Washington State JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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Nancy Pearl

SUMMARY

The first librarian ever to inspire her own action figure, Nancy Pearl was born and raised in Detroit, where her love of reading was encouraged by Miss Whitehead, her local librarian. She chose her career at age ten and earned a master's degree in library science from the University of Michigan in 1967. Following a long stopover in Oklahoma (where she earned another master's, in history, while raising a family), she moved to Seattle in 1993, becoming executive director of the Seattle Public Library's Washington Center for the Book and founding the much-imitated "If All Seattle Read The Same Book" program. A regular book reviewer for NPR's *Morning Edition*, Nancy is also the author of the *Book Lust* series and published her first novel, *George & Lizzie*, in 2017.

Jeff Schwager: Right. So, um, these are running as, uh, backups. Um, so are we. Okay, um. Everybody set? We're set. Okay. We're recording. And three. Two.

Nancy Pearl: I'm Nancy Pearl, and I do many things. Um, I'm a librarian, and a writer, and I, um, review books on National Public Radio.

Jeff Schwager: Congratulations on being selected as an Agent of Change by the Washington State Jewish Historical Society.

Nancy Pearl: Thank you, thank you. It's a great honor, and I'm looking forward to seeing the other women, um, the other people on the list.

Jeff Schwager: Well, we're thrilled to have you.

Nancy Pearl: Thank you.

Jeff Schwager: So, um, let's begin by talking about your background and where you grew up and... things along that nature.

Nancy Pearl: Okay.

Jeff Schwager: Okay. Get off your knees. Oh, gosh. Sorry. Do we have to start over? I think we should. Okay, so let's let's keep you a little bit more that way. There we go. We'll never be that good again.

Nancy Pearl: I know.

Jeff Schwager: I know, did we get Nancy's intro or do we need to have that?

Nancy Pearl: Oh, let's do that again because I fumbled that too. Yeah, right.

Jeff Schwager: All right. Take two and recording. Three, two.

Nancy Pearl: I'm Nancy Pearl and I have had a number of jobs in recent years. I'm a librarian, and a writer of both fiction and non-fiction, and I review books on Morning Edition for National Public Radio.

Jeff Schwager: Welcome and congratulations on being named an "Agent of Change" by the Washington State Jewish Historical Society... We are thrilled to have you here.

Nancy Pearl: Thank you Jeff. It's great to, um, it was quite an honor to get the email saying that I had been selected for this. So, thank you very much.

Jeff Schwager: You're welcome. So let's begin by talking about your background, where you're from, where you grew up, and things of that nature.

Nancy Pearl: Okay, I grew up in Detroit, Michigan, and, um, in probably what was then the edge of the Jewish community, which was centered around Dexter and Davison. Um, and we lived, um, really about a mile from there. Um, and my parents were very left-wing, um, very left-wing, and did not, and, and strongly identified as being Jewish. Um, and, but yet were against, um, uh, any kind of religious affiliation. So, any formal religious affiliation. So we didn't. We knew we were Jewish. Um, and that was very important to my mother, who was generally a very angry person and there were not good things going on. Um, then, um, and, and yet we, you know, I didn't enter a synagogue or a temple until I was an adult.

Jeff Schwager: Wow. Um. Was your family not religious or just not affiliated?

Nancy Pearl: Yeah. Not religious. They were, they were not religious, and they were... And yet, um, they really.... it was, it was what I guess I have come to think of as they were culturally Jewish, um, and would have um... And, and and believed in the things that, um, that Jews have generally stood for, which is um, equal rights and various, various other things like that, but not religious in any traditional sense.

Jeff Schwager: Uh huh [affirmative]. Um, were you, was your family large or small or...

Nancy Pearl: I just, I have a younger sister, and and my mother's brother's brother and her sisters were all there in Detroit as well. So that was that kind of big family, biggish family.

Jeff Schwager: Um, was there a feminist attitude in your home? Did...

Nancy Pearl: That's a good question. It was always assumed that we would, um..., go to college and be something, you know? Um, uh, in that sense, I think my father was very ambitious for, for my sister and myself. And so, um, but traditionally feminist, I would say, or what's come to be known as like "second-wave feminism," which was when I was a teenager and in my 20s. Um, there wasn't that kind of a, a sense of that. And what's interesting. And my parents are both dead, so I can't ask them this, but what was so interesting to me and so unusual, I think, is that World War II and the Holocaust... were not my parents' major preoccupations. What was the war that was important to them, was the Spanish Civil War, the war against Franco, where my father, along with many young Jews around the world went to fight against Franco.

