



“The Storied Life of Ursula Nordstrom”

with Nancy Hudgins

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:00:00] Reach Out And Read — where books build better brains. This is the Reach Out and Read Podcast. I'm your host, Dr. Dipesh Navsaria, a practicing pediatrician with degrees in public health and children's librarianship. I'm a clinical professor of human development and family studies at the School of Human Ecology and a professor of pediatrics at the School of Medicine and Public Health, both at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. At Reach Out And Read, we dream of a world in which every child is read to every day. Our show explores how children and families flourish and thrive through a combination of individual well-being, confident parents, supportive communities, strong public health, and good policy. Join us here for thought-provoking conversations on these issues with expert guests, authors, and leaders in the field of early childhood health and literacy. Research shows that reading physical books together brings the strongest benefits to children. That's why we're happy to have Boise Paper, a responsible paper manufacturer, as the founding sponsor of this podcast. Through their paper with Purpose Promise, Boise Paper looks for ways to make a difference in local communities. Thank you to Boise Paper for investing in our Reach Out and Read community. “Where the Wild Things Are.” “Good Night, Moon.” “The Carrot Seed.” “Charlotte's Web.” “Stuart Little.” “Harold and the Purple Crayon.” “Harriet the Spy.” “The Rabbit's Wedding in the Night Kitchen.” I could go on and on. Not only are these books considered some of the greatest children's books of the last century, they were all chosen, nurtured, edited, and published by the same person — Ursula Nordstrom, a giant in the publishing world in the mid-1900s. Ursula broke the mold after mold, transformed what it meant to write and illustrate

for children, and made millions for her industry in the process. A new book takes a closer look at her life, work and legacy, and explores the delicate but crucial role of a children's book editor. Our guest today is Nancy Hudgins, the author of books “Good Enough for You,” “The Storied Life of Ursula Nordstrom: Editor of Extraordinary Children's Books.” Nancy, welcome to the show.

Nancy Hudgins: [00:02:15] Thank you. Thank you so much for having me.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:02:18] So, for our listeners who may not actually know who she was, can you just tell us briefly who was Ursula Nordstrom?

Nancy Hudgins: [00:02:25] Well, I thought you gave a great introduction. So, let me see if I can add to that a little bit. What made her so fascinating to me, one of the things, was how many iconic books that she edited. And in doing my research, I discovered that she also taught many creative people into writing for children: Maurice Sendak, Shel Silverstein, Mary Rodgers, kind of on and on. But in the mid-20th century, she was the head of the children's book department at Harper and Brothers — which became Harper and Row — which is now Harper Collins. And so, as the head of the department, she was in charge of deciding which books the department would buy. After a while, that as the department grew and grew, there were many other editors that she brought in, and taught, and mentored as well. And then, she had a say in how the stories were shaped. So, she was an editor first and a publisher second, in a sense. And one of the things she did was that she pushed the envelope on a lot of new groundbreaking books for children that really hadn't been seen before 1940, when she began working as the head of the department. And her tenure continued to 1973 full-time, and then until 1980 part-time. So, for 40 years, she was involved in children's books. So that, let's say in the 1940s, there weren't that many books either for children, either written by black people or featuring black people.

Nancy Hudgins: [00:04:05] And she brought people into that mold — certainly, John Steptoe in the '60s, who's famous, but also Gwendolyn Brooks'

poetry — but she was accepting manuscripts. She had some middle-grade manuscripts from a guy named, I think it's Charlie Jackson, in the late '40s. And so, that was new and groundbreaking in the '60s. She had some gender non-normative books, like "Harriet the Spy" and also in 1969, she published John Donovan's "I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip," which was the first book that was published in which two boys kissed. And Ursula knew it would be that she'd get a lot of pushback for that, but she prepared for it. And it had a very nice opening, I think, and it did pretty well. And then, of course, there's Maurice Sendak — who she basically discovered, mentored through 20 years, at least, of his writing and artwork — and I think she sent him maybe 40 books in the '50s and '60s to do the art for. And she encouraged him to have a different style, a style that would fit what the story was about. And I think that's one of the things that really elevated his career, but they were they were close, close friends by the end of it, for sure.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:05:39] Sure. Yeah. As I was reading your book, I mean — my goodness! Some of these connections I already knew about, but then I'm turning pages and going, "Wait, she was involved in that one too? Wait! And that one and that one?!"

