

A Book's Long Journey

How Librarians Aided One Author's Award-Winning Research

PATRICIA SARLES

Nancy Churnin's Dear Mr. Dickens won this year's National Jewish Book Award and was named a Sydney Taylor Honor Book. Here she recalls her journey researching the book—and how librarians were pivotal to her research. Here, in her own words, Churnin shares her story from research to publication.

I am very grateful to librarians for making my book possible. I was in my local library in Plano, Texas, doing research on another topic when my mind drifted to Charles Dickens—one of my favorite writers—and I stumbled on one or two sentences in an article that opened a magical door.

The sentences were about how a Jewish woman, Eliza Davis, had written to Dickens to tell him how hurtful and harmful his portrait of Fagin in *Oliver Twist* was to Jewish people and how she had ultimately succeeded in changing his perspective and his heart. Well, now I had to see the entire correspondence and get more context for these sentences. But where could I find the letters?



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Nancy Churnin
Photo by Kim Leeson

I looked and looked and came up with nothing. I talked to my librarian about it. She started researching and told me that there were two copies of the complete correspondence in the United States and one of those copies was at the University of North Texas rare books collection, just forty minutes away from me!

I called the University of North Texas, where another kind librarian put me in touch with a professor who had donated the book of their correspondence to the library. He became a mentor and friend in this journey and the librarian at University of North Texas copied and emailed copies of all the letters for me.

Librarians were essential to this story's journey as were the three professors that helped me make sure each detail was correct. But the real story begins many years before I came across the article that propelled the story.

I fell in love with Dickens' novels when I was little. My mother, who had always been an enthusiastic supporter of anything I read, shook her head when she saw me reading Dickens. She asked, a bit sharply, how I could read a writer who created Fagin, an ugly Jewish stereotype, in *Oliver Twist*. My mother had lost family in the Holocaust—a grandmother, uncles, aunts, cousins she never met in Bialystok, Poland, when the Nazis marched through their village. She'd experienced anti-semitism growing up in the Bronx during World War II, too.

She knew the power of stereotypes to shape attitudes and spur ugly actions. For the first time, she disapproved of what I was reading. But I couldn't stop reading Dickens—he was

such a great writer. I wished I could have written him a letter, asking how someone with so much compassion for everyone else could write such hurtful things about my people, the Jewish people.

When I discovered Eliza's story as an adult in 2013, it was surreal. She had written the letter I had dreamed of writing. Not only that, her letters showed he did have a great heart—a heart with the capacity to grow and change much as his Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol* did.

This book has been like a miracle for my mother and me. When it was finally printed and I could put it in her hands, she read it over and over. "This is so important," she murmured. And she looked up and smiled. All the years of pain, of her heart hurting as she thought of this person so many admired hurting the Jewish people, began to fade. Thanks to *Dear Mr. Dickens*, she knew that this person she'd thought of as cold



and cruel was someone who could learn and grow and do better.

My mother is a retired teacher, and all her life she has believed in the power of helping children learn and grow and do better. As she read and reread the book, I saw her face soften as if

remembering a more innocent time when she truly believed that people were good at heart.

Dear Mr. Dickens reminds us that it's never too late to learn and grow and do better. Charles Dickens ended up being a "mensch" as we say in Yiddish, who spoke up for Jewish people and changed the hearts of his readers. Best of all, once he changed, Eliza forgave him as we should always forgive when people make amends. Like Eliza, my mother forgave Dickens. And here's the beautiful thing about forgiveness. It heals the person who forgives. I will be grateful always for getting the chance to see *Dear Mr. Dickens* heal my mother's heart. &

A Chat with Author Nancy Churnin

You were an English major at Harvard University. You said you chose that major because you noticed that the English classes had the most books at the campus bookstore.

How did that decision prepare you for a career in writing books for young people? The more I read, and thought analytically about what I read, the more I picked up on patterns that crystallized, ultimately, into the hero's quest that guides and inspires me today. I had three professors that taught very different genres: one focused on epic poetry, one a child psychologist, and one who examined the Holocaust through the lens of what became one of my favorite books, *The Last of the Just* by Andre Schwarz-Bart. What did all three have in common? From myth to real life to historical fiction, the heroes and heroines in the books I read in their courses began with a goal, a journey to achieve that goal through seemingly insurmountable odds, and the realization of that goal in a way that leaves the seeker and the world forever changed for the better. My books may be short—as picture book biographies are—I am always seeking that pattern.

When I struggle with a project, I also take comfort knowing that the writing of every book is a hero's quest, as I start with a goal, face a journey to achieve that goal with sometimes seemingly insurmountable odds, and the realization of that goal—the finished book—resulting, I hope, in changing the world for the better. When I present to kids, I encourage them to think of themselves as heroes and heroines in their journeys, and remind them that no worthy goal is insurmountable if you persevere.

Picture book biographies are trending right now. How did you fall into this genre? My first picture book biography

came about because of a friendship and a promise. After writing an article for *The Dallas Morning News* about a local production about deaf baseball player William Hoy, I received an email from a deaf reader in Ohio, who said he followed everything anyone wrote about Hoy and shared his frustration that more people didn't know about this Deaf hero. I promised to help him by writing a picture book about Hoy that would get the kids to write to the National Baseball Hall of Fame and demand recognition for him. That's how the very long journey of my first book, *The William Hoy Story*, began.

Because I had no idea how challenging it would be, that first book took from 2003, when I made the promise, to 2016 when it was finally published. But instead of getting discouraged from the mountains of rejections I accumulated along the way, I fell in love with writing picture books! When I saw the joy that this book brought to kids and adults, I knew I had to shine a light on more heroes that the kids might otherwise not know. It's my dream that the reading experience doesn't end on the final page. I want to encourage kids to dream their dreams and figure out how they can make them come true.

What's a typical day for you? I work every day, but just as I let my heart guide my projects, I let my heart guide whether I work on one or more projects from one day to another. It's not just a matter of feelings; sometimes it's trusting your instincts as to whether you know your way through a particular story or if it needs to simmer and settle longer.