Jeff Schwager: Wow.

Nancy Pearl: And he was in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. So that was what was, um, major to them was the importance of that. And that was what my father was always the most proud of that he had done.

Jeff Schwager: And, uh, were your parents educated? What kind of.

Nancy Pearl: Yeah. My mother, my father was not, uh. My father was a very interesting person who was orphaned when he was about 13. And he and his older brother, who was then 15, went, um, just traveled across the United States hitching rides, spending nights in jail, um, when they were picked up and then joined the army. So, my father was 16, I think, when he joined the army. Um, his older brother, who was 18, lied and said he was 21. And my, you know, he would sign for my father. So, my father joined the American Army, um, before World War II, well before World War II and um, and didn't, wasn't educated. He, um, he had a bar mitzvah, um, before his mother died and in Brooklyn. Um, but my, my his parents are buried in a cemetery in Brooklyn under different names. Um, because of the..., our, my, my maiden name was Linn [spells out], which was shortened from either Linsky or Linetsky {spelling?}. And one of my grandmother is buried under one of those, and my grandfather [laughs] under another one of those. But I never knew them. And my mother was very educated, very highly educated. Um, and then when she was, um, I guess when I was growing up, went back to school to get back to college to get a master's degree in early childhood education. So.

Jeff Schwager: And what kind of work did they do?

Nancy Pearl: My father was, um. Do you remember the movie "Tin Man?"

Jeff Schwager: Sure.

Nancy Pearl: So my father, father, father sold aluminum siding. Um, had his own company for a while and then went to work for one of the big, um, one of the big remodeling people in, uh, in, in the Detroit area. And my mother was a nursery school teacher and then taught at Wayne State University in the College of Nursing. Child development.

Jeff Schwager: Mhm. And were you always a big reader as a kid?

Nancy Pearl: I was always a big reader. Um, my parents had many great, uh, you know, I think they passed on, they passed on to me, great. um, some great things about the world. And, um, but they were not happy people and were not, it was not a particularly for me, a happy place to live with them. So I spent all my time at my local public library, and I would go there every day after school. I would ride my bike, "Charger," which I named. I knew, I was one of those kids who named everything in my life.

Jeff Schwager: [Laughs]

Nancy Pearl: Charger was my bicycle, and I spent, you know, I just grew up at that library. And those librarians, I have to say, were the nicest. They were the kindest people to me in my, in my childhood. And I remember them with great fondness. And I became a librarian because I saw what reading could do and how it could give you the opportunity to be anyone and to go anywhere and to do anything. And I wanted to give that. I wanted to do good in the world, and I wanted to give that gift of books and reading to other children. So, I knew when I was ten that I was going to be a children's librarian when I grew up, and I was.

Jeff Schwager: That's amazing.

Nancy Pearl: For a few years.

Jeff Schwager: To know what.

Nancy Pearl: Yes.

Jeff Schwager: You want to do when you're ten.

Nancy Pearl: Yes.

Jeff Schwager: And be able to, to do it.

Nancy Pearl: I had one little detour in college when I got very interested in transformational grammar that Noam Chomsky [laughs] was then teaching at MIT, and I thought, oh, maybe I'll go to MIT and get a PhD in, you know, in English linguistics. And, um, which was a totally, would have been a terrible, a terrible decision because I don't have that kind of analytical mind at all [emphasis].

Jeff Schwager: Uh huh. And you were writing as well when you were, uh, young?

Nancy Pearl: I was writing. I was writing mainly poetry, um, and, um, and I loved it. Um, I defined myself. And my poetry, I think, was very important to my mother. I think that was something. She was a great lover of poetry, but I was writing poetry and won some awards. And, um, and then in my 30s, the poems stopped coming. The lines stopped coming as poetry and started coming as prose when they appeared in my head at all.

Jeff Schwager: And so, were you writing novels then?

Nancy Pearl: No. I, you know, when I was 18 and in college and very unhappy and very, very unhappy in my first year of college, I wrote a, I wrote one of those teenage girls being unhappy novels, which I unfortunately. I still have it, but I unfortunately typed it on that very thin manuscript paper that used to be. And it was typing, of course, on a portable, like a, you know [laughs], not even an electric typewriter, I don't think at that point, just a portable typewriter. So it's almost impossible to read. And I think if I read it, it would just be painful.

