

# Deborah Heiligman and Kirsten W. Larson

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[00:00:05] **Kirsten W. Larson:** Hello and

[00:00:10] welcome back to Nonfiction Kid Lit Craft Conversations, the podcast where we dig into the craft and business behind today's best nonfiction for young readers. I'm your host, Kirsten Larson. Today I'm thrilled to welcome the wonderful Deborah Heiligman. Deborah Heiligman is known for her award-winning titles like Vincent and Theo, Charles and Emma, and now her newest book, Loudmouth: Emma Goldman Versus America, A Love Story.

[00:00:39] I love that title by the way, and we're gonna talk about that in a minute. In this episode, we're gonna talk about Deborah's research and writing process. And this is a craft rich conversation you won't wanna miss. So first of all, welcome to the show, Deborah.

[00:00:53] **Deborah Heiligman:** It's lovely to see you. Thank you. Thank you so much for having me, Kirsten.

[00:00:57] I'm so happy to be here and I really love nothing more than talking about craft and nonfiction, I'm so excited to be here with you.

[00:01:05] **Kirsten W. Larson:** I have been a super long time fan from your Darwin book through Vincent and Theo. You write this narrative nonfiction that's so gripping, we might as well be reading fiction. It's my honor to have you.

[00:01:18] **Deborah Heiligman:** Thank you. Well, it's my honor to be here with you. Yeah. Rocket scientists. Yes.

[00:01:23] **Kirsten W. Larson:** Oh, you're hilarious. So for, for listeners who have not yet picked up Loudmouth, which has just come out, um, can you give us a quick introduction to the book?

[00:01:36] What's it about? And then that eternal question, what drew you to Emma Goldman and this topic?

[00:01:44] **Deborah Heiligman:** I'm gonna actually start with the last thing first.

[00:01:47] **Kirsten W. Larson:** Do it.

[00:01:48] **Deborah Heiligman:** Okay, so, um, I was working on a book about Clara Leimlich during the pandemic. Clara Leimlich was, um, she was a union organizer, a Jewish immigrant early 20th century, and I was, it was part of

[00:02:04] the She Persisted series.

[00:02:06] Mm-hmm. Um, from Phil Mel. And I was asked to do a book in the series and I looked at the list of people and I thought, well. If I can do Clara Leimlich, I will, I'll do a book in the series. And I loved writing about her. She was such a badass. Um, she was this tiny woman who just spoke out against the way bosses were treating workers, and she led this huge strike of 20,000 and just made a big impact.

[00:02:34] Changed working addition in a lot of factories. Unfortunately not the triangle shirt, waist factory. Right. And that was a disaster. But she was before that, so she was already seeing all the trouble. So when that book was finished, you know, that was during. A time. So I was writing that during the pandemic when women were not feeling so empowered, so I thought I wanna write another book about another badass woman.

[00:03:06] Who spoke truth to injustice and I immediately thought of Emma Goldman. Why did I think about Emma Goldman? Well, I'd known about Emma Goldman since I was 19. A youth group friend of mine, had met this guy in college. And I went to visit her and meet her new boyfriend, and his name was Don and he was an anarchist.

[00:03:27] And he told me about Emma Goldman. And, I thought, wow, I just, I don't, had never heard of this before. I grew up in Allentown, Pennsylvania. We didn't have anarchists there. And, um, and I was fascinated by it. And, and although he was an anarchist, he did not stay an anarchist. He ended up marrying my friend and they named their first daughter Emma.

[00:03:51] Emma Goldman. So I just never forgot about Emma Goldman, but I never really knew a lot about her. And so I did what has become my, well, my maybe not so smart way of doing things, and that is I wrote a proposal based on very little information and got the contract and then decided, uh, oh, no, what, what have I just done when I.

[00:04:15] Started doing the research, but I was drawn to her because of her, , anger, but also because of her ability to just sort of. Step out. So a lot of immigrants came to this country and they had jobs that didn't pay well, and they worked really long hours and they lived in tenement and they, you know, they just couldn't, could barely feed themselves.

[00:04:42] And they just kept doing that because that's what you did. And Emma Goldman like Clara Leimlich after her. So Emma Goldman actually came first. Emma, was older. Anyway, so she came to this country in, 1885, going into 1886. And she didn't just keep working.

[00:05:02] She looked around and she just. Spoke out and she first started speaking out just to her boss, which got her fired. Um, but she was okay about that. And then she started speaking out, and for the next three decades in America, she kept speaking.

[00:05:18] **Kirsten W. Larson:** I think this is what I find so fascinating about writing biography is. It's, it's what the people did, but also like who they are. That I find so fascinating. Right. It it makes you ask that question exactly. What kind of person would do X.

[00:05:36] **Deborah Heiligman:** Exactly. That's exactly what I kept asking myself. And the thing is, I should say that.

[00:05:42] I am kind of a badass, wannabe, right? So I'm not, I mean, maybe some people who know me think I am a badass, but I don't think I am. I think I'm a good girl. Um, and I was always a good girl. I would maybe do bad things, but so nobody knew that it was me who was doing them. So I, really kept asking myself the question, who was she?

[00:06:03] What made her do this? And of course. What about her childhood and her psyche and all of that, made her be the Emma Goldman that, that people came to know and fear and love and hate.

[00:06:18] **Kirsten W. Larson:** , I'm always thinking about, hooks, right? What are the draws into the story? Melissa Stewart, who we both know, talks a lot about, if there's no hook, there's no book. And what I find fascinating about your book is your subtitle, loudmouth, Emma, golden Versus America, A Love Story, right? And so what are, what are you saying to us, to the reader about America and the need for people to speak up, improve?

[00:06:48] I mean, it's all there in the title. Like tell me about this title.

