

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Nancy Hudgins, author of the middle grade biography, *Books Good Enough for You: The Storied Life of Ursula Nordstrom, Editor of Extraordinary Children's Books*. So that's a pretty self-explanatory title, but could you tell us a bit more about her career?

NH: Ursula Nordstrom was the children's book department head at Harper and Row from 1940 to 1973. And you may not know her name, but you'll certainly know iconic books that she edited, which include *Good Night Moon*, *Charlotte's Web*, *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, *Where the Wild Things Are*. She and Margaret Wise Brown were the same age, and they often had breakfast or lunch together. They both lived in Greenwich Village in New York City. She discovered Maurice Sendak and sent him tens and tens and tens of books to illustrate, and then he started writing his own, and she encouraged that. She always encouraged people to write for children, and so *Where the Wild Things Are*, she had a hand in as well. So these and 12 other books, I write about as part of writing what her career was like, and instead of just saying "there's this book and this book and this book," I did the additional research of reading about each of these authors and illustrators that she worked with, and writing biographical vignettes of each of them to give readers an understanding of who they were and why they were writing children's books.

So she actually started at Harper in 1931 when she was 21. But she started working with the children's book department in 1936 when her superior, who was head of the department, went on maternity leave. The powers that be (all men) at Harper asked her if she would be the head of the department, and she said yes. So that sounds great that here's this young woman, she wasn't even 30 years old, was going to be the head of the department. But the fact is, the men who ran the company really didn't pay much attention to the children's book department. They were publishing books by senators and things like that. And so it was kind of a stepchild that they weren't paying too much attention to. But that gave Ursula an amazing opportunity, and she took it. She worked really hard. Her parents were actors. Her father was quite famous. He'd been famous for 30 years before she was even born. And so they acted on the stage. This is before even silent movies, and they were well known in New York and elsewhere. Someone asked her mother once how she thought about success, what did success mean to her? And she said success is spelled W-O-R-K, and I think Ursula took on that persona from her parents and was quite a hard worker.

She gained some experience working under the woman ahead of her, and then on her own, and I think that she was also in her young career, and I spent a lot of time on her first maybe 10 years or so, because that's how she really learned to be an editor. Margaret Wise Brown went to the Bank Street School in New York, which had two schools actually. One was a nursery school, which was a progressive school, and the other was a school for teachers to learn this progressive method: children do things by doing and et cetera, instead of by reading by rote and that kind of thing, and the head of that school called it Here and Now, writing Here and Now books, and Margaret Wise Brown was a big proponent of that, and she and Ursula, I think, learned a lot from each other in the course of their 10- or 12-year relationship. So she had some success. She started out, she's very shy. That could have been from her parents. But she had some successes, and I think she just grew into her job, and she became more and more confident and really became a trailblazer who changed the face of children's books in the mid-20th century.

AT: Now, it's interesting when you're talking about the men didn't really care about this, so they put a woman in charge. Because that is actually a recurring theme that I've noticed in a lot of women's stories, where they were given control of something because the men in charge didn't think it was important, but then what the woman did with that actually turned out to be way more important than what those men were probably doing themselves. And I'm guessing that this is a broader gendered situation where kids' books were seen as something feminine because motherhood and all of that, and because of that it was also undermined. Like, they didn't think this was important in part because it is considered a feminine field. Would that be correct?

NH: Well, first of all, men dominated all businesses, basically. But I think you're right in the sense that all of the major publishing houses had women in charge of the children's book department. So it wasn't unusual. And actually, children's books were not a big deal until about the time Ursula got there, maybe 1920, maybe a little bit earlier. In fact, the New York Public Library didn't allow anyone under 14 into the library until about 1905 or so, because they thought of reading as an adult thing, I guess. It was sort of seen as the ugly stepchild or however that goes. But Ursula changed that. And one of the ways she changed it is she had enormously popular books. And in fact, by the time she left the company, the children's book department was the highest percentage earner in the whole company. So yeah, she did quite well.

