

Heidi Rabinowitz 0:00

[COLD OPEN] This is a shirt that I got at the Quidditch World Cup, and it's it's a wizard rock band called Madame Pince and the Librarians.

Nancy Werlin 0:13

That's fantastic!

Heidi Rabinowitz 0:15

Being a librarian, I just could not resist this Tshirt.

Nancy Werlin 0:19

It's the right thing for this interview.

Heidi Rabinowitz 0:21

The music wasn't terrific but the idea was fantastic.

[MUSIC, INTRO] This is The Book of Life, a show about Jewish kidlit, mostly I'm Heidi Rabinowitz. As a longtime fan of Star Trek, Doctor Who and Harry Potter, I consider myself a geek, so I was very excited to interview Nancy Werlin about her young adult novel, Zoe Rosenthal Is Not Lawful Good. It's a coming of age story with a Jewish protagonist, about the power of fandom, friendship, and finding your inner nerd.

Nancy, give us your elevator pitch for Zoe Rosenthal Is Not Lawful Good, or in Jewish terms, explain it while standing on one foot.

Nancy Werlin 1:20

Zoe Rosenthal Is Not Lawful Good is a romcom about friendship. Zoe sneaks off to a con, leaving behind the more serious aspects of her life, just to have fun. I think of it as a sanity check for the fact that we need non serious things in our life, the way that we need water.

Heidi Rabinowitz 1:45

You used the shorthand, she went to a con. And I know what you mean, because I am a fellow geek, but not everybody will know, so can you explain that?

Nancy Werlin 1:55

Con is shorthand for convention. It's come to be known as the way that you describe a convention that is about something very geekish. Comic Con is the one that most people will have heard of, but there's hundreds of them all over the planet for anything that you might be interested in, there's a specialty con for Harry Potter. There's a specialty con for liking to dress up in costume. There's a specialty con for feminist fantasy and science fiction; you name it, there's a con for it.

Heidi Rabinowitz 2:31

What cons have you been to?

Nancy Werlin 2:33

My favorite con that I've been to is actually featured in Zoe Rosenthal and that's Dragon Con. Dragon Con is for all kinds of fandoms. And the thing about Dragon Con that is really really special is all of the cosplay, which is another new term maybe for people, costume play, dressing up as some of the people in the thing that you are a fan of. At Dragon Con there is a big parade of all the people wearing their costumes, and it's one of the most glorious things that I've ever seen in my life.

Heidi Rabinowitz 3:08

Have you ever done cosplay yourself.

Nancy Werlin 3:10

I have, actually, I have done a Cruella de Vil cosplay...

Heidi Rabinowitz 3:16

Awesome!

Nancy Werlin 3:17

...at Emerald City Comic Con. I went with my friend who I thought of as my native guide to cosplay, and we were both Disney villainesses, she was Ursula the sea witch. We looked fabulous.

Heidi Rabinowitz 3:29

That's terrific. What are your fandoms?

Nancy Werlin 3:34

I actually am a big, big fan of, I would say any science fiction novel that has kind of a space opera thing. I don't know that it's a fandom in the specific sense, but the novels of Lois McMaster Bujold, I read them over and over and over again, they're my, my comfort books, and I go back to them so so often. A more recent bookish fandom, because I come at things from the bookish side, is Naomi Novik, in particular, her most recent fantasy novel *Spinning Silver* filled a hole in my heart for Jewish fantasy that I hadn't even realized was there. Glorious book, I recommend it to anyone, but particularly if you're Jewish.

Heidi Rabinowitz 4:19

I'm so happy that you used the term comfort book because I wanted to tell you that *Zoe Rosenthal Is Not Lawful Good* has become a comfort book for me.

Nancy Werlin 4:28

Oh!

Heidi Rabinowitz 4:29

Y'know the books that you read when you're blue and you just need to read something that you know you're going to enjoy. And so I've already read it twice. You know it's it's a brand new book, but I've already read it twice because I love the characters, and I love the situation, and I just enjoy geeking out with these characters so much that it's now on my comfort book list.