[00:06:51] **Deborah Heiligman:** Right. Well, the, the funny thing is, so I came up with the title through a long process of trying to figure out what my book was about. And I always, need to know what my book is about before I start writing, and then of course I find out more about what it's about while I'm writing it.

[00:07:10] And so the first part of the title I thought a lot about. How she came to America with these ideals and the promise of America. And then she got angry at America and people got angry at her for being angry at America. And that was a little, a little uncomfortable for me because I kind of understood the people who were angry, but I definitely understood that why she was angry.

[00:07:38] And, I thought a lot about. What she loved, so I always have a mantra. For my books and with, um, like what is the mantra of my book? And sometimes that comes right away. It usually does not. So with Charles and Emma, the one that you mm-hmm. You know, probably first knew me by the mantra, it took me a long frigging time to realize that it was a love story.

[00:08:05] Right. You would think, I mean, it's probably right there in my proposal, but to when, I mean to realize it, like with every cell of my being. So you know, when you're writing about someone like Charles Darwin, about whom there was a huge two volume biography by Janet Brown, who was my expert reader, I wasn't gonna write that book.

[00:08:25] But I, it took me the longest time to not feel like I had to read every single thing that Charles Darwin wrote to talk about his voyage around the world to talk about, you know, just everything in great detail.

[00:08:37] But that wasn't my book. It was a love story. So that was my mantra. It was a love story and everything had to be in service to the love story. And there's a lot in that book, but it's all in service to the love story, and we could go pick it apart, but that's not the book we're talking about. So I seem to write love stories.

[00:08:55] So Vincent and Theo was a love story Yeah. Between Vincent and Theo, but it was also a quest I felt like, you know that book, the Seven Plots? Mm-hmm. There's a book called The Seven Plot. So I always look at that book. So what is my story? What is it? Is it, you know, a, a monster, whatever is it? And Vincent and Theo was a quest.

[00:09:15] It was a quest for, for Vincent to get back into the good graces of his family. This is obviously my opinion. And the way he did that was through art.

And so it also became a story of that quest and also the story of his life as an artist. Mm-hmm. So what was Emma Goldman's book about? So she was definitely in love with anarchism.

[00:09:38] She was definitely in love with herself. So it could have been a love story of Emma and Anarchism, but it could have been Emma. And Emma and I toyed with both of those. But, it really came to me, you know, kind of slowly and then all of a sudden I was reading a book about, fiction writing actually called *The Art of Time in Fiction*, by Joan Silver.

[00:10:02] And I'm looking at my wall because I still have this up on my wall. In this book, she says, meaning is determined by where a story ends. And so I was reading, an interview with somebody who knew Emma Goldman at the end of her life. And he would drive her around and she was exiled in Canada 'cause she was, spoiler alert, she was kicked out of America.

[00:10:25] Um, and she would sit on a bench in Windsor, Ontario and look across the water at America. And he said, as if through the eyes of a lover. Ah. And I said, yep, that's the one I'm picking. It's a love story with America. And so. Loudmouth comes from when the, the book opens with a scene where she's giving a speech and she's yelling about the fact that workers need to, demand work and if they don't get work demand bread, and if they don't get bread, steal the bread.

[00:10:57] And so one of the newspapers called her a loudmouth. The loudmouth said in terrible English, blah, blah, blah. And I thought, well, there's my title, loud mouth, right? So, um, loudmouth Emma Goldman versus America. A love story just kind of appeared to me, and I'll tell you a funny story. I'm good friends with Rebecca Stead and we were taking a walk one day and I said, I think I have the title for my book.

[00:11:21] And I told her the title and she said, that title is so good. You don't even have to write the book. I know. So I said I wish, but I, of course I wanted to write the book.

[00:11:31] **Kirsten W. Larson:** Well, but I just love how it encapsulates the whole thing and your mantra and everything, and we'll talk about how you get there. I love that you're saying it's a messy process because that is what I always feel.

[00:11:45] **Deborah Heiligman:** It's such a hot mess.

[00:11:45] **Kirsten W. Larson:** Yep. Well, and I, I have to tell you, so this is an aside. I have a 17-year-old who's

[00:11:51] writing a novel right now. And while we were at NCTE where I actually met Deborah briefly in person, my son texted me and he's like, mom, I finally figured out what my story is about, what it's really about.

[00:12:04] I thought it was about this, but it's really about that. And I thought, man, this kid is gonna be a writer because isn't that how it always is?

[00:12:12] **Deborah Heiligman:** That's right. It's so weird and you look back and you think, why didn't I know that from the beginning? I could have written the book so much faster, but I think then it would be boring to write, you know, know everything from the beginning.

[00:12:23] **Kirsten W. Larson:** Right. Well, and it's like, that's the magical moment, right? There's nothing like that feeling. Yes. When you're like, this is it. This is it?

[00:12:30] **Deborah Heiligman:** Yes, I, yeah, I did an event in New York, and um, my family was there, of course, and my son said after me, and he's a writer too. Both my sons are writers, but this happened to be my younger son, Benjamin, and he said, you know what moment I liked the best.

[00:12:43] I said What he said when you said how hard it was to figure out what the book was about. Then once you did, it was like ice skating. I said, oh, I said that. Okay.

[00:12:55] **Kirsten W. Larson:** I love that analogy.

[00:12:56] **Deborah Heiligman:** It's, yeah, I'm like, I, I didn't realize I said that. Okay. But I would probably fall on ice skates right now, but anyway. Yeah.

[00:13:03] **Kirsten W. Larson:** But at least you're not shoveling boulders anymore, right? Yes, exactly. Exactly. Alright, so let's, let's back up. You, you have this idea, um, that's been percolating since you were 19, you know? Mm-hmm. Potentially Emma Goldman, you don't have your mantra yet, you haven't figured out. It's a love story. So what, when you decide that you are going to write about someone, what does your initial research process look like?