Jeff Schwager: Uh huh [affirmative]. So, uh, what did you write during those years after your.

Nancy Pearl: Yeah, I didn't write anything-

Jeff Schwager: Oh really.

Nancy Pearl: For a number of years. I just, I had young children and I didn't, I didn't really write anything. But whenever a line would come to me, it would come as prose. So, clearly it seemed to me as prose. And this line came into my head and it said, um, it, the line was, "my mother talked to us all the time," and I thought, well, that is not poetry. Or at least it didn't sound like anything I could turn into a poem, but it sounded like the beginning of a short story. So, I wrote a short story, and it was published in Redbook magazine many years ago, when Redbook was doing very good short stories, and they had, like, slightly condensed novels at the end of the, each of the issues. Um, and the editors loved it. Um, the fiction editor loved it. And she said, oh, send us everything that you write. Well, that's what you want.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah.

Nancy Pearl: Yeah, no. So, I sent everything that, I would write a story, I would send it in, and they would always come back with the same note. This story is wonderfully written, but it's too depressing for our readers. And by that time we were living in Oklahoma, where I was, even if possible, more depressed than I had been in college, and there was no way I could write anything that was not depressing, which made later on "George and Lizzie" such fun to write because it is not depressing. It's, there's just wonderful humor in it as well. So that was good.

Jeff Schwager: So only the one story ended up in Redbook?

Nancy Pearl: Only the one story ended up in Redbook. Yes, yes. And I don't even know that I have. I think I might have a couple others, but nothing, nothing finished.

Jeff Schwager: Who were your heroes and role models growing up?

Nancy Pearl: Um, well, one of my heroes and role models certainly was this Miss Whitehead, my, my librarian, Frances Whitehead, at the, at the Parkman Branch Library in Detroit, Michigan. She was one of my heroes. Um, I you know, I don't... Um, there were some teachers that I had in, in high school, um, an English teacher, um, who was very supportive of me. Two English teachers, actually, who were very supportive of me and, um, kind of mentored, one of them, kind of mentored my poetry. So that was very, um, that was very meaningful. But mostly the people who were the most important to me were the people in books.

Jeff Schwager: Mhm. Is there a particular character you identified with or characters?

Nancy Pearl: Well, I think "Anne of Green Gables." {I think she is meaning Anne specifically, but that is also the book title, so would it still be in quotes, if we are even putting titles in quotes?} I think that's, um, Jo March. You know, I really was a big fan of of "Little Women" until Jo makes that terrible mistake and marries that old guy. Mr. Bhaer, Professor Bhaer. Um. Gosh. Terrible. Um, you know, so it was those kind of very spirited, very different from me. Lives very different from mine.

Jeff Schwager: Mhm.

Nancy Pearl: Um, and then there were all of the, um..., you know, characters like the kids in "Misty of Chincoteague."

Jeff Schwager: Mhm.

Nancy Pearl: Um, I mean I really used books to escape and, and I think, I think a lot of people do.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah. Yeah, definitely. Um, so this exhibit is called "Agents of Change." And, um, I'm curious what, uh, what sorts of things you saw in the world that you hoped to change when you got your start?

Nancy Pearl: Yeah, I, you know, my parents were were very, um, active in the civil rights movement in Detroit, and that was something that was very important to me.

Jeff Schwager: Uh huh [affirmative].

Nancy Pearl: Um, and, you know, has continued, I think, to be very important to me. So, that kind of, um, that was, I think, the major, the kind of major change that we all saw was really needed. Um, just one example is that my parents, we, because my mother worked, we had, um, a housekeeper, a series of housekeepers, but one especially, um, who everybody, who became really such, a such a stereotype, but, you know, really became like a part of the family, um, Mrs. Miller and her husband. But we never called her by her first name. Even my father called her Mrs. Miller. Mrs. Miller and Mr. Miller. And that kind of respect, um, was very important to my parents and has remained very important to me.

Jeff Schwager: And what about within the library field? Were there things that you saw that you felt needed to change or improve?

