood that. And at no point did they say maybe you should tone it down or dial it back or make it more accessible or less specific or anything like that. They recognized that the specificity of the story and the depth of how Jewish and how queer it is and all those things, they recognized those as strengths. And I think that their belief in the manuscript has been borne out by the response that the book has gotten.

JH: What's been the most gratifying reader response this far? What stuck with you as an example?

SL: I had a chance encounter at the American Library Association Conference. I was having to hurry away to the next event and someone caught me just before I was about to leave and said, "I just have to tell you that I read this book basically in havruta with my fiance. They read it aloud to each other and they worked through it together and discussed it as if it were a new tractate of Talmud," they said to me. And then I was already so touched and they went on to say that there's a line where Rose is looking into her love interest's eyes, and she feels a realization as if she were standing at Sinai. She has a revelation about herself, and this person asked me if they could read that at their wedding. How much better can it get than someone asking to read your words at their wedding? There are not many things that are more gratifying than that.

JH: Wow. That's a great thought to end the interview on, and I want to congratulate you on your success and to thank you for the conversation and the book. It's really been a delight.

SL: Thank you. It was good to talk.

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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