[00:13:29] Like what kind of sources are you consulting at your earliest stages?



[00:13:34] **Deborah Heiligman:** This is how I do it. And you people out there, you don't have to do it my way, but I'll tell you my way, , I. Read almost exclusively for the whole process. Primary sources. So I don't like to read secondary sources because, especially when it's about a person really anytime.

[00:13:58] When I'm writing about a person, I really wanna get to know that person whenever possible in that person's own words. It's not always possible, but it was for Charles and Emma. It was for Vincent and Theo, and it was for Emma Goldman.

[00:14:13] I don't want to know what anybody else thinks about them because I wanna be able to present to my readers my Emma Goldman, my Emma Darwin apparent. Someone said to me recently, do you have a relative name, Emma? No, I don't. Just a coincidence. But so luckily there was a plethora of primary well.

[00:14:35] Let me put it this way. There was one huge primary source for Emma and then many others. She wrote an autobiography that was a thousand pages long in some editions in my edition, it was only 890 or something, but that was very small print. It was called Living My Life. It was published in two volumes, and I read every word.

[00:15:00] From beginning to end before I did anything else, and when I am first encountering a subject, . I take a very specific kind of note, and I talk about this when I do school visits. I talk about this to writers. I take what I have called, and I did this, you know, I called it this years ago and I just haven't thought of a better phrase for it, but I called them my Oh wow.

[00:15:26] Notes. It's the things when you're reading, when you're reading something that make you go, oh, wow. Or, you know. Oh my God, that's gross. Or you know, I can't believe it. And you just, 'cause you can always go back and look up the facts. Sure. You can look up the date. I'm not gonna write down what year she came into America.

[00:15:44] I mean, I will eventually, 'cause I have a, I'm looking at my bulletin board, which is not Emma right now, it's my next book. But, um. I've had a big time line up on my bulletin board, and so I, that's fine that that can come later. What I want are those initial reactions that make me just the zing, because those are the kind of things that I wanna convey to my readers, so.

[00:16:07] So that is my process. So I read, I read all the primary sources that I can find. Emma Goldman also did a whole lot of writing. She wrote essays. She

wrote, um, she edited a magazine in which called Mother Earth, in which she wrote pieces. I didn't read every single solitary thing she wrote, but very close.

[00:16:26] So once I read the autobiography, I mean, in a way. It's not the smartest, or most, let me say the most efficient way to do it, because then I have her whole life in my head. Well now I have to figure out how I'm gonna present it. Right. Um, and then comes the sculpting, and then comes the looking for.

[00:16:48] The scenes, the dialogue, the character development, the suspense, the, the mantra, the themes, all of that. So scenes and themes, they sound alike, but they're very different, so, so that's my process eventually. I only read one other biography of Emma Goldman.

[00:17:10] No. Two. And the reason I read it, this is a great story. While I was working on the book, I posted on Instagram that I was working on the book and, and, uh, editor that I know wrote to me and said, would you like to meet Alex Kate Schulman? And I went. Wait a minute, that name. And I went over to my shelf and I had a book that she had edited called Red Emma Speaks about Emma Goldman.

[00:17:37] It was a collection of her writing. And then I looked her up and, and I remembered, oh my God, she was a very famous, she's still alive, is a very famous second wave feminist. But she had written a biography for kids, for teens about Emma Goldman. 50 some years ago. Oh, wow. It, I hadn't gotten that yet. So I got that book, but I didn't read it because I don't read other people's books right.

[00:18:03] About my subjects. But a couple years later, I, maybe a year, whole year later, um, I worked up the nerve to meet her in person. We fell in love immediately and she's one of my closest friends and she's 93. I will just say, oh, I love it. It has been she, and the book is dedicated to her and to my daughters-in-law.

[00:18:22] So she said to me, well, have you read my book? And I said, no, I don't read other people's books. And she said, you mind? I said, okay.

[00:18:33] **Kirsten W. Larson:** Well, she's your friend now.

[00:18:34] **Deborah Heiligman:** Yeah, she's my friend. So I did, but I didn't take any notes. Yeah. You know, and I just don't want anybody else's. View of my person in my head.



[00:18:44] **Kirsten W. Larson:** So let me ask you, because, I typically do start with secondary sources because I worry about, context, like, especially when you're dealing with things in the historical record, like even the meanings of words change, through time periods and that sort of thing.

[00:19:01] If you are taking this unfiltered view, how do you ensure that your historical interpretation, is accurate?

[00:19:11] **Deborah Heiligman:** Okay. I, I should, I should clarify. I, I try not to read secondary sources about my person. Okay. But, but I do read like the hay market. Mm-hmm. The hay market event that's in the book.

[00:19:24] That was what Radicalized Emma, I read secondary sources about that. Okay. So, but I don't wanna read secondary sources about my person.

[00:19:35] **Kirsten W. Larson:** Okay. That makes sense.

[00:19:36] **Deborah Heiligman:** So I definitely, I have to give myself a history lesson. Yeah. I have said way too often that I tend to write about things I know nothing about.

[00:19:44] So like, when I wrote Torpedoed, which is set in World War ii, I was like, wait. What else happened in the World War II besides the Holocaust? I mean, I'm not kidding you, right? I was like, oh my God. I think I heard about the Blitz. So maybe you had asked me in an email what Melissa Stewart meant by saying that I read around.

[00:20:02] Mm-hmm. Well, maybe I was talking about torpedoed because I really did read around for that one. Okay. I read a whole lot of novels about World War ii. I read histories about World War ii. I read about Winston Churchill and I did all of that, but about. So, I definitely read around my person, secondary sources.

[00:20:20] And by the way, plenty of nonfiction writers start with, I was on a panel recently with Mark Aronson, and while we were planning the panel, he said, I always start with secondary sources. I said, I know Mark, we've had this argument in public before. Let's, let's not do, and it's not an argument like that. I think he's wrong.