Nancy Pearl: Well, my my library, the Detroit Public Library system, when I was growing up and even when I was working there in the late 60s, um, I thought was the ideal library. Um, it was just, I mean, what did I know? I was, you know, a kid, and I was in my early 20s. Um, but... So what I saw then, um. And it's funny, I still think of that library when I think about, um, when I think about ideal libraries. It's those libraries that I, that, that I think about all the time. Um, so there was nothing in the library that needed, that I felt needed to be changed, except perhaps at that time when you checked a book out in the Detroit library, you, there was a slip of paper and you copied down the title of the book. And, you know, they had these rules. So, and if it was a long title, that was like a pain, especially if you had like 10 or 11 books that you were checking out. Um, and the other thing is, is that you couldn't go into the young adult section or the adult section of the library, which were separated from the children's section by the circulation desk, um, um, a big circulation desk until you were like 13, and you would get then a special card with a, maybe a green stripe on it that indicated you were allowed to go there. And I remember when I turned 13, Miss Whitehead took me over to the adult section and introduced me to the librarians there. And they, you know, kind of welcomed me and, and, um, I checked out my first adult book, which was "Gone with the Wind."

Jeff Schwager: Mhm. That's great.

Nancy Pearl: [Laughs].

Jeff Schwager: You talk so fondly in your reminiscences of libraries that it reminds me of Philip Roth, "Goodbye, Columbus."

Jeff Schwager: Yes.

Jeff Schwager: Where there's all that about the library. Have you ever had a chance to interview him?

Nancy Pearl: No, I would, you know, I was thinking about who my favorite, I was thinking about Jewish writers and if I had to say who my favorite writer was. Um, you know, I admire Philip Roth. Um, I mean, there are books I've liked better and books I've liked worse or haven't liked as much. But, um, you know, he really..., um. I remember the first time I discovered him, which wasn't with "Goodbye, Columbus,' which was, I think every, most people that was. But he had a short story in, and I think Harper's or The Atlantic called "Paul Loves Libby," and I read that and that kind of, um, uh...., sent me off on my Philip Roth, and it became part of I can't remember.

Jeff Schwager: "Letting Go."

Nancy Pearl: "Letting Go. " Yes. Which is still one of my favorite novels.

Jeff Schwager: I love that book.

Nancy Pearl: Oh, you did [excited]? Oh, good.

Jeff Schwager: I've read that book probably three times.

Nancy Pearl: Really?

Nancy Pearl: And it's 600 pages long.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah, yeah.

Jeff Schwager: That's how much I love it.

Nancy Pearl: That's dedication.

Jeff Schwager: I actually, I have a, um, an old record of Philip Roth reading from it that was put out in the early 60s.

Nancy Pearl: Really?

Jeff Schwager: Yeah. You know, those old Caedmon.

Nancy Pearl: Yeah, yeah, Caedmon spoken word records.

Jeff Schwager: That's right, yeah. I bought it on eBay.

Nancy Pearl: Wow.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah.

Nancy Pearl: Oh, gosh. Yeah, that, that was such a good book.

Jeff Schwager: Oh. Love it. Yeah.

Nancy Pearl: And there's another one that I remember too, which was in two parts. And one was kind of from the woman's point of view. I don't remember. I'll have to look that up.

Jeff Schwager: Mhm. Yeah. But I think a lot of people, uh his books are hit and miss.

Nancy Pearl: Yeah, they are, they are.

Jeff Schwager: Definitely.

Nancy Pearl: Yeah.

Jeff Schwager: Um.

Nancy Pearl: Well what's the one about? Um..., the one about growing up in Newark and Lindbergh, I can't. Oh, "The Plot Against America."

Jeff Schwager: Oh, right.

Nancy Pearl: Which was so presh {how to note this?}. I never know how to pronounce prescient, but.

Jeff Schwager: Yes.

Nancy Pearl: I mean, oh, my gosh.

Jeff Schwager: And apparently they're making a mini series out of it now.

Nancy Pearl: Oh, they are?

Jeff Schwager: Yeah.

Nancy Pearl: Oh, that is good news.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah, that should be fun.

Nancy Pearl: Yeah. Good for him.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah. It's about time.

Nancy Pearl: Uh, can I just tell a quick?

Jeff Schwager: Sure.

Nancy Pearl: Philip Roth.

Jeff Schwager: Absolutely.

Nancy Pearl: Related story. So, Judy Blume, the great children's, uh, novelist, not just children's, teens and adults. I interviewed her three times when her new book came out in front of three live, big, live audiences in various places here in Minneapolis, basically. And, um, she told me this, this great story that after her first adult book came out, um, which had a lot of sex in it, um, her mother ran into Philip Roth's mother.

