

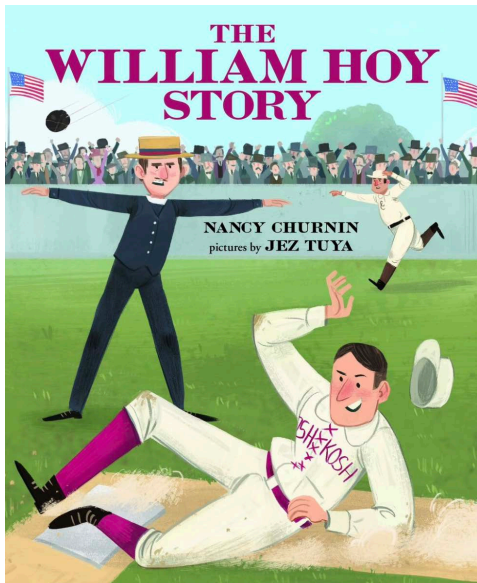
An Interview with Nancy Churnin

Questions by Patricia Sarles

Snapshot

Patricia Sarles, a School Librarian and the Coordinator of Library Services for the New York City School Library System, interviews the author Nancy Churnin about her award winning work and her particular focus on the picture book as a biographical form.

You are a Harvard University graduate and a Columbia School of Journalism graduate. How did you get into writing children's books?



It was a long and winding road! But a wonderful one. I always knew I wanted to be a writer but didn't know how to make that a career. I wrote and published poems and short stories in small literary magazines, then pursued a degree and a career in journalism so that I could get paid for writing -- and learning. Journalists are always learning through interviews and research for interviews. I ultimately became a theater critic and had an exhilarating time analyzing and following theater in my community and beyond, reporting from Moscow, London and New York City. It was while covering the theater that I discovered a play called [*The Signal Season of Dummy Hoy*](#), by Allen Meyer and Michael Nowak, about the Deaf baseball player, William Hoy, who taught umpires sign language so he could play the game he loved -- with signs that we still use today for safe and out. I came up with the idea of writing a children's book about Hoy because of my friendship with Steve Sandy, a Deaf historian who has dedicated himself to trying to get Hoy into the National Baseball Hall of Fame, where he would be the first Deaf player honored there. I thought that with Steve's help -- and he was an immense help

-- [*The William Hoy Story*](#) would get kids excited about this great Deaf hero and it has. I hoped the kids would help us get him in the Hall of Fame by writing letters asking for him to be inducted there. And while we're still working on that goal, the kids have written thousands. I'm so grateful to them! I hope they will keep writing those letters until we make it happen.

Because you were a journalist for so many years, I heard you say in an interview once that the first draft of your first book that you shared with an editor read like a newspaper article. How did you learn to unlearn that craft in order to learn a new craft of writing?

That took a lot of years! I made my promise to write *The William Hoy Story* in 2003 and the book came out in 2016. In between were many years of rejections. Finally, one kind editor told

me that the problem was that it read like a newspaper article. That's when I realized I needed to get past the *hubris* of thinking I could knock this out in an hour (like a newspaper article) and study the craft of children's book writing. In addition to craft, what I slowly began to learn was that I needed to knock down the emotional wall between myself and my subject. In journalism, we observe from the outside. We don't presume to know

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what a person is feeling. In picture books, I have to know what my subject is feeling. I have to find that place where we are one. If I don't find that place where I am feeling my character's fear, courage, hope, dream, hurt, love, my reader won't feel it. Writing children's books takes you to a vulnerable place emotionally. That was tough for me. It's easier and safer to write from a distance. But there's nothing more rewarding than taking that leap and feeling what your character feels. Now, more than at any time in my life, I feel that I am doing what I was meant to do.

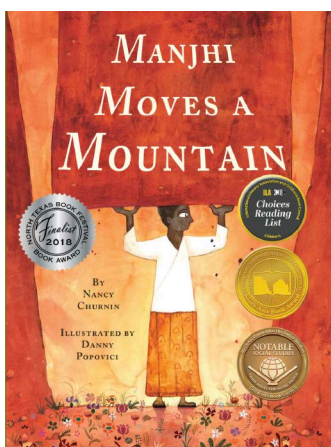
You have written ten picture book biographies so far, with more in the works. How did you choose to write in this genre of children's books - picture book biographies?