[00:20:35] Okay. It's just like, this is my process. Right. And eventually I use the secondary sources very much. To check things or if I, I'm not sure about something, but by the time I get to the secondary sources, I'm an expert and I

am an expert enough. I mean, not an academic expert, but I'm an expert enough to know which secondary sources to trust, right?

[00:20:56] So that's a big thing. Like there were mistakes in her autobiography that people just quoted as if they were real. Mm-hmm. And when I find a secondary source that does that, and a lot of them did that because they were written before the internet and before it was really easy to figure out. So it's not that I never use secondary sources, but I, but I use them only to check things or like you said, perfectly, you know? Yes. To get context. Absolutely.

[00:21:23] **Kirsten W. Larson:** This is another area where experts can also be helpful, right? If you don't necessarily want to read somebody else's work and you wanna double check something or get a little bit of context, you can also consult experts.

[00:21:34] **Deborah Heiligman:** One secondary source I did read was a very academic book about Emma Goldman called Emma Goldman, political Thinking in the Streets. And I actually did read that whole book, and I made lots of notes and then I got in touch with her because she had a very. Particular point of view. It wasn't a straight biography and it wasn't going to mess me up by the time I read it.

[00:21:56] I already knew Emma. She was already my Emma. I was able to ask her some questions and I watched a video of a talk she gave. I also watched a video of a talk that was done at the Tenement Museum by people who had written about and studied Emma Goldman, and one of those people became my.

[00:22:14] My expert and he read the manuscript for me and like that, .

[00:22:17] **Kirsten W. Larson:** Yeah, it is very easy to be swayed by certain people's point of view when you haven't developed yours yet. If you're reading, you know, source material with very strong opinions

[00:22:30] **Deborah Heiligman:** And people do have very strong opinions about Emma Goldman, and so, and I did, I would read, you know, some academic articles about her with those strong opinions. But I, again, with my kind of looking through my fingers at them Yeah. Just knowing, okay, that's their opinion.

[00:22:45] I, but I wanna form my own opinion. Yeah.

[00:22:46] **Kirsten W. Larson:** Right, right. Okay. So you, you have this, this story idea. You're reading all of these primary sources. You're reading her autobiography, and then like at what point do you start, does the idea of the book start to sort of gel for you? Or at what point are you developing your mantra?

[00:23:05] Are you pretty far into this process before your initial mantra comes to you?

[00:23:12] **Deborah Heiligman:** It feels that way. Yes, it feels like an eternity. I remember having all kinds of thoughts about what I was gonna do and how far in her life I was gonna go. And one of the biggest problems that I had was figuring out how to shape it so that it wasn't a thousand pages like her autobiography.

[00:23:36] Right. And. I mean, sometimes I feel like I shouldn't admit these things in public because they sound so stupid, but it, I was really having trouble figuring out how far in her life to go and how, there was a whole lot of stuff after she left America. I really, there was a bunch of stuff I wanted to include.

[00:23:57] And I finally like looked at my title and I thought, it's Emma Goldman versus America. Right? So basically Deb stop when she's get kicked, gets kicked out of America. And I don't actually stop there because I needed to take her to her death, but I truncate her last decades. So that it's really a story about Emma in America, because that's what I called it.

[00:24:20] And that's what I wanted to do. And I had to have, like I love stories that have parameters around them. Those are the easier ones to write, right? And usually you have to figure them out yourself. Right, unfortunately. And if it's a long life then, she lived till she was 70, and that's a pretty long time, for, you know, that age especially.

[00:24:39] And she lived like 50 million lifetimes in that life, right? Because she was such a larger than life character. So it was hard to know how to contain it. So somewhere in there. Something happens and I start writing. I don't know what it is. I just like, okay, I guess I'm done. I'm not, I'm at that stage with my current work in progress and I didn't know it kind of come up, came up and snuck at me, from behind.

[00:25:02] It kinda went, okay, stop researching and start writing. So I haven't really started writing yet, but I feel like the engine is like mm-hmm. It's getting, it's getting there. I dunno if that happens to you. Yeah. But you just kind of hit a

wall also then you ne I mean, I never stop researching until they pull that book out of my hands.

[00:25:18] So I know I can always research some more and I do. Right.

[00:25:22]

[00:25:56] **Kirsten W. Larson:** I think it's one of those things where you kind of get to, I mean, at least for me, like I get to a point where I feel like I'm not getting new information, right? So every time I'm reading something, it's, it's very little new information.

[00:26:10] And it is, it's like you have this energy. I love this idea of like, you're kind of spinning your wheels just waiting to like pop the clutch and like, now, now you're. And then you go, right?

[00:26:20] **Deborah Heiligman:** Oh, and then the other thing is like, so where do you start? So that for me is always the moment when mm-hmm. I know I'm, I can write when I figure out where I'm gonna start and I had a couple different ideas of where to start this book and then I just said, no, it's gotta be in this place.

[00:26:37] Um, and I tend to tend to do where I start in the middle and then I go back. Yeah. Which somebody once called the tent pole structure, which makes sense to me, but I don't know. Um, so, but I wasn't always gonna start there. I had a different place that I was gonna start for a long time and it, it just wasn't working for me.

[00:26:56] Once I figured out where I was gonna start. Then I could start writing.

[00:27:02] **Kirsten W. Larson:** Well, and it's, it's interesting to me, it almost reminds me of like a murder mystery where sometimes you have, like, the murder happens in the beginning or you, you know, and Yeah. And maybe you, and then maybe you have to like jump back in time a little bit and work forward, but you're starting with this dramatic moment where she is called a loud mouth.

[00:27:21] Right, right. And, and then you're kind of jumping back. Right. A little bit in time to go pick up with her childhood and all of that. Right. So where were, where were you gonna start? That's what I wanna know.