Nancy Werlin 4:51

You are the audience that I hoped for then, Heidi. I've become aware in all the years I've been a writer that not all books are for all readers, and as a librarian you know this, it's about making the match. It's about finding the right readers for each particular book, and as a writer, it can be a little bit of a cold water shock to realize not everyone is going to love your book, some people are going to hate your book, and then to get beyond that to say, Ah, but this book is a book for the people that will love it. It is a love letter for them. And this book *Zoe Rosenthal*, I felt the whole time that I was writing a comfort book for myself, a book about joy, a book about the wonders of hanging out with your, with your best beloved friends, about finding those friends when you didn't expect to and feeling, These are my people. These are my people, which is a wonderful way to feel and particularly teenagers don't always feel that way in their high school, in their synagogue, in their normal life. But when you find it, it's amazing.

Heidi Rabinowitz 6:00

Yes. In an interview on Vimeo, you said that the story is not so much about what could go wrong as what could go right.

Nancy Werlin 6:10

Yes.

Heidi Rabinowitz 6:10

What did you mean by that?

Nancy Werlin 6:12

So many, so many stories... oh, what complications ensue. And things tend to go badly in a story before they can end well, if you're, if you're going to have a book with a happy ending. But I wanted to show that sometimes you do something that part of you says oh no this is not the right thing for me to do. But there's a deeper voice inside of you, that actually knows it is the right thing for you to do. It is the right thing to open up more, it is the right thing to talk to that person over there, who's wearing the cosplay that you really admire. it is a right thing to watch hour after hour of that show you love and geek out about it with your friends and feed your soul in a different way from the way that Zoe's very serious boyfriend believes souls need to be fed. There's a place for frivolity in your life. I think in writing that book I was teaching that lesson to myself,

Heidi Rabinowitz 7:19

Well that ties into my next question. I wanted to ask you what was your inspiration for this story.

Nancy Werlin 7:25

My inspiration for this story actually comes from a con that I went to over 20 years ago. It was actually the American Library Association convention.

Heidi Rabinowitz 7:35

Oh, how wonderful!

Nancy Werlin 7:36

In New York City. Years ago, I had met some other children's book writers online. And we decided we were going to go. We weren't being taken by our publishers, we decided to get a hotel room, cram into it, and we fell in love with each other that weekend, and we're friends to this day. And it was a remarkable feeling to suddenly be able to talk to people about reading children's books, writing children's books, when I didn't know anyone like that in my life before this. It was amazing. I will never forget that feeling of going out into the world and finding my people that way. In writing this book, I thought it was a perfect translation, I was writing about the feeling and what can provoke that feeling of finding your people? Actually many things. My older sister is a knitter, and she has found her people through knitting groups. There are all kinds of ways to look for your people. In writing a book, you are just looking for, what is the situation that will provoke the emotion that you want to provoke. For me it was a natural fit to say, oh, a TV show that she loves and has no one else to talk to. That would provoke the feeling that I want to express.

Heidi Rabinowitz 9:00

I very much understand Zoe's mode of fandom, you know I am a big fan of Doctor Who, a longtime Star Trek fan, a Firefly fan, as well as a Harry Potter fan, so I relate to her feelings of fandom. But the thing that she is a fan of, the show Bleeders, is fictional. So I wanted to ask you about creating Bleeders, and it must have given

you an opportunity to kind of come up with your dream show, so can you talk about the creation process and what elements were really important for you to include as you created this idea of a show?