Nancy Hudgins: [00:05:54] As you can imagine, the research was so much fun.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:05:57] Sure. So, she herself had a pretty tumultuous childhood. Can you can you say a bit more about that?

Nancy Hudgins: [00:06:06] Yeah, sure. Her parents were vaudeville actors and also actors on Broadway. Her father was very famous, even before — I mean, 20 years before, 30 years before — she was born. He was a well-known actor in New York City. And so, for the first four years of her life, she was on the road when they were on the road and she had a black nanny, Ellen Webb, who traveled with them. Then, they settled down on the north shore of Long Island until she was seven or so and her parents got divorced. They were having — well, basically her mother decided she wouldn't live with her father

anymore — for reasons I won't go into, but seemed pretty decent reasons to me. And so, this broke up the family. Ursula was very emotionally attached to her father. And then, so, that was about when she was 7 or 8. So, she went on the road with her mother. That was in like February and March of a school year. And so, at the start of the next year, her mother sent her to boarding schools and she was in boarding schools for the rest of her academic career. She was not as much in touch with her father later on, as she was with her mother. And in fact — and I found this by googling Ursula Dixie — because Dixie was her father's name.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:07:30] That's right.

Nancy Hudgins: [00:07:31] And I found the actual transcripts of the two arbitrations, sort of mini trials that her parents went through when they were fighting each other over the divorce, and proceeds, and stuff. And her father, who she adored, had promised her, Ursula, that the house they lived in, in Long Island, would stay with her and her mother. And then, he reneged. And I think that was really tough for Ursula. So, she went to boarding schools. It was, you know, two different ones. It was a struggle. So, it wasn't a rosy childhood.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:08:06] Right. Makes you wonder how dealing with all that, right — the changes, the moving around, the different parents, the boarding school — how that affected her ability to kind of see what might speak to children. Right?

Nancy Hudgins: [00:08:23] For sure. And at that time, when she first got started, most of the children's books were rosy and most of the kids were blue-eyed and brown-haired and they, you know, were perfect little angels. And she knew that children weren't perfect little angels. And so, she either found writers or writers found her. And she encouraged that they write about real situations. She said, "Books should be fresh, and original, and honest." "Anything else," she said, "is not good enough for a child." And that's where "books good enough for you" comes from.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:08:59] Yeah, the title of your book! So, just — you know, for context here, right — like Harper and Brothers was a publisher that had been around a long time — like, you know, over a century, when she arrived there. Right? But the children's department was relatively new. She didn't create it. It existed. But she's the one who went from this sort of fantasy ideal, right, of “everything is all great all the time” — which I will say many people still think is what children's books should be like, right? Unfortunately, yeah. And then, she turned it to like, “this has to speak to the reality of children.”

Nancy Hudgins: [00:09:37] Right?

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:09:37] Yeah.

Nancy Hudgins: [00:09:38] Right.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:09:39] So, you — and on one page, you bring us these writing tips from Ursula — can you say more about where those tips came from, and then maybe highlight what are some of your favorites?