AT: So a couple of years ago, I came across a children's book about how dragons aren't allowed in the library. And I remember thinking this is not giving good messages because the reason that the dragon didn't belong in the library wasn't because, "oh, you might accidentally set the whole library on fire with a sneeze." It was the dragon was too big, which felt like fatphobia. It was the dragon was clumsy, which felt like, there's a lot of disabilities that that could connect to. And so I was reading this, and I'm like, the reason that the dragon isn't allowed in the library is traits that a lot of kids could see reflected in themselves and the people around them. And so I was looking through this, I was like, this ironically doesn't feel like a book that belongs in a library. Like to me, libraries are for everyone. (NH, laughing: Right, exactly. Exactly.) So when you're talking about, you know, the the New York Public Library not letting kids in, that's such a weird concept for us in our contemporary understanding of libraries. So I wasn't a fan of that book because I felt like the messages that it was giving to kids were harmful. Like it's teaching kids that something that should be for everybody isn't actually for everybody. And the reasons that it's not for everybody are not (NH: Are horrible reasons.), at best are questionable things to be teaching a kid. But with that in mind, when we're talking about these books, like *Good Night Moon* and *The Runaway Bunny* and *Stuart Little* and *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, all of these books that resonated for generations. I'm just curious, what do you think makes a good children's book, in terms of what gives a book staying power? What makes it a beloved classic?

NH: Ursula had an approach that served her well. She said books for children should be fresh and original and honest. Anything else, she said, is not good enough for a child. And that's why the book's called *Books Good Enough For You*. The history of children's books is, as of the time Ursula comes on the scene, most books were either folklore or fables or fairy tales, some of which could be quite grim, as we know. But if they weren't like that, they were just like, girls were always nice and boys were always pleasant. They were these idealized children. And Ursula didn't have an idealized childhood. She wanted children to be able to see themselves in books. And that was kind of a radical idea. Most of the books were white kids with blue eyes. So there's a new idea that boys could act differently or girls could act differently, and that there's more than one race in the world that should be seen in books for children. And so I think that's how she was a trailblazer in so many respects.

AT: With that in mind, could we zoom out a bit, and apart from her career, could you tell us a bit more about her as a person, like her life experiences, and you touched on how that impacted the work that she was doing?

NH: I mentioned she was shy. And part of that may be because her parents were larger than life. Part of it may be is, when they got divorced and they were both working, they sent her off to boarding schools from the time she was 8 till she was 18, to different boarding schools. That was a struggle for her. She'd always been the only child, and now she was out on her own. And it was hard for her to adjust. Ultimately, she adjusted. She made friends. But I think that was all very tough for her.

One of the things that's interesting about her is that she was open to new ideas. And I mentioned that about Margaret Wise Brown and that they would discuss their ideas about books for children. It was also true with Sendak, who was quite young. She discovered Sendak. She was introduced to him by the children's book buyer at FAO Schwartz in New York City, who knew she was always on the lookout for new talent and young

talent. And he was working at the store at the time, helping build the sets for the display windows on Fifth Avenue. They set it up so that he had his artwork out, in the department in which he was working. And she stopped by with the head of the book department. He seemed shy to her. Now, at this time, she's 41. She asked him how old he was, and he said "22 and a half," which I think is just the most charming thing. You expect maybe a 5-year-old to say "five and a half." But he was a shy kid, too, and still living at home. So he wanted to sound like he had some substance. She brought him along. She really mentored him and sent him 40, 50 books over the next 20 years. And she always wanted him to use his own style and not have one style that he was known by, which I think was brilliant on her part, having a style that went with the book he was illustrating. He started out as an illustrator. But then she learned from him, too. They were both self-educated, basically. Ursula didn't graduate from high school. Maurice graduated from high school, but didn't go to college. And so they both read widely. Ursula read the complete Oxford History of Verse. And Maurice would study English and German and French illustrators. And so as time went on, she probably learned as much from him as he learned from her in the early years. But she developed as an editor.

She also happened to be gay. And in the '40s, '50s, '60s, that was not really something that people talked about a lot. Her friends knew she was gay. Some of the artists and authors knew she was gay. Some didn't. She was pretty private about it. And I don't know why that is. I don't know if she just didn't want to be that public about what was going on, whether she thought it was her personal life. Her parents were alive. Maurice Sendak didn't tell his parents he was gay, ever. And it was only after they died that he came out. And I don't know if Ursula felt it the same way or not. She lived with the same woman for 40 years. And they did all kinds of things together couples do. And so I included all that in the book because that was part of who she was. And at the end of the day, people go home to their partners and she went home to marry. And so it was part of her life. And I think that if it had been a heterosexual couple, I probably would have included the spouse too. So why wouldn't you? Some of the people that she worked with, authors and illustrators, were gay. Some were not. I don't know that there was a big distinction in her mind between the two, but she was just an extraordinary woman.