Nancy Werlin 9:35

Well, first I'll say that Bleeders is a little bit of a cross between Firefly, which you mentioned Heidi, and also M*A*S*H, which was a medical show, a sitcom, in a way, set in a mobile hospital during the Korean War. I wanted a spaceship. I wanted a crew that was mostly women, mostly female I should say, because not everyone is human on this spaceship, and I decided that they were chasing a virus. I wrote this book before the COVID-19 pandemic, and it was very interesting to me how differently the book feels reading in the pandemic world versus the world in which I wrote it and yet works. That's a side note, back to Bleeders. Then I began thinking Well who is on this crew. We need a captain. We need an engineer, but they're also surgeons, they're also doctors. So kind of working backwards from that I tried to create a... I want to say multi ethnic crew but, of course not everyone is human. I wanted them to be dangerous, and also deeply humane. I even wrote a little set of episode guides for myself so that I would know what happened in each episode. This particular virus, the bleeder virus, I just wanted something kind of really disgusting. What it does is dissolve your skin and capillaries so that you are just a sack of bones with all the blood gushing out all at once, very very quickly. I thought Oh that'll make some great special effects. And it also allowed me to do some bleeding jokes within the book, with cosplay particularly. Sometimes you throw things in as a writer, just to see what happens. And the bleeding, I can't even explain why I thought, let's have this disgusting bloody thing. But, boy, I knew I wanted to do that, make it as blech as possible and contagious, very contagious.

Heidi Rabinowitz 11:46

Yes, and I do love the scenes where they're trying to recreate that special effect through cosplay. So you mentioned that the crew is multi ethnic or multi species.

Nancy Werlin 11:58

Yes.

Heidi Rabinowitz 11:59

And I wanted to ask you to talk about representation in this book. There's a lot of diversity very naturally integrated into the story, all kinds of diversity, can you talk about that?

Nancy Werlin 12:09

It's very important to me as a writer at this time to write books that reflect the world around us, but at the same time to remain anchored in the worlds that I know well, so it was important to me that Zoe herself is Jewish. She's secular Jewish, but she cares very much, and knows her history, and some of the political stuff that comes up kind of in the interstices of the story, cause her to make reference to some of her Jewish morality and principles. But in conceiving her friends, all they needed to have in common... well, youth... but all they needed to have in common was love for their show. And I believe actually that something like that can cross barriers much more effectively than just about anything else. You have something to talk about that is passionate, and a little bit apart from you. And it lets you join together and talk with anyone about the thing that you are both fans of, and be able to leave behind the rest of yourself until you make that connection with that person, and then the rest of you can join in. I feel like fandom can be a bridge across diverse spaces, and I wanted this book to show that. It was really important to me to name the ship the Mae Jemison. Mae Jemison is a black woman astronaut as well as scientist. It was important to me that the captain be a black woman. I wasn't comfortable writing a black character as a main character, but I knew that the captain of the Mae Jemison should be a black actress. I wanted the showrunner to also be of Latina background. It is really tricky to make sure that you are showing a diverse world as an author and doing your very best at it, aware that you are probably going to also make some mistakes, and yet not retreat into a world that is all characters like

yourself. With some diversities I'm more comfortable than others. I have a sister who has autism. So, a character who was on the spectrum felt very natural to me. Easy to do. Other stuff, I relied on friends and secondary readers to read for me, as one does now. You do your best with the awareness that if you get 80% right, you're doing well and maybe you'll do better next time. But you can't leave it undone. You just can't. The world will decide if I did a good job here or not. I know I did my best. It's also joyful. It is joyful to write a book in which people come together because of their shared passions. There's even a healing moment fairly early in the book, between one character, Sebastian, when he encounters a girl from his high school who he absolutely loathes and who you feel bullied him in some bad ways. But now because of their shared fandom, there can be healing. That was kind of wonderful to write about. And she's older now, she takes the initiative to apologize, the sort of thing that we wish would happen. I can make it happen, I can write it.

Heidi Rabinowitz 15:36

That's wonderful. And you've touched upon some of the different ways in which the characters are diverse, and I didn't want to leave out the gender diversity that you include.

Nancy Werlin 15:45

Yes.

Heidi Rabinowitz 15:46

Do you want to talk about that at all?

Nancy Werlin 15:47

Yes. There is a character, Liv, who defines herself as sort of gender neutral. She asks to be referred to by the pronoun they. And you also see that she's got a bit of a struggle in her life she has to accept being a she, in some ways because of her basketball career, she plays on a girls team.

Heidi Rabinowitz 16:09

But you're saying She, should you be saying They as you describe Liv?