[00:27:31] **Deborah Heiligman:** I was just gonna say, oh my God. We're like a mind meld here. Um, yes. 'cause I think it would be interesting to the listeners I was going to start for a long time.

[00:27:41] Again, spoiler alert. But you'd find this out if you just looked her up on Wiki. Yeah. Um, when she got kicked out of America. I was gonna start, ah, it started with, it was a cold December morning when Emma Goldman got kicked out of America. That was gonna be my first line, which is a great line.

[00:27:57] **Kirsten W. Larson:** It's a great line.

[00:27:58] **Deborah Heiligman:** Um, it's still in the book, I think, something like that. But, um, and I actually talked to my Steve Sheinkin about it. And he said yes, and then you could make it kind of like a, a mystery of like, why did she get kicked out? And I, and I thought about it and I thought about it and I thought, yeah, and maybe he would write the book that way, but that's not how I'm gonna write it.

[00:28:19] And it would be like, I was just talking at a conference about this, like, I think if four nonfiction writers were all given the same topic, it would be really fun to see Yeah. How everybody would do it so differently. 'cause you know, people have this now I'm gonna go on one of my little rants. Sorry.

[00:28:33] Warning.

[00:28:33] **Kirsten W. Larson:** Please do, please do.

[00:28:35] **Deborah Heiligman:** Um, people have this misconception that we just, you know, it's like writing a book report or writing a report that you did for school. Every author's DNA is all over the book and you know, your fingerprints are all over the book. So. Why did I start it when she's standing at age 24 in front of a crowd of thousands?

[00:28:56] Being a loud mouth. 'cause to me, that was the essence of who she was, this brave woman who was terrified of public speaking. So as I always tell kids, brave doesn't mean you're, you're not scared. It means you're scared, but you do it anyway. Standing up and saying, the white patriarchy is screwing us all over, and she was so young to be doing that.

[00:29:17] And to me that was, and it goes to your question and my question throughout the book is. Why, how, who was she? How could she do that? Right, right. How could she do that? I couldn't do that at her age. Coming, to a new

country. Like I wouldn't have done that. I'm so impressed with her. , So yeah, so, so, so I was gonna start it with the deportation, but I wanted there to be suspense about.

[00:29:41] You could have done it. I could have done it that way. I think it would've been an interesting structure, but this is just the one that as soon as I landed on this, I knew, okay, now I know how to write the book.

[00:29:51] **Kirsten W. Larson:** Well, but I think you're still, it's still a mystery, right? Because you are showing her in her full self, you're showing us who she is, and so then the reader is like, okay, how did we get to this 24-year-old?

[00:30:06] Up here in front of these crowds doing what she's doing. Right. And, and so now, yes, I want to keep reading because I want to see how we got here and what made her this person. Right. Right. So it's still a mystery, right? It's just right. A different history.

[00:30:22] **Deborah Heiligman:** And then throughout the book, throughout the book, I drop little hints that things are, you know, the government is after her, right?

[00:30:27] Mm-hmm. It wasn't just hints, but like, she wrote about it and she knew the government was after her. And she kept getting arrested and thrown into jail and having to serve, sentences and being told she's not allowed to come back to this. City or not allowed to speak outside or , nobody would give her a place to speak.

[00:30:44] And so you kind of start to feel like, who's gonna win here in this Emma Goldman versus America. Right? I don't know who won.

[00:30:51] **Kirsten W. Larson:** I still think Emma won, but, but

[00:30:56] she's in, she's in Canada with universal healthcare. No, I'm just kidding. Exactly. Exactly. You mentioned scenes. I'm a big fan of your scenes.

[00:31:06] **Deborah Heiligman:** Thank you.

[00:31:06] **Kirsten W. Larson:** The mark of fantastic narrative nonfiction are these scenes that are so tense and they really pull the, the reader through, and they're so hard to construct because you're often having to pull from all these sources.



[00:31:19] So yes, let's talk about scenes. You mentioned when you're researching, you start to kind of think about. What, might make good scenes. So can you tell us a little bit about how your research feeds into what you're picking as your scenes?

[00:31:38] **Deborah Heiligman:** Yes, definitely.

[00:31:39] When I was writing Vincent and Theo, and just feeling so overwhelmed by the amount of detail because there, I had read all his letters, all their letters, to each other. It was a lot of material, and I would get to the end of the day and I would tell my husband stuff, but I wasn't writing yet.

[00:31:58] And I, one day, I, he is also a writer and a writing professor. Not bad person to have is your next door neighbor and leave the office next to me. I said, I don't think I'm ever gonna write this book. I dunno how to write this book. And he said, everything you've told me Vincent and Theo is like an opera.

[00:32:17] Write me the arias. Oh, he said, why don't you just, and I said, oh wow, interesting. And so I said, well, I know the first aria and so I just, for about a couple of weeks I just started writing short pieces that were scenes that I knew would have to be in the book, and that broke through that, that.

[00:32:43] Writing fear, I guess, as I will call it. Mm-hmm. For Vincent Theo. I wrote a torpedo that way. I wrote, even little Clara Leimlich I wrote that way. And so I'm just sort of trained. I'm a big fiction reader. Mm-hmm. And so I'm really trained to see the scenes and because I never make anything up, I do.

[00:33:03] Damnedest to never say maybe, or perhaps, you know, like if I, I don't know if I say that in this book. I think, I think I say that about the sewing machine because I couldn't figure out exactly what sewing machine she had, but that kind of thing. So I try to just, I write the scene with all the details that I have, so I had.

[00:33:23] I had her autobiography, her comrade lover best friend, lifelong buddy was Alexander Berkman or Sasha. I had, I had his memoir called Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist, which is a gorgeous, gorgeous book. I had letters, I had, things that other people said who were there. I had other memoirs, you know, I just had a lot of material.

