

## The 2019 #PBChat Mentorship

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**Nancy Churnin**'s eight picture book biographies have won the Sydney Taylor Notable, South Asia Book Award and Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People, been honored on numerous state reading lists and been translated into Japanese and Braille. A former theater critic for The Dallas Morning News, Nancy is an alumna of Harvard, with a masters from Columbia. She lives in North Texas.

Nancy will be accepting applications for: writers of picture book bios.

1. If you had to wear the same t-shirt with one word on it for a year, what word would you choose?

Persistence

2. If you had your own talk show, who would your first three guests be? Bonus points for sharing the name of your show and what it would be about.

My show would be called MILK & TOUGH COOKIES. I would have guests that were and are ahead of their time, writers and illustrators that are giving us the books we need before we know we need them. My first three guests: prolific and gifted author Leslea Newman, whose affirmative *Heather Has Two Mommies* 30 years ago; Pat Mora, whose book *Tomas and the Library Lady* tells the true story of the difference books and kindness can make in a child's life; Javaka Steptoe, who could talk about taking the groundbreaking legacy of his award-winning father, John Steptoe, into his own award-winning present with *Radiant Child*, an affirmative portrait of an artist who finds his own unique voice.

3. If you could instantly become an expert in something (non-writing-related), what would it be and why?

Botany and zoology. I would love to know the name of every plant and animal I see and what its characteristics are.

4. What are your five favorite picture books not written and/or illustrated by you?

*Gittel's Journey* by Leslea Newman; *Horton Hatches the Egg* by Dr. Seuss; *The Velveteen Rabbit* by Margery Williams; *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupery; *The Polar Express* by Chris Van Allsburg

5. What is the toughest feedback you've ever received?

So many people have uplifted me with their warm response to *MARTIN & ANNE, THE KINDRED SPIRITS OF DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. AND ANNE FRANK*, but a reviewer recently gave the book the worst review any of my books have ever received, noting that she didn't want to see any

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more books on Anne Frank at all. I respect the reviewer's right to dislike my book, but I hope she will become more open-minded about the value of books about Anne Frank. I think Anne's story is an important story about the importance of protecting our children against hate and prejudice that needs to be remembered in fresh ways for each generation.

### **6. What are some of the most important lessons you've learned so far?**

I've learned that it's important to follow your heart – to write about what matters and resonates with you deeply, to accept going into this business that not everyone will understand and support you and your work and that's okay, but to find the people who understand and support you and for you to support and uplift as many as you can. We want to do the best work we can while we are here to do it, but none of us will be here forever and one of the most important things we can do beyond our work in our lifetimes is to pass the baton so others will be encouraged to do the best work they can.

### **7. What writing-related accomplishment are you most proud of?**

I am proud that every one of the biographies that I have written puts a spotlight on someone who inspires me. Every time a child or adult shares with me that the subject of one of my books inspires them, my heart is happy.

### **8. What are your dreams and goals as an author?**

For my books to break down walls between people as children empathize and identify with someone they might not have ever thought about or considered before, that the journey my subjects take to achieve their dreams will empower and inspire children to follow their dreams and make a positive difference in the world.

### **9. What are your strengths as a mentor?**

I am open to any subject for a biography, I am interested in helping the mentee find his or her emotional connection to the character and brainstorm why this character is important to the writer and thus to the reader, I want to help make the story as thrilling and well crafted as possible.

### **10. Who are you not the best mentor for?**

I am not the best mentor for rhyming books. While I love reading fantasy and fun, I am not the best person to critique these books.

### **11. What are the most important things you're seeking in a mentee?**

I can be most helpful to someone who is very open to honest feedback. As a writer, I welcome constructive criticism from editors and critique partners because my goal is to have the best possible book for kids. I would like someone to come in with that attitude that the goal is not to be right, but to get the book right. Don't be insecure and don't be overly emotional. Let's just get in and get the job done.

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### **12. What is your feedback/critique style like?**

Straightforward, analytical, surgical. A writer needs to write from an emotional place. A critiquer, in contrast, needs to be dispassionate and logical as if examining, tinkering with and fixing a machine. At the same time, I will get increasingly excited and happy as the manuscript gets closer to where it needs to be, to live and breathe on its own.

### **13. During the mentorship, how will you help your mentee and their stories develop?**

I will be happy to talk with my mentee on developing their strongest ideas, then critiquing those manuscripts, identifying weaknesses and strengths and helping them to develop a social media presence.

### **14. What type of relationship do you hope to establish with your mentee?**

Friendly and supportive.

### **15. What is your style of communication like?**

I prefer email. I like to be informal and as helpful as I can be. Sometimes exchanges will be short, sometimes they will be more detailed.

### **16. While reading prospective mentee's manuscripts, what do you hope to experience?**

I hope to feel how much they are about their subject. If they are passionate about the person they are writing about, we can get that manuscript to where it needs to be.

### **17. What will you look for in the applications you receive?**

I look for people who have a passionate commitment to what they are doing, to the subjects they are writing about, who care more about getting the story right than being right, who care less about their own fame and fortune than in making a positive difference in kids' lives.

### **18. What about the idea of mentoring excites you most?**

I believe that each of us has a unique voice and perspective and we are all here to help each other. I love forward to turning up the amplifier on new voices so the world can hear them.

### **19. Is there anything, author-related, you wish people would ask you about? If so, what, and how would you respond?**

I am happy for people to ask me why I do what I do and why I write about the people I write about. I choose the people I do because they inspire me to be a better person and I write because I hope they will inspire kids and people of all ages to be better as well.

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**20. What advice or inspiring and/or motivational words would you like to offer up to anyone applying to be your mentee or simply reading this questionnaire?**

Be honest. Be yourself. Don't tell me what you think I want to hear. Tell me who you are and what you want to accomplish. Everyone is not right for everyone and every style is not right for everyone. If I'm not the best fit for you, someone else may be. If I am the right fit, I am happy to help!