Jeff Schwager: [Laughs].

Nancy Pearl: at the grocery store, and, and this was long after "Portnoy's Complaint" and all of that, and Philip Roth had a certain reputation. And, and Mrs. Roth said to Mrs. Blume, "People are going to ask you, how does she know those things and what you say to them?," Mrs. Roth went on, is to say, "not from me" [laughs]. So, I loved that. I loved getting to know Judy Blume. It was really, those were fun interviews.

Jeff Schwager: That's great.

Nancy Pearl: Yeah.

Jeff Schwager: So, how did you end up in Seattle?

Nancy Pearl: So, I ended up in Seattle, I was, um, I spent about eight years in Tulsa after my girls were in school, working in and managing a wonderful independent bookstore in Tulsa. And when the bookstore was going through what seemed to be its imminent closing, I had already gotten my library degree from the University of Michigan, um, right after undergraduate. Um, but one of the librarians from the Tulsa Library came in to the bookstore and I said, "are there any jobs at the library these days?" And she said, "oh, yes," you know, "come in{Do the you know go in the quotes?}." So, I went in and had an interview and then met, um, the manager of the Central Library, the big library there, and was hired to work there and was there, and then rapidly had a promotion and became head of collection development, which was a job that I really loved. But then the man who had hired me there moved out to Seattle to be the assistant director here. And my daughter, my younger daughter had dropped out of college at the University of Chicago and had moved out here to live a kind of wild and reckless life, it seemed to me. But yet she was here. So I came out to visit her and then, of course, saw my friend and his wife from the library, and he said, well, "what if I created job for you at the library," you know, "would you come here?" {?}. And I said, um, "absolutely." I mean, I was ready to leave Oklahoma. So, um, and that's how I got here.

Jeff Schwager: Uh huh.

Nancy Pearl: He just created this job, and I came and made it work. And, um, my husband was a professor at Oklahoma State University in Stillwater, Oklahoma, and he, um. And after Craig said that about would I come to Oklahoma, um, come to Seattle. I said to my husband, I'd really like to do this, but if you think that this is, you know, not going to be tenable to, you know, I didn't want to get divorced. It wasn't what I was interested in doing [laughs]. Um, then I won't do it. And he said, to his great credit, he said, "No, you have to do it. We'll make it work." And so he stayed on in Oklahoma for four years and finished out his teaching, so that he could retire with full benefits at a very young age of 53. So, and then he's lived off my earnings ever since [laughs]. As I say to him frequently. No.

Jeff Schwager: Well, it's lucky you're not only living on your library salary or also your salary as a library celebrity.

Nancy Pearl: Yes.

Jeff Schwager: How did you go from being a librarian to being a celebrity?

Nancy Pearl: I, you know, it's so, I it just happens. Do you know what I mean? I mean, I think that we talk a lot about, um, making connections and, um, you know, that whole LinkedIn phenomenon. But it always has seemed to me that everything good that's happened in my life has happened because of the kindness of others. Um, you know, the people that I've gotten to know, not in any, ever in any way of saying, well, maybe they can help my career, that that was never the point. I didn't even think that. Um, so after I had been in, so I came to Seattle in 1993 and in 1998, we started as a result of a grant from the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund. We started a program called "If All Seattle Read the Same Book," and that kind of put the library and the center for the book, which I was running, on the map, as it were, on the library map, as it were. And so, um, so maybe that was the first kind of moving beyond Seattle to a more national stage. And then in about 2002, um, a, an editor at a local publishing company, Sasquatch Books, called me and said, "Nancy, come talk to me. Um, I want you to write a book for us." And so, I mean, and so then he described the book he had in mind, which was just that I would write about all my favorite books and come up with quirky categories and, you know, um, I don't know how many words, 60,000 or 70,000 words. Um, and like, oh my God, I felt like I could go home and just sit down and get the thing done in a month. Um, which it took a little bit longer than that, but that became "Book Lust" and, and that came out in the fall of 2003. And then at the same time, in about almost the same time that I was talking to Gary Luke at Sasquatch, I was, my husband and I were at a party, a dinner party with the owner of the Seattle company, um, Accoutrements, which runs Archie McPhee, the, the store that has all those wonderful, kitschy, fun things. And he was telling us that they were making a series of action figures and somebody said, "Mark, you should do a librarian act-." Oh, I guess he was saying that people were were talking about the Jesus action figure and how it was performing miracles for them. He had gotten a letter or two about that, and somebody and I said, "But, Mark, the people who really perform miracles are librarians. They change people's lives every single day. " and somebody else said, "Oh, Mark, you should do a librarian action figure." "Ha ha ha," we all laughed. And then somebody else said, "And Nancy should be the model for it. " And then the conversation went on to many other things. And as we were driving home that night, my husband said his four favorite words to me. And many husbands I know have other four favorite words. My husband's favorite words to me are, "Nancy, think this through." And then he went on to say, "Do you really want to be a four inch plastic, non-biodegradable [emphasis] action figure?" And I said, what I always say, which is "Oh, it's never going to