[00:33:45] And then I would find things that weren't right. So I wanted to write the scene. So the book opens with the scene of her speaking.

[00:33:52] Mm-hmm. So we're gonna put that aside for a second. I loved working on that scene. So much. Um, but then I go back to her childhood and really all we have about her childhood really is her autobiography. So, you know, I, I added in details that I found out from my secondary source research about where things were.

[00:34:11] And then I decided, so chapter. One is her speaking and we go back to her child. Chapters two and three are her childhood in Russia and chapter four opens with her coming to America.

[00:34:23] So I did a lot of research about, you know, the day, the weather, all that kind of stuff. And then in her autobiography she writes.

[00:34:36] The last year of our journey comes vividly to my mind. Everybody was on deck. Helena, that's her sister, and I stood, pressed to each other and raptured by the sight of the harbor and the statue of liberty suddenly emerging from the mist. Ah, there she was the symbol of hope, of freedom, of opportunity. She held her torch high to light the way to the free country, the asylum for the oppressed of all lands.

[00:35:02] We too Helena and I. Would find a place in the generous heart of America. Our spirits were high, our eyes filled with tears. What a gorgeous quote. Emma, thank you so much for that. Was it even up yet?

[00:35:17] Well, that's the thing. I looked it up and it wasn't up yet.

[00:35:22] **Kirsten W. Larson:** Like, wait a minute. That's not right. So what was I gonna do, Kirsten?

[00:35:27] **Deborah Heiligman:** What was I gonna do? I was like, can I curse on this podcast?

[00:35:30] **Kirsten W. Larson:** Yeah, sure.

[00:35:32] **Deborah Heiligman:** Oh shit. I said, probably worse than that. What am I gonna do? And then I thought, I'm going to use it. I'm going to use it. I'm gonna show my work. So I entered the book for a moment. I said, except no. The Statue of Liberty was not yet standing in New York's Harbor.

[00:35:50] It had arrived in Paris in June of that year, but was kept in its crates until the summer of 1886. This was with 1885, while it waited for the pedestal to be completed. But then I a, I asked myself the question, why did she see the

Statue of Liberty? I don't think she was making it up. Right. I think, I mean, I don't know for sure.

[00:36:10] Maybe she was, 'cause she knew how to tell a good story, so she wanted the statue to be there. So she put it there, but I don't think so. I think she remembered it there because as I wrote. In Emma's memory, the statue was there when she first entered America because Lady Liberty symbolized all that America stood for all she hoped it would be For Emma and Helena and all the new immigrants.

[00:36:34] America was the land of opportunity where even if the streets weren't truly paved with gold as rumor had it, everyone, if they worked hard enough, could make good lives for themselves. This hope, this promise of what America could be, should be never left. Emma. Even though she was disappointed many times over, starting with her first minutes on land, and then I'd go to the chaos of Castle Garden.

[00:36:56] So I got to say that, right? And that to me was the book. So I found a mistake. I thought, oh shit, I'm screwed. And then I thought, let me use it and let me put it in the scene. And then I go into the scene of Castle Garden where I used her memory, but then I verified it with another firsthand account. I mean, it is so much fun to build the scenes, Kirsten, because I can like.

[00:37:19] Pick from different sources. Mm-hmm. Verify them. You always have to verify your facts and then make a scene. It's so much fun.

[00:37:27] **Kirsten W. Larson:** Well, and I just wanna interject because I mean, I, I do tell people this, like, you do have to be really careful with your primary sources because human memory is.

[00:37:37] Fallible. Right. And I mean, right. And, and so a lot of times in, in terms of like actual facts, right, of the facts are sometimes better coming from a secondary source, right? But you're never going to get a better source, right. For feeling emotion personality than those primary sources,

[00:37:58] **Deborah Heiligman:** that's right.

[00:37:58] And I say in the book that human memory is fallible and I want, you know, this is. Ya, you know, teenagers, it's also adult. A lot of adults read it. But, but I want kids to start looking at, at what their, their source is and thinking, is this true and thinking about their own memories. And is, is this true? How would I remember it?

[00:38:18] Another scene in the book that, that I actually show my work, um, is um, when she first met Sasha, who became her comrade, her lover for a while. And she writes about it in her autobiography. He writes about it in his autobiography and they put it at different times of the year. They have slight, and the funny thing is they helped each other with their autobiographies and they, and they let it stand. So I show that too because it was also emblematic of their relationship. So that worked for me. So there are all kinds of ways of handling both. Material that doesn't kind of do what you want it to do. And also, how to make scenes.

[00:39:01] **Kirsten W. Larson:** I feel like we're used to what a scene looks like and what it involves in fiction.

[00:39:08] But I think sometimes for some of us, it's harder to wrap our mind around how we have to craft something similar in nonfiction using. Only the research. So, you know, for you, like when you're constructing a scene, what are some some of the critical elements for you or the critical things that you're thinking about as you're trying to like get this on the page?

[00:39:33] **Deborah Heiligman:** Well, details like as many details I can get. What color something was if somebody says how something smelled, but also dialogue and dialogue is tough because. Do you believe that they said what they, exactly what they said? Right? Not really. I mean, in, in torpedoed, I made the decision to put dialogue not in quotation marks, unless it was from a letter.

[00:39:58] Mm-hmm. And then I could read the letter. But I also think that you can get a little carried away with making sure everything is, you know, exactly. I never make anything up and I always, take from the primary sources and, it's all in the back matter, like where exactly I got it from.

[00:40:15] I also want tension. Hmm. Um, so like, there's a scene. At the end of the book, of the trial, this big trial, that was Emma and Sasha that would eventually get them kicked out of America. And there were many, many sources for that because there were, there was, how she wrote it. There were how other people who were there wrote it.