AT: Well, that does make me wonder how much her sexuality might have contributed to the kind of books that she chose. Not because she was attracted to women necessarily, but in the sense that a lot of kids and teenagers historically have had to find allegories for that feeling of being an outsider, having a part of you rejected. And so I'm curious when we look at the choices that she made, how much she might have been either consciously or subconsciously ensuring that kids who felt that way saw that experience. Cause you talked about how she wanted books for kids that she would have benefited from as a child. So I'm just curious if we know anything about how, I don't want to say queer coding because that's a different concept, but how that relatability, that feeling of metaphor, that someone is experiencing the same thing I am, even if it's not the exact same thing explicitly.

NH: Right. Right. I'm sure it came to her mind. I'm sure it had something to do with some of her choices because again, not all kids are white and blue eyed. So for instance, in 1964, she edited and published *Harriet the Spy*, which was a non-conformist girl. I was a little bit too old when *Harriet the Spy* came out. So I didn't read it until I started researching this book, but she wore blue jeans and she wanted to be a reporter. And so she made a tool belt that had her reporter's notebook and probably a flashlight and other stuff on it. And she's out doing her own thing. And it was written by a gay woman, actually, Louise Fitzhugh. And I think there are some nods to kids being gay in that book. And I'm sure Ursula was happy to have that book published. In fact, she learned maybe from the woman ahead of her, or maybe she just learned on her own, that librarians were the gatekeepers. And certainly before World War II and pretty much post-World War II, at least in the '50s and early '60s, most books were bought by libraries. 75% of all books were bought by libraries. And so she knew that librarians were the gatekeepers. So she always went to the yearly American Library Association meeting and that sort of thing. So she developed over time a Rolodex of librarians and English teachers and whatever

all around the country. And she got that Rolodex out and just called everybody and said, you're going to love *Harriet the Spy*. You got to read this book. So that was one.

Another book that she edited and published was by John Donovan. At the time, he was the executive director of the Children's Book Council in New York City, which was a trade organization of publishers, basically. And they were friends. Ursula had been the president of the Children's Book Council 10 years before. So they obviously knew each other. And he wrote to her and essentially said, "I've been writing a middle grade novel about two boys who develop an attraction for each other. Would you be interested in seeing it?" And she wrote back and said, "I've wanted forever to publish a book where kids have feelings for other people of their own sex because it happens to every kid at one time or another." So I think that would be great. So he wrote a book that became called, *I'll Get There, It Better Be Worth the Trip*. And it was about a boy, Davey, who was 13, maybe. He lived with his grandmother and unfortunately his grandmother died. And so his parents had divorced and he ended up living with his mom after that. And that was a big transition from being in his grandmother's house, being in the country and being in New York City with his mom. And so he has to go to a new school, meet new friends, etc. He meets a boy and they are kind of buddies. And they're roughhousing one day with his dog and they end up kissing each other. And it shocks both of them. They really don't know what to do with it. And the story goes on a little bit. I won't say the rest of it.

But essentially, Ursula knew this was going to be groundbreaking. And by this time, it was published in 1969, I want to say. It was right before the Stonewall riot. She wanted people to accept it and have it be a book that people would read and not just be automatically banned or people be horrified or whatever. So first she went around to everybody at Harper and said, "what do you think? Do you think there's a book that we'd be interested in publishing?" Everybody said yes. So then she thought that she needed to get some outside authorities to line up. So she wrote to psychologists and heads of school and pediatricians, etc. And said, "think about publishing this book. Would you do a blurb for it for the back of the book?" or whatever? And she got some of those, one of whom was from Frances Ilg, who at the time was at the Gesell Institute in New York City. And she wrote a weekly column, maybe a monthly column about children's books and children growing up and that sort of thing. And so she wrote a lovely blurb for her that basically said, "this happens. It happened to Davey. It happens in lots of kids' lives. And it's not the fact that it happened. It's how Davey dealt with it that is what's important. And it may make a difference in the rest of his life." And so she thought kids should read it too. And that adults should read it too, actually. And so Ursula went ahead and published it.