My youngest was seven when I started, so I think I had my Josh in mind when I started -- although he was nearly 20 when that first book came out! The biggest reason though is [*The Magician's Nephew*](#) by C.S. Lewis. In that book, Lewis writes about the birth of Narnia, when that world was so young that when a piece of metal was dropped into the soil, it grew into a lamppost. For me that's what children's hearts and minds are like. You can change an adult's mind, yes, but it's

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much harder. With children, I feel that a story can take root like that piece of metal in Narnia and grow into something that will illuminate their way as they grow. I look for subjects that inspire me and that I hope will inspire them. I look for people who not only faced challenges to make their own dreams come true but left the world a better place. Others can write about the bad guys. I want kids to know about the good ones, the ones that fill the world and our hearts with light.

You write about people who are not so well-known. How do you find your subjects?



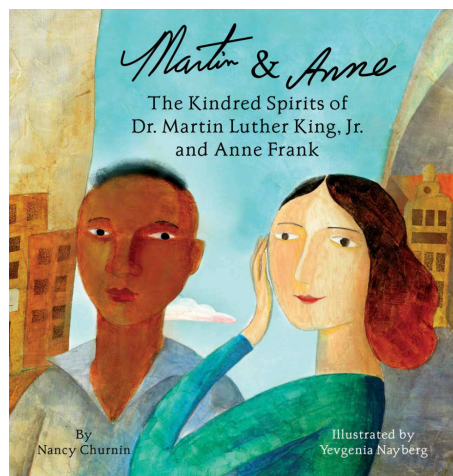
I find them all over -- from plays and other people, like William Hoy in *The William Hoy Story*, from newspaper articles and video interviews like Manjhi in [*Manjhi Moves a Mountain*](#) and from constant curiosity. I found Charlie Sifford in [*Charlie Takes His Shot*](#) when I wondered about who broke the color barrier in golf and Queen Charlotte of [*The Queen and the First Christmas Tree*](#) when I wondered who introduced the first Christmas tree to England and America. But while there are a lot of intriguing subjects, the only ones I commit to are

the ones that resonate with my heart, that have brought me an insight and understanding that have changed me in some way for the better. Each book is like a child to me that will exist in the world like a piece of my heart outside my body. I know I will care about what happens to that story and how it impacts children forever. So, I pick my subjects with care. Even if the person is a worthy subject, I won't write about the person if I can't find my personal, passionate connection with it. That means that when you read one of my books, you know I care deeply about my subject and will always be happy to talk and share about that person and his journey.

You have a teacher's guide for each one of your ten children's books. Why is it important to you to have teacher's guides for your books?

My mother is a retired teacher for whom teaching was always a mission. My home was not only filled with books to read, but with workbooks that extended the learning. I loved to learn! I hope that these free teacher guides extend and expand the joy of learning for the children. I hope they are a help to educators. Every time I help an educator, I feel as if I'm helping my mother in the noblest of professions -- the work of lifting up and helping the next generation be better than the one before. I also provide a free project with individual project pages on my website, nanchurnin.com, because I hope that the end of the book is the start of an adventure. It is my hope always that the children are inspired by the heroes and heroines I wrote about to find ways to become the heroes and the heroines of their own lives and change the world for the better, too.

You have written about prejudice, immigration, social justice, empathy, tolerance, creativity, disability, kindness, hope, racism, antisemitism, oppression, optimism, determination, and perseverance to name just a few. Why are these themes important to you and what would you like your young readers to learn from these themes?



As I consider my subjects, I look for people I think it will enrich the lives of children to know. I am sensitive to the issues of the world that we are facing and try to find people that have been on similar journeys and may provide us a light of hope and possibility. I wrote [*Martin & Anne, the Kindred Spirits of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Anne Frank*](#) at a time of rising racism and antisemitism in America, to illustrate the similarities in the playbook of discrimination. I hoped through showing the parallel journeys of Dr. King and Anne Frank, kids could recognize how segregation leads to persecution, how discriminatory rules and actions are always wrong and that any group can be their target. I hoped that this story would encourage them to stand up for the vulnerable and to know their own value and have pride if they are discriminated against because everyone has an equal right to love, freedom, and the pursuit of happiness. I wrote [*Irving Berlin, the Immigrant Boy Who Made America Sing*](#) at a time when immigrants in America were facing prejudice