Nancy Hudgins: [00:09:50] Sure. Ursula is basically self-taught. She never graduated from high school, but she read a lot. And so, as I read Leonard Marcus's book, “Dear Genius: The Collected Letters of Ursula Nordstrom,” I picked up writing tips for kids. I picked up writing tips for myself, which was pretty fascinating. And so, you know, she had on-the-job training. I think she just, she had an ear for it. She certainly had a nose for talent, and she did everything she could to support that talent, and all the talented writers and artists she worked with. The tips I just pulled either from Leonard Marcus's book, or from what I wrote about in my book, and just put them all in one place — basically as a sidebar. And of course, Ursula wanted her writers to be authentic. And so, that's kind of, I think, how I started off with the tips. But the last tip, which I think is something fun at the end, I decided to put that in because one of Ursula's writers was Mary Rodgers, who she talked into writing children's books. Ursula would go out to creative people in other pursuits and

ask them if they wanted to write for children. So, she saw Mary Rodgers and got her interested in writing children's books — Mary Rodgers, the daughter of Richard Rodgers of Rodgers and Hammerstein fame, who had also written a Broadway play on her own, “The Princess and The Pea.” So, Mary was having trouble figuring out what she wanted to say in one of her novels and she had lunch with Ursula. They became good friends. And Mary said that she didn't really like writing scenes, and she wasn't really into that. And so, Ursula said, “Well, what do you like to do?” And she said, “I like to write dialogue; I love dialogue.” And I said, “Do that.” She said, “You know, that's what will be interesting to you. And if it's fun for you, it'll be fun for the kids,” which I tried to mimic in writing this book, because I wanted people to get the fun of Ursula's humor — which is why I liberally use excerpts from her letters, so that rather than saying, “Oh, she was funny,” I could have excerpts from her letters in which she was funny. So, I wanted them to get the fun of Ursula as well. And I wanted the book to be fun because I had so much fun researching it. I just thought kids would have fun learning these stories.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:12:21] Yeah. And for our listeners, the book is aimed at about a 10 to 14 year old.

Nancy Hudgins: [00:12:30] Yeah. Abrams says five to nine, fifth to ninth grade — so, 10 and up or whatever. I've heard people as young as third grade were reading it and liked it. So, there's that. And then, I have some 70-year-old friends who like it, too. So, there's that.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:12:46] There you go. And hey, I'm clearly an adult and I loved reading it, but I have a professional excuse. So, there you go. That's great. I also think it's very meta that you wrote about a children's book editor in a book that is designed for children, of course.

Nancy Hudgins: [00:13:05] Yeah. Well, she needed to be elevated. I mean, I didn't know this when I started, but she's kind of iconic in the children's book world — but outside the children's book world, people think she's associated with the department store, so I wanted to get her out there in her true glory.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:13:24] Sure. And just as an aside, Leonard Marcus is a friend of the show here. We've had him on a few times, so.

Nancy Hudgins: [00:13:31] Yeah, well, I stand on his shoulders. I mean, he was — I wouldn't have written this book if I hadn't read his book. So, there you are.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:13:39] Indeed. Let's talk a bit about the books themselves — because, as I gave that laundry list at the opening — they really are just immense. And I think, in many ways, now sitting here in this time and era, we think, “Oh yeah, they're classics.” They're classics. Right? But of course, they really broke the mold when they came out. Let's maybe just talk about a few of them. One that caught my eye was “The Rabbits Wedding.”

Nancy Hudgins: [00:14:09] Mhm.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:14:10] Yeah. Can you share a little bit about what was what, what made that different?

Nancy Hudgins: [00:14:15] Well, this is a brouhaha that didn't need to happen, but it happened. And you could certainly see it happening today. Unfortunately, Garth Williams was discovered by Ursula because he was doing cartoons for The New Yorker. And about the same time, E.B. White discovered him as well — between Ursula and E.B. White, they decided that he should illustrate “Stuart Little” and “Charlotte's Web.” And so, that's how Ursula knew him. She also got him to do the illustrations for a reprint of the — or reissuance of — “The Little House on the Prairie” series, because she thought that the older pictures were dated, and so she put them out again during her tenure, and to huge success. But he decided he wanted to write a picture book. And he wrote about two rabbits who played together in the woods and then decided to marry. And he talked to Ursula about it. She thought that'd be great. “I think children love to hear or read about weddings, so, you know, go for it.” So, he did. He was an artist. He also illustrated it. And so, in doing that, in the illustrations, the male bunny was black and the female bunny was white — which made no difference to anybody in the first year or

so that that the book was out. It was just a sweet book about two animals who decide to marry and go to live on, happily ever after.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:15:44] And wasn't it also just so you could tell them apart?

