

Acts of Conjuring: Helene Wecker in conversation with Dan White

A hummingbird flew out of Helene Wecker's garden and crashed into a windowpane while she was talking to me about her best-selling and critically acclaimed debut novel, The Golem and the Jinni.

It plopped on the ground. Wecker, who lives in suburban Pleasanton, California, not far from San Francisco, was in such a state of shock that she stopped talking to me for a moment. Then I heard her say, "Oh my God. That bird. That bird just killed itself right when we were talking." Then came a long pause and the sound of a door sliding open. "I'm picking up the bird right now," she said. "I'm...I'm stroking his little chest. I'm..."

After a minute or so of stroking, the "dead" bird stirred. It glanced at Wecker, spread its wings, and buzzed off. In a moment, it soared above her garden wall and was gone.

This created an awkward pause in our talk. But when we resumed our conversation, it made for a good jumping-off point into our discussion about magic, acts of conjuring, and drawing life out of dead matter.

Wecker's first book, The Golem and the Jinni, is the story of an unlikely alliance between two folkloric characters—a female golem, drawn from Jewish traditions, and a genie (or "jinni") taken straight from the pages of Arabian tales—who have both been set loose on the streets of nineteenth-century Manhattan. It's also a story of dislocation, of ending up far from your home turf, and of trying to muster your powers and wits to blend in and get by.

Wecker can relate to these circumstances. She had to conjure a remote setting—New York City in Victorian times—while sitting in her home office in Pleasanton, where she lives with her husband, Kareem, and their child, Maya. I've known Wecker for years—we were both in Columbia University's mfa program—and I've always wondered how someone so down-to-earth and unassuming can create so many inspiring—and in some cases, dastardly and downright terrifying—characters.

By way of answering this question, Wecker spoke about the various acts of conjuring—and years of dogged research—that went into her book. Wecker also talked about dreary "realistic" early drafts of the project, and how a dare posed to her by a brash Columbia mfa classmate added a jolt of life to her once-moribund project, which was ultimately given a high-profile introduction to American readers on the front page of The New York Times Sunday Book Review this

summer. Here is our conversation—but first, a quick primer on Wecker's book:

A golem in Jewish folk mythology is a clay, humanoid creature, which protects and serves a Jewish community and makes use of its extraordinary strength. In Wecker's book, the golem is a female, a made-to-order bride. Her designer is an unscrupulous kabala master, and her "husband" is a slightly shady man who is bound for America. After the man dies, the unbound golem is set loose in Manhattan, where she crosses paths with a jinni, an ageless creature who assumes the appearance of a tall and imposing young man. The Golem and the Jinni is the story of their unlikely alliance, the dark forces that brought them into being, and their struggles to assimilate. It is, in other words, a classic immigrant's tale—with monsters.

Dan White: Tell me about the origins of the book.

Helene Wecker: I was working on a collection of short stories that was supposed to be my thesis for Columbia's MFA fiction-writing program—fictions based on stories from my family and my husband's family. I'm Jewish. My husband, Kareem, is Arab-American. We've known each other for a long time. It struck me how many experiences our families had in common—coming to America and being immigrants, and how that affected us. I was working on these stories, but they were not good at all. They were too close to the truth. Oh goodness, I just knew these stories too well, and they were all tied up in actual, lived truths, giving me no room to fictionalize. There didn't seem to be a lot of energy to them. They didn't sing on the page. They felt like reportage. They landed on the page and just sat there.

DW: What enabled you to get beyond that perspective? Was there a starting gun for you?

HW: Yes, there was. A friend of mine in the Columbia workshop, Amanda Pennelly, read the stories, and said, "Helene, you are a total geek. A nerd! You grew up on *Doctor Who*, and *Star Trek*, and *Star Wars*. You watched the TV shows, saw the movies, and you read the spin-off novels

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based on the shows and movies. You are always the one in class who talks about the fantastical, the genre-bending, and about using fantasy elements. Why aren't you writing like that?" It had never occurred to me! And she said, "You need to try. The next thing you have to do is take a break from this, and when we come back to the workshop, I want you to have written something fantastical about your family." It really turned on a bulb for me. That night I started writing what turned out to be this book.

DW: Did you have to overcome a genre phobia? Was it a question of "high-mindedness?"