Nancy Werlin 16:13

I should be, and this is the kind of thing that is very difficult when you're writing, not to revert to the norms that you were raised speaking, you have to go back again and again and try to get it right. My editor was an enormous help to me here. She described to me how she and her husband had set up a little bank in their kitchen for whenever they use the wrong pronouns for one of their friends, they had to pay: an effective way of training yourself.

Heidi Rabinowitz 16:45

That's great. Yeah, so there was sexual diversity, gender diversity, racial diversity, neuro diversity, just diversity of background, and it just felt so natural, and that was what was nice to me, it did not feel like you were purposely trying to prove a point or something.

Nancy Werlin 17:02

I try to work from character first.

Heidi Rabinowitz 17:04

Yes,

Nancy Werlin 17:05

Well and it you know, it was so much easier because everybody loves Bleeders, everybody is all about Bleeders, all they want to talk about at first is what's going to happen in the next episode in the season premiere. So, when a character begins talking about those things, and I don't get to know characters until I'm writing about them, until they're talking, the rest of who they are unfolds much more naturally, I think. Oh, they're so much fun to hang out with, these kids!

Heidi Rabinowitz 17:27

They really are. So of course there's religious diversity, As you mentioned, Zoe is Jewish, and her Jewishness is not a major theme of the book, but talk about why it's important that Judaism is part of her identity, why it's important within the story and why it's important for readers to know that about her.

Nancy Werlin 17:56

There is a point in the story where we come to understand more fully, that Zoe is struggling with her political identity. One of the background plots of the book is that she has a very serious, very politically active boyfriend. There is nothing wrong with this boy. He's good. He's a good guy. He's working on a political campaign. He's very left of center. He wants many improvements in our world that I think all of us would say those are good things. And Zoe also believes that these are good things, and she wants to fight for them too. But he never stops, fighting, and she needs a little break, which is where we first find her, but she does care and she's struggling within herself for a place where she can say it's all right for me to relax a little bit, even while I care. She feels it necessary to put out there that she knows because she's Jewish that hate can go to terrible places, and that we have been living in a United States where the tide of hate and rage against people who are different has been rising and rising. She would never say, I'm going to hide my head in the sand about that. And that comes from being Jewish, it comes from the lessons of history, But she can't live there 100% of the time, and neither, I guess it must be clear, can I. I write every book that I write because I'm, whether I know it or not, trying to figure something out for myself. And in writing, *Zoe Rosenthal Is Not Lawful Good*, I was trying to figure out for myself, as I wrote this during the Trump presidency years, how much is it okay to do, and when is it okay to take a step back and take a breath. Some people would say it's never okay. I don't want to say they're wrong. But not everyone can do that. Is the person that can fight 100% of the time 24/7, better than the kind of person that can't? That's the kind of question I wanted to look at. For me, the answer is, it doesn't matter. We're all doing what we can help, hopefully. So that was the subterranean topic of this book, one of the things that it's about.

Heidi Rabinowitz 20:33

That's interesting that you wrote it from the place of the struggle of the Trump era, which for many of us was a time of extremely urgent activism, but I also felt like Zoe and her friends, just because of their age, just because they're children of the 21st century, that they are extremely aware that the world needs saving in all kinds of ways.

Nancy Werlin 20:57

Yes!

Heidi Rabinowitz 20:58

And I felt like that struggle with her guilt about being a fan, instead of devoting all of her time to saving the world, I felt like that was a very Jewish struggle.

Nancy Werlin 21:07

That's a really interesting comment. I had not thought of it that way. I think you're right. I think they're, they're also a little bit in despair, as a group, because there is so much to be done. They talk about different opinions, whether anything can be done. There's one member of the group that feels like all that's left to do is to fiddle

while Rome burns. In creating a cast of characters who are holding the center of the book as an ensemble, that gave me the opportunity to voice all the different opinions that can run through my head, depending on my mood.

Heidi Rabinowitz 21:45

And that's one of the attractions of this book. I loved the thoughtful, sensitive, deep conversations that these young people had with each other, and how respectfully, they had those conversations, and how natural it felt that they did so. It's a hilarious, life affirming book that also acknowledges that the world is also a terrible place, so it really juggles a lot of balls very successfully.