[00:40:37] There were how the new, how the newspapers of the day wrote it. And by the way, newspapers are not primary sources, newspapers of the day, definitely not. They are, I don't know, primary and a half sources. They're contemporaneous sources, however you wanna think about it. But I marked one little thing I wanted to share with you.

[00:40:56] So she's at trial and it's her birthday. She talks about that and she says, basically, my birthday didn't go unnoticed. Those were my words. But she said, at their lunch break, three of Emma's friends gave her a bouquet of her favorite flowers, red roses. So she was really happy about that.

[00:41:16] But then this, the New York Sun wrote. They were sarcastic about it. Ms. Emma Goldman with her own little group of serious thinkers, crowded about her and her maids, and waiting on hand to fetch her water and take turns holding her large bunch of red roses, celebrated her 48th birthday and Judge Meyers section of the federal court. So it's sarcastic the way they wrote it.

[00:41:40] Right. And it's making fun of her. And it's mean, but that's not how she wrote it. But by using the quote from the newspaper, I'm getting in the tension of the, not only of the scene, but the tension of the day, meaning the contemporary feeling. Mm-hmm. About Emma Goldman, which was largely negative. Right. Um, so I'm not gonna, I don't have to say it.

[00:42:02] Right, right. I can use the word sarcastic and that, and that's enough. So, so I pay attention to details, I pay attention to, to tension. Mm-hmm. Just like when you're crafting a scene in fiction, you don't want it to be boring. You don't wanna have too much dialogue in there. And very, often I put everything on the page and then I have to cut, cut it a lot.

[00:42:23] And I'm very. Big on cliffhangers, so at the ends of chapters and things like that. So I try to leave a good cliffhanger in a scene if I can, you know, like, let's just end it and then Right. The reader wants to turn the page. But I once had somebody say to me, why don't you have, , Charles Darwin lean up against, a gas lamp, a street lamp lit with gas?

[00:42:47] Why don't you have him lean up against it? It's a, but I don't know if he leaned up against it. I can have the gas lamps, the gas lights there. But I could, and I did, and Charles and Emma have Charles Darwin stepping over horse poop. Someone said, I should have said horse increment excrement, but I prefer poop.

[00:43:07] Because everybody had a step over it. But not everybody was gonna lean. I said, I don't know if he is a leaner. Right. I don't know. I just don't know that, , so you put in the details that you can verify in one way or another? That's how I feel about it. Yeah.

[00:43:22] **Kirsten W. Larson:** And sometimes yes, we have to go and get.

[00:43:25] Other sources, right? You may not have him specifically saying I stepped over horse poop, but you know, from the period and the number of people Exactly. That were using horses, you know, stepping over horse poop was a thing. And so that's research that's verifiable facts. You know, he's living in that time period.

[00:43:44] Right. You can kind of bring those two together. ,

[00:43:47] **Deborah Heiligman:** Or like there's a scene. A great scene, , in Emma's autobiography that I use in the book about the night that she tries to be a, a sex worker. And she gives me a lot of great detail, but then I was able to like, add more detail because I could look up pictures of the time and know what bank building she was talking about and where, I know New York City, so I know what avenue she was, like that kind of thing.

[00:44:12] Right. So I can put that in.

[00:44:13] **Kirsten W. Larson:** So you have to just go to all these different, all these different sources and

[00:44:17] **Deborah Heiligman:** Right. Pull them all together.

[00:44:18] Right. And then you have to, hello. Word to the wise word to me. Do end notes as you go along. Yes. Because you think you're gonna remember, you are not gonna remember.

[00:44:30] You're so sure you're gonna remember you are not. So I have a document. I work in Scrivener, but I didn't always work in Scrivener, but I do now. And I have everything is footnote and noted. And, and sometimes it changes. Sometimes I make mistakes even in the end notes.

[00:44:45] But it comes that moment when the copy editor, fact checker says. Really, that's where you got that, you know? And how do you know that, that you go back and also when you wanna double check it yourself? Wait, did she ever say that or did that, what did that newspaper really say? What were those words? I can't read my handwriting 'cause I also take notes in longhand.

[00:45:06] Probably a mistake.

[00:45:07] **Kirsten W. Larson:** So the one thing we have, we've kind of danced around but we haven't



[00:45:10]

[00:45:45] **Kirsten W. Larson:** really touched on is how does young adult nonfiction differ from adult nonfiction? Um, you know what I've noticed being a reader of your work for a long time is that you , it seems like you're picking a slice of a life, right?

[00:46:00] That you're not necessarily telling, the Ron Chernow. Hamilton, right. 1000 page biography. For you, what are the essential pieces of like young adult nonfiction?

[00:46:13] **Deborah Heiligman:** I will tell you, but first I'd like to say if somebody does wanna make a musical out of this book, that's fine with me.

[00:46:18] Awesome. Awesome. Right. Um, so. I was on, I did a presentation with a, a young adult nonfiction writer called Christina Gadi. She has a book called Most Perilous World about Young Abolitionists. And we were talking, before the presentation we had never met. It was in Baltimore at a bookstore called Red Emma's named after my Emma Goldman.

[00:46:41] How could I not go there? Wow. She said, she writes adult books too and she said, what I love, and we both said it kind of at the same time, this is on a bench sitting outside before we went in. What we both love about writing for kids for ya is that we get to tell the story we wanna tell. Mm-hmm. I think maybe you could do that for adults at this point.

[00:47:09] Maybe adult. I don't know for sure. I haven't done a study about this, but, I don't wanna do a whole honk and big bio of Emma Goldman, especially because, to tell you the truth, and I had a lot that ended up on the cutting room floor. I can tell you one great thing that I didn't get to put in the book, so sad about it, , but.