Nancy Hudgins: [00:15:48] Well, yeah — I mean, yeah. Exactly.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:15:51] Because otherwise, they look the same, right?

Nancy Hudgins: [00:15:53] Right. And all the other bunnies were white, look the same, and all the other black bunnies look the same. So, yeah. So, he just thought that having them be different colors would be more picturesque, I guess. So, that was just how he did it. And what happened was, a couple of years after it came out, some columnists in Florida decided — this is in the late 1950s during McCarthyism — that really what Garth was trying to do was implant in young reader's mind the idea that integration was an okay thing, because one bunny was black and one bunny was white. Which, you know, I mean, yeah. So, it got picked up by the White Citizens Council and other people in the South. And so, in Louisiana, a state senator tried to get it first banned from the State Library, and then burned. And by that point, even the segregationists who were his pals are like, This is stupid.”

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:17:01] Yeah, but —

Nancy Hudgins: [00:17:01] Why?

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:17:01] — are we spending our time on this?

Nancy Hudgins: [00:17:03] Exactly. Yeah, sure. But it made headlines all across the country. They were talking about it in Europe, and it was just — the whole thing is kind of dumb.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:17:11] So, yeah. Another one that stood out, of course, is “Where the Wild Things Are.” It was just amazing listening to how much of

a hand she had in, like, helping Maurice Sendak, shape the story and the narrative in that.

Nancy Hudgins: [00:17:32] Right. He'd written a couple of other books before then. "Kenny's Window" was one of them, but he'd never written a picture book in which there'd be a synergistic effect between the pictures and the text and that they would both move the story forward but not necessarily repeat each other. They would complement each other or push it forward. Either one. And so, she was thrilled when he came to her with this idea, which had been sitting around — he'd been noodling at about it for several years. And this, of course, as a 21st century debut author, the fact that it could be started in April and published in October, it's just like, "oh my goodness." Yeah. So, that's, that's a whole different story in itself. But she wanted to hear about it. And he set to work writing the story. And she encouraged him, as she did always, which was very encouraging to him to write it. So, he worked on it for several months and I'm sure they still talked about it. He used to go to Harper and they'd eat tuna fish sandwiches at Ursula's desk. So, he wanted to finish the text before he started in on the on the art, but he was thinking about the art at the same time, too. So, ultimately, there came a time where he just couldn't quite figure out how he wanted to end the story, and he went to talk to Ursula about it. You know, people who knew them have said that they could almost read each other's thoughts — that they just had a wonderful, intellectual, and human, emotional relationship. And so, he said, "Do you want me to tell the story? Is that why you asked?"

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:19:25] Yeah, sure.

Nancy Hudgins: [00:19:25] "Go for it." Okay. All right. So, he goes to see her and he says, "I've got this idea." And he's telling her the story about Max going to the "Island of the Wild Things." But he wants to get him back home eventually, and he can't figure out how — because it looks like Max is having so much fun, you know.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:19:42] Yeah. Wild, wild rumpus and all.

Nancy Hudgins: [00:19:44] Yeah. Three spreads of the rumpus. And so, Ursula said, “Well why did he want to go back home?” And I think Maurice either didn't know or he didn't want to say, but he was kind of cagey. So, he made up some jokes — which they both love to make each other laugh. So, they're laughing about that, but Ursula was persistent. She said, “Well, why don't you want to go home right then?” And Maurice said, “Because they wanted to be with someone who loved them best of all.” And I think, almost in the telling of that story, you can just hear this kind of silence as it was said — you know, I mean, an editor and a writer working together. And so, that's what he did. And it just was a wonderful ending to the story.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:20:31] Indeed. And you know, even to go back to what we were saying before about children and their realities, right? There was that opening, you know — like, “It was the night where Max wore his wolf suit and made mischief of one kind and another. And his mother called him ‘wild thing.’” Right? And like, this is the anger that children have, right — when they want to do the thing they want to do. And it really does speak to that reality and the reality of having limits set on you. Right? In all those ways.