happen. Don't even think of, you know, why worry? Why think about it. It's not going to happen." And then it happened. And so the librarian action figure came out simultaneously, almost, again with no planning, I mean, it wasn't like we got this big marketing plan together. It just both came out early in September of 2003. And the librarian action figure, um, uh, her action was a shushing action, which we all thought... was great because it plays on that awful stereotype of these children's, librarians going, "shh!" Well, the well, there were, I would say maybe 39, 38 or 39 librarians around the world who had no sense of humor.

Jeff Schwager: [Laughs].

Nancy Pearl: And every one of them wrote to me about how. Two of them, identical, said, "You have set the library profession back 20 years." So all of this kind of, um, controversy caused, um, a Seattle writer to pitch a story to the New York Times about the librarian action figure and the book and me. And it ran on the arts section of, I think, like a Wednesday. I don't even remember, one of the day, date, daily, weekly, you know, the days [laughs], weekdays. Um, and that just... made it even a bigger stage. And then somehow, I am not clear on how this happened. I found myself sitting at the old headquarters of National Public Radio in Washington, DC and talking with people about reviewing books, or I don't even call it "reviewing books," I call it "recommending books." Um, which felt like a job interview, but wasn't, but they said, "Oh no, this isn't, we're just talking." But somehow I was there. I have no I have no memory of how I got there. And so then I started reviewing, recommend, talking to Steve Inskeep on On Air about books that I've, that I love so that. See, it's all just accident. I mean, you just.

Jeff Schwager: It's a perfect career path anyone can follow [laughs].

Nancy Pearl: Yeah. Right. Right. Yeah. I set it all out, you know, just perfectly that way.

Jeff Schwager: Um, let's see what I have here [whispers]. You know, um, Shmuel {?}, our, uh, office manager and, uh, operations manager, uh, his sister is a library worker-

Jeff Schwager: Oh

Jeff Schwager: and she has given us a couple of questions for you.

Nancy Pearl: Oh, good. Good.

Jeff Schwager: Um, what do you feel is the future of the physical book in the library?

Nancy Pearl: Um... Some days I am very confident that the physical book will endure... well beyond any of our lifetimes. Some days I feel that the library has..., um, gone in so many other directions that the physical book will not, does not play as important a part in, in the life of the library, of the public library. I believe that the library is the heart of a community, and that a community without a library is barely a community at all. I think, what what, what I believe is that reading makes us better people. And I think that the only way that we can really gain... a kind of understanding of other people, a sympathy for other people, is through reading and empathy. Um, you know, there's a lot of talk about empathy now and what it means and how you instill it in children. Well, the best way to instill empathy in children or adults is to give them books to read that show them that people live in different ways. We spend so much time in our society, inside our own selves and the people that we talk to and the people that we spend time with generally think the same way that we do about the other. Um, but I think it's so, you know, we always think I like to, I like, I say that this is like, we always think we're the Hamlets in our lives, you know, we're the star of the show, and, you know, you send an email to somebody and they don't respond in a minute. You think, well, what's, you know, what am I, chopped liver? You know, like, answer me right away. We, you know, kind of expect that because we're the star. But in reality in, you know, we're really like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. I mean, we're the friends who come in and then are killed off in act five maybe, or whatever it is. I mean, it's, we have to understand that and we have to be able to, to look at the way people, other people live and believe what they believe. And you get that from reading. And I think that it's so important now more than ever that our leaders be readers, because it's hard for me to see. I mean, when I look back at what I, at my beliefs, yeah, so many of them came from my parents' beliefs. But books like "Strawberry Girl," about the, children's book by Lois Lenski, a life of migrant workers who travel around, you know, following the strawberry, in this case, the strawberry harvests. I mean, that taught me about poverty. Um, a book called "Tree Wagon" by Evelyn Sibley Lampman. See, this is the kind of stuff that just sticks in my head. "Tree Wagon" taught me about, um, Marcus and Narcissa Whitman. I mean, everything I've learned, I've learned, really, from books and reading.