Nancy Werlin 22:12

Thank you.

Heidi Rabinowitz 22:14

So, books like yours provide a more casual representation of Judaism. So what do you think is the benefit of casual Jewish representation? You said you made Zoe Jewish just because you yourself are Jewish, but why do you think it's important for readers to see casual Jewish representation?

Nancy Werlin 22:33

There are an awful lot of Jews in the United States that are casually Jewish. And it's the same mirrors. It is healthy to see people whose lifestyle represents yours. You want to feel seen as you read. My very first novel, *Are You Alone on Purpose*, featured a Jewish family. I was later told by Noa Wheeler, who is an editor who is some 20 years younger than I am, that when she encountered that book as a teenager, she read it over and over and over again, because there weren't a lot of books with Jewish characters in them, published by mainstream fiction houses in the 1980s and 1990s I wrote it because that was who I was.

Heidi Rabinowitz 23:17

Let's talk a little bit about the title, *Zoe Rosenthal Is Not Lawful Good*

.

Nancy Werlin 23:23

Yes.

Heidi Rabinowitz 23:24

Can you explain this odd turn of phrase?

Nancy Werlin 23:27

I certainly can. In *Dungeons and Dragons*, there is a rubric that is used for quick classification of the character role that you play, and that is a matrix. Across the x axis is lawful, neutral, and chaotic. Down the y axis is good, neutral, and evil. You put that together, you have nine boxes, ranging from lawful good in the upper left corner. And then in the lower right corner you have chaotic evil. Lawful good combines a commitment to oppose evil with a discipline to fight relentlessly. So this is Zoe's boyfriend and Zoe declares right up front that she is just like that too. Of course we the reader, and her friends, we know better. She has a chaotic heart. Right in the middle, you have the true neutral: neutral neutral. No strong overriding beliefs. Morality is real, but situational. And then you go to chaotic evil: arbitrary and unpredictable sees no reason to consider law, or others. What they want is all that matters, and they don't care how they get it. Using this rubric, it's not only helpful for *Dungeons and Dragons*, but it's also great for discussing your favorite shows. *The Muppets* is the one that the characters in *Zoe Rosenthal* talk about. You will discover that Kermit is lawful good...

Heidi Rabinowitz 25:00

Of course!

Nancy Werlin 25:00

And Miss Piggy is neutral evil, and that Animal is chaotic neutral, and it can be really fun to start classifying in this way, and it provides a way for Zoe to think about herself and for her friends to think about who they are and to get a little bit of a bearing on how you behave in the world. Of course true psychology is a lot more complicated than this, and you might be lawful good in one area and chaotic evil in another, perhaps you're chaotic evil in the way that you cook! It could happen.

Heidi Rabinowitz 25:37

The title does a good encapsulation, it signals to you immediately that this is a geek book.

Nancy Werlin 25:42

Yes.

Heidi Rabinowitz 25:42

For me it kind of made me feel like an insider, before I even opened the book,

Nancy Werlin 25:46

This goes back to the thing that I said earlier about, not all books are for all people. You can try to title a book and to package it so that it is kind of neutrally appealing to you think as many people as possible. I'll put beautiful flowers on it, and that will attract everyone that likes beautiful flowers. You know, you're better off, aiming directly at the people you think are really going to love this book. It's okay to signal this is a geek book. Not everyone who isn't a geek will understand the title, but they'll get a little bit of a feeling for it and then they can decide whether to pick it up or not, but someone who does come from a geeky fannish background is going to know immediately as you said, Oh, I know what this is about I'm going to pick it up.

Heidi Rabinowitz 26:37

Yeah, I appreciated that wink. What was the easiest part of creating this story and what was the hardest?

Nancy Werlin 26:45

It was actually really hard to figure out the story within the story of the Bleeders episodes, figuring out exactly how that was going to unfold and how I would weave it in without weighting the narrative too much with something totally imaginary. The easiest thing to write were all in the hotel room together just talking and talking and talking, those conversations were pure pleasure to write, as were some of the scenes that take place at some of the cons. There's one scene that takes place at a panel about Princess Leia, that I don't even know where that, that just came flowing out of me.