and hate. I wanted kids to know they have an immigrant to thank for one of America's most patriotic songs. I wanted them to be aware, through Berlin's story, of the gifts and generosity of immigrants and how lucky a country is to have someone who becomes a citizen by choice. I wanted them to know that Irving Berlin gave all the royalties for "God Bless America" to the children of America -- specifically the Girl and Boy Scouts. I was extremely moved when I offered to read any one of my books to a school, I was mentoring, that was on the border of Texas and Mexico. It was a school where most of the children were first or second generation Mexican Americans. The book they chose was *Irving Berlin, the Immigrant Boy Who Made America Sing*. I was surprised at first. On the surface, what did these children have in common with a Russian Jewish immigrant who came to America at the start of the 20th century? Then I realized: They were immigrants as he was. They dreamed one day of using their gifts to give back to the country they loved. The children were wiser than I realized. I love learning from them.

Why is it important to you that children be inspired by your books to do good things in the world like the people you write about? For example, your [Move Your Own Mountain project](#) on your [website](#) is based on your book, [Manjhi Moves a Mountain](#), about Dashrath Manjhi's 22-year quest to chisel a path through a mountain so that the people in his Indian village could access schools and hospitals on the other side. Can you tell us about some of the projects kids have been involved in as a result of reading your books?



We are all here on this earth for a speck of a speck of time. I can't think of anything more important we can do with our speck than to leave the world better than we found it. After we go, what remains but the love and light we have left behind? It is never too early to start spreading love and light. That's what I hope these projects will do for the kids -- empower them by showing them, through their own actions, that they can make a positive impact on the world, that they can make a difference. This not only gives them a way to do good, it makes them feel good because it reminds them, through their own actions, and the good things that come from their actions,

that they matter. I am so proud of the kids who participate in the projects. One of the most popular ones is the MOVE YOUR OWN MOUNTAIN project I created for *Manjhi Moves a Mountain*. I tell the kids that Manjhi moved an actual mountain to help his village, but every time we help others, we move mountains. Librarians, educators, and parents send me photos of the children and the good deeds they do or, if they don't want to share pictures of the children, photos of the good deeds by themselves. The good deeds are as different as the children, another thing I love. One child loves animals so she shared a picture of herself going to a shelter and petting the animals, so they won't be lonely. One school shared a picture of a food drive and another of a community garden where they harvest fresh vegetables to donate to a food pantry. One child spends her birthday as a Kindness Day, planning out what organizations she will help and what she will give them as a way of celebrating her birthday. With permission, I post these photos on my Move Your Own Mountain page and celebrate the children and their good deeds on social media, hashtagging how they #movemountains

You make a lot of visits to schools and libraries. What are you trying to accomplish with each visit and are your visits different for the different classrooms and libraries you visit?



The most important thing for me on each visit is to connect with the children and their educators' heart to heart. We are all on this journey through life together. It is a miracle that each and every one of us is here. It is a miracle that brings us together. It is a responsibility to honor that miracle by lifting each other up. I like to consult with teachers and librarians about their goals for the visit. I have many individual programs for the books that are ready to go, but I also make custom programs for classrooms and schools, with some wanting programs about the writing journey, or themes of kindness or empathy or social justice, or specific themes that complement the curriculum. I am happy to create a program that works for the needs of individual classrooms and schools. And I always love to have time at the end for individual questions so that I can help the children with the issues that are most pressing to them about the books or about any issues that the books bring to their mind.

When you visit schools and libraries, what do you hope the children take away from your visit?

They are too often embarrassed by the ways they are different. They are terrified of being laughed at. I hope these stories help them see that their difference is their gift.

I hope when they read these stories about people who weren't the biggest or the strongest, or the richest or the most powerful, that we can all accomplish great things if we articulate a dream and persevere until we achieve it. Too often kids compare themselves unfavorably to others. They are intimidated by their peers or someone they have put on a pedestal. They are too often embarrassed by the ways they are different.