Jeff Schwager: Mhm. That's great. Um, what is the most difficult leadership decision you have had to make?

Nancy Pearl: Um, I think that, um, when I was head of collection development, really, along with the head of the library, the director of the library, I had great input into what books the library would purchase and what books we wouldn't purchase. And one of my, um, you know, one of my strongest beliefs, and somebody did a t-shirt of this years ago that said, um, um, let's see,

"there's something in my library to offend everyone." And and that to me is the definition of a library. But when you're asked to put books in the library... that you have this strong, visceral reaction against, that you don't want anybody to read for whatever reason. Um, and I mean, that's when you have to step back and say, this is a library. I have to put these books in the library. Um, that's, those are hard decisions.

Jeff Schwager: Are there specific books?

Nancy Pearl: Well, I mean, one that doesn't have any, um, an interesting one that doesn't, uh, that is not controversial at all, is, um, is the book, is Madonna's book. It was one of her early books.

Jeff Schwager: Sex.

Nancy Pearl: The "Sex," which was, you know, not even a library, I mean, it wouldn't. And there's, um, but but we did, I hope I'm remembering correctly that we did add it to the library collection, but, um, there was a funny story about some library that bought four copies of it, and, um, two were immediately stolen and one was on reference and one was circulating, and , and they somebody figured out that by the holds list, it would be 113 years before the last person on the list got that, got to check out that book. But, I mean, it's more serious when you talk, when you think about, I mean, when you think about, um, Holocaust deniers, for example, you know. Did they belong, did those books belong in the library? And part of me says, no, I don't want anybody to read those books. Those books are not history. They're, they're, you know, you know, invented.

Jeff Schwager: False narratives.

Nancy Pearl: There false narratives. Right, right. And then part of me says it's a library, but that's a hard decision.

Jeff Schwager: So do you stock books like that in the library or do you think libraries should?

Nancy Pearl: I am torn, quite honestly.

Jeff Schwager: Because it seems like false history, you're, it's almost antithetical to the.

Nancy Pearl: Right.

Jeff Schwager: To the vision of what a library is.

Nancy Pearl: Right. Yeah.

Jeff Schwager: It seems like maybe you should keep them in a reference room for serious researchers who are researching false narratives.

Nancy Pearl: Yeah. And then and and most libraries don't have that. I mean, that would be at a university library. I don't know. I, um, you would get people arguing that it isn't a false narrative.

Jeff Schwager: Right.

Nancy Pearl: And it's when you have, it's when all of you, I think as a librarian, when all of you kind of screams against, I don't want this book in the library that you really need to figure out where that feeling is coming from. Do you know what I mean? I mean, we had people working at the library who, if a book, um, showed, um, had some nudity in it or something. They, they would not. That book would go into a desk drawer, their desk drawer, and would never see the light of day. So where does, you know, Where does that stop?

Jeff Schwager: Right. I mean, in today's news, there was something about somebody banning "To Kill a Mockingbird" and, um, "Huck Finn" again?

Nancy Pearl: Right, yes.

Jeff Schwager: Again.

Nancy Pearl: Again, right. It's crazy. It's just crazy. And if you start, where do you stop?

Jeff Schwager: Right.

Nancy Pearl: But I think everybody who's honest with themselves knows that there, there's, there's at least one area. And, and I have a master's degree in history, which I kind of picked up along the way. And I still read a lot of history. Um. And so it's particularly offensive to me, those false, those false narratives.

Jeff Schwager: Is there a history book that's, uh, of special import to you?