AT: I think one of the really impressive things about a good children's book is that just like what we think of as "literature," if it's good, in my opinion, one of the key markers is that it's going to resonate with people across generations. And so it's not something that is so of its time that it's not going to be relatable down the line. And so when I was a kid, I remember reading Paula Danziger's, which she wrote dozens of books over decades. (NH: Amber Brown and those types.) Yeah. And I was reading books in the '90s that had been written in the '70s. And obviously a lot of these books are much older and are still resonating. We're still getting film adaptations of stories like *Stuart Little*. I remember in 1996, the *Harriet the Spy* movie came out. And so that got me to read the book. And the book had been published, as you know, in 1964. So almost 30 years after the book came out, I'm reading it because of this movie.

So coming back to that question of what makes a children's book good. In a previous conversation I had with Rachelle Bergstein on Judy Blume, we talked about the importance of children's and young adult literature and how Judy Blume wasn't talking down to kids. She was treating them with respect. And I think Paula Danziger was the same way where it's like, "these are based on my experiences. These are based on like actual kids that I know." You're treating them like human beings, like real people. And I think that's one of the things that a lot of children's books don't do well because a lot of adults don't treat kids as full human beings.

NH: I agree. It certainly was something that Ursula believed in. Sendak strongly believed in it. Margaret Wise Brown was more for 4-year-olds,

[Listen to Rachelle Bergstein on Judy Blume](#) or [read the transcript](#).

but even Ruth Krauss, who wrote picture books and early reader and middle grade books, they all really respected children. And I do think that's important. I think a kid will get it whether you're talking down to him or not. This is my first book and I did not want to talk down to children. That's the last thing I wanted to do. I wrote it with my 10-year-old grandnephew in mind because I would never talk down to him. And so I think that tends to be why books endure. I'm sure there's more to that. I'm sure it's not that simple.

AT: So in a conversation that I had with Amy Reading on Katharine White, who was this famed *New Yorker* editor who was also married to E.B. White. So for anyone who's not familiar, he wrote *Stuart Little* and *Charlotte's Web*, among other things. But she edited him. And so she was, according to Amy, heavily involved in *Stuart Little's* writing. She collaborated with him and Nordstrom on *Charlotte's Web*. And she was also basically his agent. So she was the one actually connecting him with people. He didn't have what we would call an agent today because he didn't need one because he had Katharine. All of that to say, one of the things that Amy and I were discussing was how much impact an editor can have on the work. Because other than, hopefully you get mentioned in the acknowledgments, editors often don't get credited for what they're doing. Theirs is not the name on the cover. And so as an editor, what was the impact that you think Ursula had on children's literature overall as a genre?

NH: Let me talk about *Charlotte's Web* first. I have not read Amy's book. It came out after I'd written this one. And the interesting thing that to me about what she said, I listened to your audio about that, is that I don't think I realized what a big part Katharine White played in E.B. White's children's books. But basically, she was at *The New Yorker* before White. One of the things she did for *The New Yorker* was, once or twice a year, she did a roundup of children's books. And so she knew Anne Carroll Moore, the head of, probably by then the former head of the Children's Department of the New York Public Library. And she knew people in the children's book world. And so it makes sense to me that her idea of what a children's book would be like was probably more acute than his when he first started writing. *Stuart Little* was his first children's book. And he was well known before that, not only for working for *The New Yorker*, but he had four or five adult books out before then too. He was a little bit older than Ursula. So for the first several years of their collaboration, she called him Mr. White, because he was just that well respected. But the interesting thing is she did very little editing on White's books. And I didn't have the perspective when I wrote this one on the idea that maybe that was because Katharine did all the editing before she saw it. So that could be – hooray for Katharine!