Nancy Hudgins: [00:21:04] Right. And I mean, it's a universal emotion that kids have. I mean, I can remember my mother and father sending me to my room, just being so angry. So, everybody had those times, you know, but they hadn't been written about in this way in children's books until 1963. And so, that's what made it really revolutionary. And it opened the door, as so many initiatives that Ursula had had opened the door for other publishers to start considering books like that, too.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:21:39] The other thing that I really loved that you talked about in this was many things, but was about how Ursula was willing to also admit when she was wrong or change her thinking, right? So, was it with Stevie Wright that she changed around some of the words in the initial draft? And the author said, “No, that's not how children in, you know, my neighborhood — in a largely Black neighborhood — that's not how they would speak. And she said, “Okay, you're right” and left it in.

Nancy Hudgins: [00:22:17] Yeah. That's right. And I think that, you know, she was upset about it, too, that she had let herself kind of get drawn into this “Well, it should be formal written English” idea. And yeah, I mean, she listened to her authors. And you have to realize that, when John Steptoe said that to her, he was — I don't know — maybe 17-years-old.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:22:41] Right.

Nancy Hudgins: [00:22:42] You know, he just stood up there and said, “No.” Yeah and she listened.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:22:47] Yeah. But it also says something that a 17-year-old would say that to this this authority figure who's saying, “You know, we're going to publish this, right?” Many would say, “Fine, whatever. I'll do what she says. I want to please her, so this gets done.” And the fact that she clearly had left the door open to say, “Hey, push back here.” And he did, and she said, “You're right.” Like that speaks a lot to her commitment, I think, to that authenticity we talked about.

Nancy Hudgins: [00:23:19] Yeah, absolutely.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:23:21] Yeah. So, the other thing, of course, is that she talked a lot about other ways in which children faced — and still do face, right — being true to themselves, and in one aspect is of things like LGBTQ stories. Right? She herself was actually gay. Right? But not openly, so do you think there's something there about how her private life might have affected her choices as an editor?

Nancy Hudgins: [00:23:50] Well, sure. I mean, my private life influenced my choices to write this book, so yeah to some extent. I mean, I don't think she was “out,” you know, looking for gay authors and illustrators. But you know, there was no reason not to publish them, and if she wanted to give her platform to some of them, I think that's fine, too.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:24:15] Mhm. Yeah.

Nancy Hudgins: [00:24:17] It could not have been easy for Ursula to be gay in 1940, '50, '60. Right? You know, so people were basically generally quiet about it.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:24:27] Sure. It also was remarkable to me that her publishing house supported her. Right? Because some of these, you know, she goes through things and then she'd bring it out there saying, "Hey, this is going to be potentially controversial." And it seems like she got the thumbs up, at least almost all the time.

Nancy Hudgins: [00:24:46] Yeah. My favorite thread through all this was, was how the gruff guys in the sales department, you know, reacted to all these different new books. And almost always, they supported her. I think "William's Doll," they weren't quite that fond of — but yeah, they said, "Let's go for it" on "I'll get there. It Better Be Worth the Trip" by John Donovan.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:25:11] Yeah, those guys were great. Your descriptions were — of just even that one line about the gruff salesman — and I'm like, "I could imagine them in the movie version of the book already going. Well, I don't know about this, but yeah, we'll give it a whirl."

Nancy Hudgins: [00:25:28] Exactly.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:25:31] We're almost out of time here, but — in closing — how do you think the children's book publishing world has changed since her day? I mean, there's so many ways we could identify that, but is there kind of a big shift that has occurred that you would say like, "Yeah, this is the big thing."