Nancy Pearl: Well, I'll tell you, I just recently read a book. It just came out late in January and it's translated from the Swedish, but in very fluid translations, so you don't feel any awkwardness reading it. It's by a woman named Elisabeth Åsbrink. Um, and it's called 1947, the year 1947, when now begins ["1947: Where Now Begins"]. And it goes through month by month. Everything that happened in the year 1947, including the beginning of the Nuremberg trials, the hunt for Nazi war criminals in, in um, South America and, and in and um, oh my gosh, so much. It's not just political, but also, um, ballet and theater. I mean, it's just, and it's very impressionistic. So it's wonderful for people. I mean, I learned so, so, so much about it. So, um, uh, the, um, the United Nations, uh, creation of Israel, all of that. I mean, 1947. Amazing. Just and I, and you just. Oh, the beginning of the Truman Doctrine, the, the, um, the Marshall Plan, the Marshall Plan, I guess it was called. All of that is in that book and it's so, there's so much there. And it's so interesting that, that reading it made me remember why I loved history so much and, and how somebody who can pull those disparate things together and present it in that way is was so impressive.

Jeff Schwager: Interesting.

Nancy Pearl: Yeah.

Jeff Schwager: Um, we're curious if you, uh. Do you belong to a synagogue now? Do you?

Nancy Pearl: No. We don't, um.

Jeff Schwager: I'm curious about your feelings about Judaism? What does it mean to you,in your life?...There are no wrong answers.

Nancy Pearl: Yeah, right [laughs]. No, just trying to think of how the best, the best way to say it. Um, I am... Jewish... I don't feel the need to be affiliated with any particular, um, any particular synagogue or temple. Um, when we moved from Stillwater, Oklahoma to Tulsa, Oklahoma, partly we did that because I didn't feel I wanted my children to grow up being Jewish and not feeling, um, apart. Not, not feeling "apart, one word." Not feeling because I always felt, yeah, I was Jewish, but, you know, I didn't have a bat mitzvah. I mean, there was nothing. My parents were really, in fact, very anti-religious. But, um, and I felt I couldn't give that to my children. And there was a reform temple in Tulsa that I felt, that we ended up joining. And I taught eighth grade history in Sunday school there and and all of that. And for a long time it was, um. And my, my older daughter was bat mitzvah there and all of that. But, um, I just feel that... That I, that... Well, I would welcome the community, I think. In fact, um, I just don't feel that it's necessary to me.

Jeff Schwager: Okay. Um, a couple more questions. Um... You just published your first novel.

Nancy Pearl: I did just publish again.

Jeff Schwager: Congratulations.

Nancy Pearl: Thank you, thank you.

Jeff Schwager: Uh, "George and Lizzie."

Nancy Pearl: "George and Lizzie."

Jeff Schwager: Um. Is that what your future holds? Are you now? Uh, Nancy Pearl, novelist.

Nancy Pearl: [Laughs.] You know, I think I want to be Nancy Pearl, long distance walker, because, because what I would really love to do is walk across the country and, um, raise money for small and rural libraries. But the problem is that, um, I'm not somebody who is at all capable of arranging things. I have really good ideas. So I'm just sort of waiting for somebody to, to, to jump up and say, "I will get you sponsors and I will arrange all that, and I'll plot a route for you and do all that," before I can do that. But writing the novel, I, I, I absolutely love those characters in the book. Um, I love "George and Lizzie" immoderately, um, I, I it was so much, it was so interesting to write it because the characters came to me just like my poetry used to come to me. Um, they, they sort of appeared in my head, and I just would write about them in little vignettes about their lives together and their childhoods and things like that. Um, but I can't see that that's going to happen again.

Jeff Schwager: Uh huh [affirmative], okay, um.

Nancy Pearl: Because it was never anything that I planned to do. I mean, it was never, I was perfectly happy reading other people's novels and talking about them or thinking about them.

Jeff Schwager: I can't remember who said it, but somebody famous once said, "Why would I want to spend five years writing a book when I can go down to the store and buy one for $0.50?"

Nancy Pearl: [Laughs.] Right. Yes. Yeah. And I only wrote it, really. I mean, they were in my head and I loved thinking about them. They were in my head for several years, but I only started writing it down when I couldn't find enough books that that made me, that I loved. And I just wanted to write a book that I loved, and exactly the kind of book that I loved and I did. I think.

Jeff Schwager: That's great.

Nancy Pearl: For me.

Jeff Schwager: Well, congratulations.

Nancy Pearl: Thank you.

Jeff Schwager: And I think that's, that's great. That's a great note to end on. So thank you.

Nancy Pearl: Thank you Jeff.

Jeff Schwager: Thank you, Nancy... That was fantastic.

Nancy Pearl: Oh, thank you. Thank you.