[Listen to Amy Reading on Katharine S. White or read the transcript.](#)

AT: I guess that raises the question of when we talk about someone as an editor, we're actually talking about two different things. We're talking about someone who potentially helps shape the book, which not always. I know that my book, the editing didn't really do much to the structure or anything of the book. But a lot of editors like Katharine White do have a much stronger hand in how the first draft evolves into the final product, shall we say. But then Ursula is a gatekeeper, right? Which Katharine was as well at *The New Yorker*. But those are two very different roles, but I would say equally impactful. The gatekeeper and the shaper. Because the gatekeeper is making decisions about what works make it to the public, how much attention they get. Like you said, she has this Rolodex that she's telling everybody, "no, you're going to love this book," right? She's using that power and influence, the same way that Katharine used her power and influence, not that E.B. White wouldn't have succeeded without her, but she's doing a lot of this work to open the gates.

NH: She gave some interviews during her life and she wrote a ton of letters, which is how we most know about her. While she was editor at Harper, she wrote approximately 100,000 letters and she typed them herself. Her parents didn't think she needed to go to college because it was 1928. Why would a girl need to go to college? So they sent her to secretarial school. And one of the things she learned was how to type and she typed really fast. And so almost all these letters are typed by her because she wanted her persona to come out and when

she dictated letters, it just didn't quite make it. One thing I haven't even mentioned yet is that she was hilariously funny. Just so much fun. It's one of the things that attracted me to her and why I wanted to read more about her and write about her, besides her legacy and stuff. But she's somebody you would be dying to have dinner with. Because she was just so interesting and interested in a lot of different things. But in the process of writing these letters, she would give editorial opinions. And so she told somebody that she thought of herself kind of as a gunslinger. She would take chances and she was a gambler on what she took and didn't take. And I think that's true to some extent. But I think it's also Ursula being funny and she had a very self-deprecating sense of humor. So that's kind of self-deprecating. She was more than a gambler, to be right and right and right and right. So it was informed by more than just, "oh, I think we'll try this." And I don't know what that certain something was because I'm new to this world. So I don't think I can be more specific than that.

AT: To kind of expand on this power that she had as a gatekeeper, when she is advocating for these controversial and trailblazing books, do you think that that changed the landscape of children's books? Do you think that by putting these books out there and by showing that these books can be successful, she made other publishers more willing to at least consider them?

NH: For sure. Absolutely. And that's one of the reasons that she became thought of as a trailblazer. She broke the mold in a lot of ways. She published Gwendolyn Brooks, a Black woman, actually the first Black person to win the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1950. And she published a book of her poems called *Bronzeville Boys and Girls* in, I want to say, '56 or so. She published in 1969 a book by John Steptoe, who came to her when he was about 17. He was an artist in high school in New York City. And his art teacher had said, "if you want to make some money with your art, you might go around and talk to some publishing companies and see." And so he ended up in Ursula's office. And of course, Ursula loved young people and she loved finding out about them. She was very good at sussing out what authors and illustrators, what sparked their imagination and what made them want to do with what they do. And she just encouraged it. And so if someone came in and she didn't think they were very imaginative or, as a person, not as a writer, she might not take them on. And John Steptoe was kind of the second Maurice Sendak, I think, of her editorial career. He had done some oil paintings of kids in his neighborhood. And she looked at them all and they talked about them. But after that, she had him sit down and she talked to him for a long time about, well, what was he doing? And what did he want to do? And what was his life like? And just drew him out. After he left, she wrote a letter, of course. And she said, "I was thinking about that story you told me about." A kid who's an only child and then his mom takes on daycare for some other mother's kid during the day. And all of a sudden Stevie, the main character, he had to share with this new guy. And the new guy was younger and it was like having a younger brother and it was a big pain in the you know what. And so she said, "that could be a good story. You should write that." He was a 17-year-old kid and she's encouraging him to write it. And she told him, "don't worry if it doesn't have a great big plot or not. It has to have emotion. And you talked to me about that. And so you have that emotion. And so I'd love to see you write that book."

Ultimately she coached him into writing the book. And in fact, the first thing he brought in was handwritten and she typed it up for him. She didn't go to a secretary. She typed it up for him, sent it back. A year or two passed. And ultimately this book, *Stevie*, written by a young Black man in New York City about kids in his neighborhood using the language that they used in his neighborhood was published in 1969. And it was so unusual at the time that *Life* magazine, about a month before it was published, had a several page spread and printed every single page from the book and had an interview with John Steptoe, who by now was 19, I think. And it was a big deal. And she totally supported that because here is a new voice with a new idea spoken in the language of the kids in the neighborhood that he grew up in. And she thought that kids ought to read that.