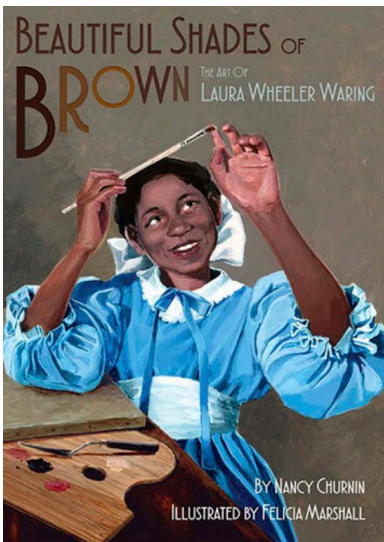
They are terrified of being laughed at. I hope these stories help them see that their difference is their gift. I hope these stories help them see it's a good thing that no one is exactly the same as anyone else, because that difference helps us see things differently and come up with different solutions and their difference may be just the thing the world needs. I hope, as they read about these unlikely people who persevered, they grow confidence that they, too, can persevere. They shouldn't worry who laughs at them or doesn't understand things the way they do. I hope these stories show them that there are many ways to do good in the world -- some do it through art or science, through music or social action, or simply by speaking up when they see someone do something wrong. I hope these stories encourage them to follow their heart and to use their talents for good, to make the world better.

Have your visits changed in any way as a result of the pandemic? For example, can you reach more children now through zoom without geography getting in the way?

I love virtual visits! I had already done some virtual visits for different countries, but now I do them regularly. I can do Power Points virtually, answer questions in real time, and here's another plus -- I can lift up my cat, Gloria Swanson, to say hi, which the kids love. That's not something they're going to get on an in-person visit! Going forward I expect to have a mix of virtual and in person visits. I already have a virtual visit planned in October with London students through The Charles Dickens Museum in London for [*Dear Mr. Dickens*](#) and in November with a Hadassah group for [*A Queen to the Rescue, the Story of Henrietta Szold, Founder of Hadassah*](#) in Delaware here in the United States. I have to admit, it's nice to skip all the travel and hotels and just focus on the kids for the time we have together.

Your path to publishing your first book, [*The William Hoy Story*](#), was a 12-year journey. Your next children's book was published just one year later. Did you work on them simultaneously?

The reason that *The William Hoy Story* took so long was that I thought I knew how to write children's books when I started, but I didn't! Once I was comfortable with the craft, the writing, while never easy, was easier. I became faster at solving narrative problems. I could edit and rewrite more quickly. I think I had so many pent up ideas, I just couldn't get them on paper fast enough. *The William Hoy Story* came out in 2016, *Manjhi Moves a Mountain* in 2017, and



three books in 2018: *Charlie Takes His Shot, How Charlie Sifford Broke the Color Barrier in Golf*; *Irving Berlin, the Immigrant Boy Who Made America Sing*; and *A Queen and the First Christmas Tree, Queen Charlotte's Gift to England*. Three in one year remains a record for me! I had one in 2019, *Martin & Anne*, two books in 2020 -- [*Beautiful Shades of Brown, the Art of Laura Wheeler Waring*](#) and [*For Spacious Skies, Katharine Lee Bates and the Inspiration for "America the Beautiful."*](#) Now I have two books in 2021 -- *Dear Mr. Dickens* and *A Queen to the Rescue, the Story of Henrietta Szold, Founder of Hadassah*

Can you tell us anything about the librarians in your life in school, public, college, or graduate school?

I am grateful to the librarians in my life! My mother, as I've said, is a retired teacher and she and my dad always had lots of books in the house. In fact, I didn't learn until later that the room we called the library -- my favorite room in the house because it had books from floor to ceiling -- was actually supposed to have been the dining room! But even though my parents loved books, it took our local librarian at the Kingsbridge Heights Public Library in the Bronx, whom I visited nearly every day after school, to discern the books that were missing in my life. My parents weren't into fantasy, so it was a revelation when my librarian put a book in my hands and told me she thought I would enjoy it. The book had the strangest title. I looked at it skeptically as I read the title out loud. She said to try it, that she thought I would like it. I took it home and it became one of my favorite books ever. It was *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. And soon, I was on a quest to read every C.S. Lewis book in the series. As you can see from this interview, C.S. Lewis has continued to inspire me. I can't tell you how many times I've gone back to read *The Last Battle*, a truly profound story, and how Lewis taught me that the quest to achieve and be good, to make a positive difference is the highest quest we can undertake.

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What can you tell us about your most recent books, which are both coming out simultaneously in the US, the UK, and Australia in early October, [*Dear Mr. Dickens*](#) and [*A Queen to the Rescue: The Story of Henrietta Szold, Founder of Hadassah*](#)?

It is important to me to share stories about heroes and heroines that the kids might not know about otherwise, about people who made a positive difference in the world and show ways in which we can all make a positive difference. I learned about Eliza Davis in an essay I read about Charles Dickens. I have always adored Charles Dickens and the big heart he had for children and the vulnerable. However, I never understood how he could create such a hateful, ugly stereotype of Fagin in *Oliver Twist*. The person who really didn't understand that was my mother.