Heidi Rabinowitz 27:29

That was beautiful, that tribute to Princess Leia slash Carrie Fisher, to both of them, and the mixture of them. It was very touching.

Nancy Werlin 27:37

I don't want to say I was very touched by my own writing because that wasn't quite it. When you're writing about fandom you're borrowing the power of those other things, you're channeling it. This is actually why fanfiction is so powerful a draw, you get to borrow the power of the thing that you already love. It's not all you doing the creating.

Heidi Rabinowitz 28:01

That's right. I've always thought of fanfiction as midrash, but I like that idea that it's sort of scaffolded and so it's a good entry point for beginning writers.

Nancy Werlin 28:08

Yes, it definitely is that, it's more than that, but that is one of its uses. It's a really beautiful thing, fanfiction. It's a way of participating, it's a way of joining the group, again, the group of the people that you belong to.

Heidi Rabinowitz 28:22

I wonder if there will be Bleeders fanfiction...

Nancy Werlin 28:25

I would love that! Oh, I can only dream.

Heidi Rabinowitz 28:30

Well, you could write the perfect Bleeders fanfiction because you know what happens, you're the authority!

Nancy Werlin 28:36

I thought about including the episode guide in the book, but in the end we didn't.

Heidi Rabinowitz 28:40

You could do it on your web page!

Nancy Werlin 28:42

I suppose I could.

Heidi Rabinowitz 28:43

I think people would like that.

Nancy Werlin 28:45

But then it would have to all make sense and I'm not sure it does.

Heidi Rabinowitz 28:50

Oh well, but not all shows make sense, there are plot holes in real shows.

Nancy Werlin 28:55

And the fans never get over it, they talk and talk, it's actually even more fun.

Heidi Rabinowitz 28:59

Gives you more to discuss

Nancy Werlin 29:00

Exactly.

Heidi Rabinowitz 29:03

It's Tikkun Olam time, and I wanted to say that one of the things that I appreciated about this story is that the group uses their fannishness to change their world. They become fan activists, and fan activism is a very big thing these days, the Harry Potter Alliance and so on. But I wanted to hear your thoughts on activism that you would like to inspire. So, what action would you like to call listeners to take to help heal the world?

Nancy Werlin 29:32

The tikkun olam thought that I had, is to ask listeners to be kinder and more accepting and welcoming, of their own frivolities and the frivolities of their friends and loved ones, and to understand these are things that we need, as Zoe comes to believe.

Heidi Rabinowitz 29:55

All right, and as soon as people read the book, they'll see what you mean.

Nancy Werlin 29:57

I hope so. Thank you.

Heidi Rabinowitz 30:00

Nancy Werlin, thank you so much for being a guest on The Book of Life.

Nancy Werlin 30:04

My pleasure.

Margret Aldrich 30:05

[TEASER] I'm Margaret Aldrich from Little Free Library. I'll be joining you soon on The Book of Life podcast, and I'd like to dedicate my episode to my dad, who took me to our little public library every Saturday morning.

Heidi Rabinowitz 30:22

[MUSIC, OUTRO] Don't be a stranger. Say hi to Heidi at 561-206-2473 or BookofLifepodcast@gmail.com. Check out our Book of Life podcast Facebook page, or our Facebook discussion group, Jewish Kidlit Mavens. We are occasionally on Twitter too at [@bookoflifepod](https://twitter.com/bookoflifepod). Want to read the books featured on the show? Buy them through [Bookshop.org/shop/bookoflife](https://bookshop.org/shop/bookoflife) to support the podcast and independent bookstores at the same time. You can also help us out by becoming a monthly supporter through Patreon or making a one time donation to our home library, the Feldman Children's Library at Congregation B'nai Israel of Boca Raton, Florida. You'll find links for all of that and more at BookofLifePodcast.com. Our background music is provided by the Freilachmakers Klezmer String Band. Thanks for listening and happy reading

Transcribed by <https://otter.ai>