AT: One of the things that always strikes me when people freak out about books that go against "traditional values," whether that's the people who don't want you teaching kids about the realities of slavery for starters,

racism, and Jim Crow, since we were just talking about how radical it was to have a kids book by a Black man about Black kids. But even before that, when you were talking about before this era, it was little girls doing things that little girls are supposed to do and little boys doing things that little boys are supposed to do. And then further down the line, we see books about sexuality and “you can’t have a children’s book where that penguin has two dads!” That one’s so dumb. And there was even a story I saw where a book by someone with the last name Gay ended up on one of these books to ban lists just because of the last name. But point being, anytime I see people just losing their minds over this idea that you might teach kids about real life, right? Like actual experiences that other kids have, kids who maybe aren’t like them, maybe don’t have their privileges, maybe have two moms. It just really demonstrates to me how fragile and flimsy those traditional values structures are because people who defend them will say that this is the natural order. And I always think, “okay, if this was actually the default, you would not be so scared right now. You would not have to work so hard to try to keep kids ignorant.”

NH: Good point. I think that what people miss is the empathy that kids who don’t look like *And Tango Makes Three*, or don’t live in those types of families realize, “oh, that’s just another family.” It’s just a different way of thinking of family. So I think books like that can create empathy in people who don’t see themselves in it, but can come to see that there are other viewpoints or that there are other ways of thinking or that there are other ways of being. And, you know, we’re all humans.

AT: And for anyone who isn’t aware, *And Tango Makes Three* is the penguin has two dads book. That is a real thing. I didn’t just make that. For anyone who’s not up on all the kids’ book news. But when we’re talking about censorship that is an ongoing battle today, I would say it’s more of a battle nowadays in terms of being explicit rather than implicit. So decades ago, I would say it was just understood that publishers weren’t going to put out these kind of books, but then once the publishing industry realized that they could make money off of those books, I fully believe that someone like Ursula might have been making these choices because she genuinely cares about the books and the kids, but I’m going to generally assume that most big companies are just more concerned with the bottom line. And so once she helped show that, “oh, hey, these books can make money,” that didn’t necessarily open the floodgates, but nudged them a little further open.

NH: Right. For sure. I think that’s for sure true. And I have to say that, I haven’t done an exhaustive history of children’s publishing in the 20th century. So I don’t really know what other companies were doing at the time, but I do know that she took risks and a lot of times those risks paid off and then other people joined in. But in terms of censorship, one of the big hills that she was willing to die on was Maurice Sendak’s *In the Night Kitchen*, which came out in 1970. So they were very close. And so if people were going to come after him, she was going to defend him for sure, regardless. But she did quite a lot in 1970. So he wrote a book called *In the Night Kitchen* in some kind of a comic book style. When he was young, before he met Ursula, he thought he might be a comic book artist. And had actually worked at a company and did some of that background art. Like if, let’s say, Roadrunner screeched off to do something, the little puffs of dust that you would see that would connote as going really fast, that was Maurice. He did that kind of stuff. And so he wanted to write this in a comic book style. It was a dream. It was a story about a little boy who was asleep in bed. He falls into this dream. And by falling in the dream, he falls out of bed and he lands in a batter of dough. And in the process of falling into it, his clothes come off and he’s naked. And so let’s say he’s four or five. So the depiction of him being naked is not graphic. And Sendak, of course, had a great sense of humor too. And years later, he said, “I’s would think people would be worried if I didn’t write a penis into him. What are little boys going to think?” (AT: That child is a Ken doll!) That’s right. Exactly.