[00:47:31] We don't have to. Like I could have told her whole life, right? I could have told, and I did tell basically her whole life, but I didn't have to go into the weeds, say about the different kinds of anarchism. Right, the different philosophies, the different leaders, and which, it's in there a little bit, but I'm telling a story.

[00:47:53] First and foremost, I am not writing the definitive biography of Emma Goldman. I'm writing a book that is going to introduce people to Emma Goldman, and if they wanna go read more, they can go read more, right?

Because I wanna tell a story. I am a biographer, but I'm a storyteller first, right? I have up on my wall.

[00:48:14] You are a storyteller, not a scholar. Ah, that's been up there since I was writing Vincent and Theo. And I think that is the blessing of writing for kids and young adults, because you can tell the story. Nobody's gonna call you out because you, you didn't, really dissect the theory of evolution by natural selection.

[00:48:33] Right. I explained it, but I didn't go into. I didn't go into social Darwinism. I just wrote the story of the marriage. Right. And with Emma, Emma, Goldman versus America A Love story. It was about Emma and America. So I missed a few decades there at the end of her life, you know?

[00:48:49] But I got to tell the story I wanted to tell, and in a way that I wanted to tell it, because I think that. Teens wanna read a page Turner, right? And I wanna write a page turner. And guess what? So many of my emails come from adults, from all of my books. Adults read them, they find them, they read them.

[00:49:12] Them. Oh yeah. And, and I think, that's great. So yeah, it's a weird, it's kind of a small niche, young adult nonfiction. But I think it finds its people right? And I get to write what I wanna write.

[00:49:25] **Kirsten W. Larson:** Oh, for sure. And what are you hoping that young readers or adult readers will carry with them after they finish reading Loudmouth?

[00:49:34] **Deborah Heiligman:** Oh man, I care. I have a big wish. I have a wish that people who read this book will be inspired by Emma Goldman and will be empowered to speak truth to injustice just like she was and know that it's scary. Know that you have to protect yourself, but to speak out when you see wrong. And I believe that is it.

[00:49:57] I mean, is my hope that it is a book of the moment and that it will empower. Young readers and older readers to do just that, just like Emma did. Yeah. I'm inspired by her.

[00:50:08] **Kirsten W. Larson:** Yeah, she's amazing. She's amazing. Okay. I'm gonna be remiss I have to ask you about the scene that you had to the part of the book that you had to Yeah.

[00:50:16] **Deborah Heiligman:** Leave out. Which is so heartbreaking.

[00:50:18] It was so heartbreaking. And I think you'll get it and you'll also get why I left it out in the end. But it was, oh, so she, when she was deported, she went to Russia . By the way, she pretty much very quickly saw Lenin was not doing a good job and that it was still the white patriarchy that was screwing everybody else.

[00:50:38] But she was there. She made the best of it for a little while. She, she actually. Yelled at him at Lenin, which is great. Love it. Um, which, which is kind of in the book, but not in a scene because I just didn't have the, the space, but the scene that I really wanted to put in, she and Sasha were hired by Lenin to go around and collect artifacts for the Revolution Museum, the Museum of the Revolution.

[00:51:05] And she, they agreed to do it. 'cause they thought if they did that and they traveled around Russia, they would actually get to see if it was working. 'cause they were pretty sure it wasn't working right. They could see, they could go all over the place and see, and they, their belief that it wasn't working was confirmed.

[00:51:22] But before they went on their journey, they went shopping because they had a, the use of a Pullman car, which was a train car that would be attached to another train that was going where they wanted to go. And that's where they would live and that's where they would sleep and that's where they would cook.

[00:51:38] So they had to outfit it. Mm-hmm. So they got to go shopping in the Winter Palace of the Czar. Whoa. They went down into the basement of the Winter Palace of the Czar. Who was overthrown and got to like get plates and silver and clothing and bedding and all this kind of stuff. And the scene in her autobiography is just so much fun and I really wanna put it in.

[00:52:02] But you see why it didn't go in. Yeah, because first of all, what do our readers know about that's, and I would have to explain so much about the Russian Revolution and so much about the Czar and like it would just be too much of a setup. And so that's on the cutting room floor, but. I get to tell you about it.

[00:52:18] **Kirsten W. Larson:** Yes. Yes. Alright. And I've ta I've kept you way too long, but before I let you go, can you tell our listeners where they can find you online and learn more about your work?

[00:52:30] **Deborah Heiligman:** I certainly can. I am on a temporary social media break at the moment as of today because I really have to work on my next book. I'm mostly on Instagram @dheiligman but I have a pretty robust website. And you can find out a lot about me at my website@[www.deborahheiligman.com](http://www.deborahheiligman.com) and probably you will misspell my name. So, um, look up one of my books like, this one loud mouth and yeah. Hold it up. Hold it up. Oh, I can hold it up.

[00:52:58] There you go. Yeah. Hold it up for the camera. Yay. Okay. There it is. Yay. There you go. Um, and you know, just Google me and then you'll get right to my website and you can find out more than you ever wanna know. And also, while I am on this social media break, and I really mean this. Feel free to email me and it's just my name at Gmail.

[00:53:16] Or you can email me through my website really easily. And I'm happy to be in touch with readers and fellow writers and stuff. I just don't want all the noise from social media. Yeah. Because I need to start writing this book, so.

[00:53:28] **Kirsten W. Larson:** Awesome. All right, well it has been a delight. Thank you for taking time outta your schedule to speak with us today.

[00:53:33] **Deborah Heiligman:** Oh, thank you. Alright. I had so much fun. Thank you first. Yay. Likewise.

[00:53:40] **Kirsten W. Larson:** If you enjoy today's craft conversation, please follow the show, leave a review, or share this episode with a friend who loves children's nonfiction. And if you want more resources, including classes and critiques, visit me@[kirstenwlarson.com](mailto:kirstenwlarson.com). Thanks for listening. Until next time, happy writing and revising.