We lost family in the Holocaust, and she faulted stereotypes like Fagin for antisemitism. It was a painful puzzle. Then I came across Eliza Davis, a Jewish woman who wrote to Charles Dickens just as I would have liked to have done. At first, he brushed her off. But she persisted and eventually, she changed his heart, which changed history in England in a surprising way. I have been so excited to share this little-known story. *Dear Mr. Dickens* has been vetted by three Dickens scholars, every quoted word is from the correspondence and from Dickens' own works. The book is being featured at The Charles Dickens Museum in London where it is part of the museum's educational outreach program. Best of all, it has been healing for my mother and for me. The book is about two things, really -- the importance of speaking up when you see someone doing something wrong -- even someone you admire. But it's also about forgiveness and the nobility of acknowledging you've done wrong and changing for the better. Charles Dickens

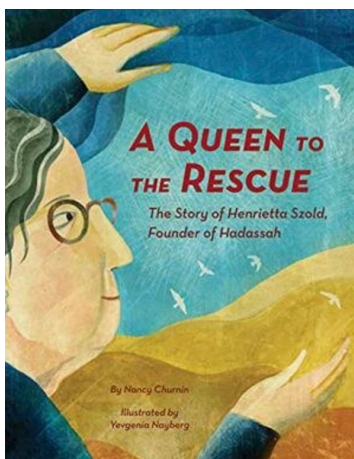
went on to become an advocate for the Jewish people and even created Mr. Riah, a kindly Jewish character in *Our Mutual Friend*, because of Eliza's letters. Eliza not only forgave him for Fagin, she would go on to write to his daughter, after his death, about how his creation of Riah showed the true nobility of his character -- the ability to do better.

A Queen to the Rescue, the Story of Henrietta Szold, Founder of Hadassah sprang from curiosity. My sister and I are lifetime members of this charitable organization, but who founded it and why? The more I learned about Henrietta Szold, the more I loved her. Like Katharine Lee Bates, the daughter of a minister who was a little girl during the Civil War,

Both women were told about all the things women couldn't do, but both persevered to get an education and to find things they could do.

Henrietta was the daughter of a rabbi who was a little girl during the Civil War. Both women were told about all the things women couldn't do, but both persevered to get an education and to find things they could do. Katharine, the heroine of my book, *For Spacious Skies*, became a poet, professor, social activist, and suffragette. Henrietta established the first night school in

America to help immigrants adjust to their new country, became the first editor of the Jewish Publication Society, to make sure there were Jewish books and texts for those immigrants and others, founded Hadassah, the first charity created and run by women and, in her 70s, saved 11,000 children from the Holocaust. How is it that Henrietta is not more widely known? Henrietta never wrote an autobiography or cared about fame or fortune. All she did was to help others and make the world a better place. She is an example for us all and it has been an honor to write about her and share her inspiring story.



Nancy Churnin is the award-winning author of ten picture books about people who persevered to achieve their dreams and make the world a better place. Among her awards: a Junior Library Guild selection, a Kirkus Star, multiple National Council for the Social Studies Notables, multiple Silver Eureka Awards, multiple inclusions on A Mighty Girl list, Sydney Taylor Notable, Towner Award nominee, Sakura Medal finalist, Notable Book for a Global Society, Anne Izard Storytellers Choice Award, and the South Asia Book Award. *Dear Mr. Dickens* and *A Queen to the Rescue*, *The Story of Henrietta Szold*, founder of Hadassah, will be out in October 2021. A native New Yorker, Nancy lives in North Texas with her family, which includes a dog named Dog and two cantankerous cats. Reach out to Nancy and check out free teacher guides, projects, and resources for all her books at <https://www.nanchurnin.com/>.

Patricia Sarles has been a medical librarian, an academic librarian, a public librarian, and a school librarian for more than 30 years. She now works as a Coordinator of Library Services for the New York City School Library System. She holds master's degrees in Anthropology and Library Science and is finishing up her third master's degree in Educational Leadership and Administration. She has published in *Teacher Librarian*, *Library Media Connection*, *Knowledge Quest*, *School Librarian's Workshop*, *Children & Libraries*, and *Voice of Youth Advocates*. Her first book chapter, with Anthem Press in England, was just published in August of 2021.