At the time, when it first came out, no problems. People liked it. Sendak had just won the International Hans Christian Andersen Award for illustration. He was well-respected. Probably done 50 books at least by then. But then a librarian in Louisiana painted diapers on Mickey, the main character. I guess that satisfied her, but

Ursula found out about it. And she was incensed. Not only because it was Maurice, but because it's a First Amendment issue, the freedom of expression. I think it also upset her that by painting in the diaper, people without looking closely might think that that was Sendak's original idea and that that was just part of the book. And it wasn't part of the book and it wasn't what he was trying to say. And so she got 450 signatories to a statement that she wrote talking about freedom of expression and the right for kids to be able to read the original stuff that people wrote or illustrated. And these were artists and writers and publishers and editors. She made a big deal of it. I'm sure in some way she instigated the American Library Association to change their rules about depictions of things as well as written things, which they did, I think, in 1973. But Ursula's objection was not just that it changed what Maurice's expression was, but she called it mutilation. And she felt very strongly about it. Fast forward to 2024 or 5, someone objected to *In the Night Kitchen* in Florida. And the powers that be took it off the school library shelf and returned it once blue jeans had been painted onto Mickey. Not only is that history repeating itself, it just shows you that the fight for the right to read continues.

AT: On another conversation that I had with Courtney Jarrett about her local history book, *Muncie Women A to Z*, we discussed the importance of teaching women's history in particular to young people. So in the context that you wrote this for middle grade, which I would guess is what, 10 to 13-ish? Obviously some wiggle room on either side there. (NH: Yeah, Abrams says 10 and up.) So why was it important for you to write this story for young people specifically? What do you hope that kids will get out of her story that adults maybe wouldn't?

NH: When I decided to write, I decided I wanted to write children's books because I loved reading books as a kid. And I actually read quite a few biographies. So I started out with the idea of wanting to write biographies about women, which idea occurred to me in about 2000 when my kids were in primary school. And they brought home some books from the classroom, biographies. And I looked in the back, it was a whole series called The Childhoods of Famous Americans. It was actually around when I was a kid, not being published anymore. And I read on the back the names of 25 people who were in that series. And I think 22 were men and two were the wives of presidents. And one, I think, was Molly Pitcher or Betsy Ross or somebody like that. So I had that idea from the beginning to write about women. And I tried at that point and was unsuccessful because I didn't know what I was doing. Life intervened. And so now in the last 10 years, when I've been focused on writing on children's books and writing about women, there are many, many more books about women, which I think is fantastic. So a little bit harder to get into that space. But I think for Ursula particularly, first of all, I hope they enjoy the book because I hope they enjoy her sense of humor. And the way I tried to bring her voice into it was to quote from her interviews and quote from her letters. She really was quite funny. And I hope they enjoy that. But I also, in the process of showing, not telling the reader how books were made, there's quite a bit about how to write. There's quite a bit about how to edit. And I think when I was a kid, I thought editing meant you read through and if you didn't have the punctuation correctly, or you wanted to change a word or the tense of the verb, the same as the subject, that that was editing. In fact, I thought that for quite a long time. I've since learned differently. And I thought kids would be interested in that. And then they might become better writers in school if they had an idea about looking at the big picture, which is basically what editors do for writers. And I have to say that I learned quite a bit about writing myself from reading Ursula's editorial letters.

AT: Now, obviously, there have been a lot of fascinating women in book publishing, several of whom we have actually mentioned in this conversation. So what was it about Nordstrom in particular that made you say, "yes, I need to write about her"? I know you've mentioned that she just sounded so interesting in her letters. But what made you connect with her story?

NH: Part of it is what information is accessible. I was lucky to discover Leonard Marcus's book, *Dear Genius*:

*The Letters of Ursula Nordstrom*. Harper had allowed him to read Ursula's letters and to choose which ones he wanted to put into a book. And it came about because he was doing research for a book on Margaret Wise Brown, who died in the '50s. He went around and talked to a bunch of people who knew her. And they would all, sometime or another, start talking about Ursula Nordstrom and what great letters she wrote. And people loved getting letters from her. And she was just a great correspondent. So he went to Harper and discovered that there were 100,000 of them. And he went through tons of letters and came up with 300 or so. And so I read that book, which got me interested in Nordstrom, and which is a really insight into the type of person she was, by reading 300 of her letters. And I did some more research about other publishers at the time and editors. And I'm not sure there's as much information about anybody as there was on Ursula to look at. So that's a reason. But then beyond that, look at all these books she published. How in the world do people not know about her? She's known in the children's book publishing world for sure. But outside of that, not as well known. And I just wanted to elevate her and have people learn about her.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast. And remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.