Nancy Hudgins: [00:25:51] I have to say that I'm still mired in the 20th century children's book publishing world, so I'm not really one to speak about it, I don't think. I do think that, because of the groundbreaking books that she published and that did well commercially, it encouraged other publishers in the '40s, '50s, '60s, '70s to listen to more voices as well. You know, I think still today we need more diverse voices, but she — in a sense — was under that in

the mid-20th century. And could she have gone farther? Yeah, maybe. But you know, Leonard Marcus famously said, “Timeless books are still books of their time.” And in a way, all of us are people of our time. So, for where she was and what she did, I just have a tremendous amount of respect for her.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:26:56] Mhm. Yeah. I think so many of the books that we see published today that receive acclaim — and rightly so — owe something to, you know, her work at saying, “Okay, we're not going to be sitting here and writing these, you know, sickly sweet, ‘everything's perfect’ stories that no child would take seriously” and “it's okay to write about those, about the challenges and about the inner turmoil, and just how children experience the world.” Thank you so much for this book and the opportunity to learn more and talk about Ursula Nordstrom and just what she's given us in the field of children's books.

Nancy Hudgins: [00:27:45] Thank you. I appreciate that.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:27:52] Welcome to today's 33rd page or something extra for you, our listeners. In our conversation today, we discussed how Maurice Sendak and Ursula Nordstrom interacted around “Where the Wild Things Are.” And I have to say, this was my favorite chapter in the entire book. And you know, maybe it's because I just love that book, but there was just something about the editor and creator interaction that just stood out. And I wanted to share a part of that with you. “Sometimes, however, writers can get stuck. Maurice got stuck on how to end his book. He had written about Max's acting out his mother's anger and her banishing Max to his room without his supper. He had written about Max's sailing away to the ‘Island of the Wild Things,’ how Max had subdued them, and a crazy celebration that followed. But once Max was king, it looked like Max had it all. Why would he want to go back home? Maurice wanted to talk it over with Ursula there in her office. He explained his story. Ursula did what she did best. She listened with all her senses. She let the story and the worry pour out of Maurice when he came to his dilemma. She asked, ‘why did he want to go home?’ Maurice didn't know, so he offered some silly ideas and they left. Ursula wanted

Maurice to dig deeper into himself. She persisted, asking in her low melodic voice, 'why did he want to go home right then?' Maurice took time to think about it. Then, in a soft, hesitant voice, he said 'he wanted to be where someone loved him best of all,' adding, 'but I couldn't really say that.' 'Why not?,' said Ursula. 'It's absolutely perfect and it's exactly what you mean.' Maurice sat with that idea. He realized Ursula was right."

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:29:49] "She had helped him find his ending. He wanted to convey Max's mother's love in a lyrical way. After pages and pages of glorious art, Maurice ended his book with a blank page with only five words indicating Max's dinner was still hot. And then, right before publication, there's one more thing I wanted to share about this book. Ursula continued to work with him on the text. The final version was only ten sentences long. In late September, before sending Maurice's manuscript and drawings to the printer, Ursula looked at them one last time. She wrote, 'Maurice, the words are beautiful and meaningful, and it does just what you wanted it to do. And you did just what you wanted to do.'" And that's today's 33rd page. You've been listening to the Reach Out and Read Podcast. Reach Out and Read is a nonprofit organization that is the authoritative national voice for the positive effects of reading daily and supports, coaches, and celebrates engaging in those language-rich activities with young children. We're continually inspired by stories that encourage language literacy and Early Relational Health. Visit us at reachoutandread.org/podcast to find out more. And don't forget to subscribe to our show wherever you listen to your podcasts. If you like what you hear, please leave us a review. Your feedback helps grow our podcast community and tells others that this podcast is worth listening to. Our producer is Jill Ruby. Lori Brooks is our chief external affairs officer. Special thanks to our communications manager, Niels Torres, and communications specialist Priscilla Takyi. Thank you to our founding sponsor, Boise Paper for making a difference in local communities like ours. I'm your host, Dr. Dipesh Navsaria. I look forward to spending time with you soon. And remember, books build better brains.