HW: I don't know if it was that. Genre work wasn't something I looked down on. In fact, I probably came across as having a chip on my shoulder whenever anyone would try to cut it down. It was more of a tunnel vision about this project. But when Amanda said that, a side door opened up, and I walked through it. The door was there all along, in my peripheral vision. I just wasn't seeing it.

DW: And you saw the main characters standing behind the door that opened up?

How did you develop a cosmology, the mythology behind these things, and then get into the process of transforming myths into full-blooded characters?

HW: Yes. That was when they first presented themselves to me. “Okay,” I thought, “if it is going to be fantastical and I have these two cultures, these two people, a girl and a boy, then one is going to be a golem and the other a jinni, because those are the first mythical creatures you think of when you think ‘Jewish’ and ‘Arab.’” As for their actual characters, those built slowly over a long writing process.

DW: You have these two creatures that are powerful but also vulnerable. You exploit that tension not only within the characters but also in the way they interact. Both are fearsome, but they operate under constraints. They both, at various times, have overseers.

HW: Yes. I couldn’t just have these two crazy-powerful creatures rampaging around New York City, with nothing to check them. They wouldn’t be interesting. Pretty quickly it became clear that they were going to need weaknesses. The golem can easily be overwhelmed by the people around her and her instinctive need to respond to their fears and desires, so she takes a job at a bakery. It is a huge challenge not to instinctively reach out and just give people what they want, but that would give her away. She needs to live as a human in disguise, but her nature

constantly prods her to reveal herself. The jinni has been a powerful being, but he has suddenly been brought low. Even though he’s not in the flask, he is bound to human form, and he is bound to a master. He has no memory of his master, but he has an iron loop on his wrist and no idea how it got there. He is constantly pushing against his anger and against the constraints of human society.

DW: How did you develop a cosmology, the mythology behind these things, and then get into the process of transforming myths into full-blooded characters?

HW: It was a long process. There was a lot of trial and error. So one of the first things I did was sit down and look at the source material—the old golem stories and the jinni stories. I wanted to be respectful of source material, especially on the Arab-American side. I had the sense that I could fool with my own culture as much as I liked, but I wanted to be respectful of everyone else. I didn’t feel much ownership about the jinni, or about how to develop his character, so I treated that with kid gloves for a while until I got more comfortable with creating my own cosmology and taking ownership of it. In the early stages, I had this idea that there was a platonic golem and a platonic jinni, an ideal, and that I had to be faithful to that. Then you go back and look at these stories and they’re all different! In some golem stories you had to write the word *EMET*, which means “truth,” on their foreheads to activate them—and then, to kill them, you take out the first letter and it turns into *MET*, which is “death.” I thought, “Well, I can’t have her wandering around with a word on her forehead. That would be a bit of a giveaway.” As for the jinni story, I had it in my head that they were creatures of fire, so why don’t I make, as the weakness, the fact that they can be extinguished by water? The idea that they can be “put out?” Then I came across a translation of *The Arabian Nights* where someone comes to an oasis and sees a genie strolling out of a pool of water!

DW: MFA programs often get trashed in print these days—there seems to be a backlash right now, maybe because there are so many programs, and it’s still so hard to get published. But it seems to me that your book owes its very life to that program. It took shape there.

HW: I think getting the MFA was one of the best decisions I ever made. I know the old debate: are these programs worth it? Are you just putting yourself in hock for the rest of your life for no good reason? Some of that backlash ends up feeling like sour grapes. And some of it feels like the entire industry smacks of elitism, turning out writer factories and that sort of thing. I can’t speak to these higher systems, but I can say that I knew pretty much going into that it was going to be a good thing, because I do well in a classroom setting and when I’m being challenged by the people around me. It really was two years of insane writing boot camp that felt like the knob was constantly being turned up, not just on my writing but also on my reading. The way that I read books changed the way I read people in my workshop. Having yourself critiqued was fine and good and gave me great ideas, but the real work and the real benefit came from reading everyone else’s stuff in the workshop and watching them go through the writing process. Watching the decisions they were making, critiquing those decisions, then learning to turn the lens back on yourself. “You can’t have the character do *that* because it’s too obvious that the author is reaching in and poking them in a particular direction,” and so on. You grow without realizing it at first. After six months there, I looked back on my application and the stories I submitted, and I thought, “How did I get into the MFA program at all? This stuff is so terrible!” Would you need to go to an MFA program to learn this stuff? Absolutely not. Does it happen a lot more quickly when you go to the program? Heck, yes, in my experience. That is what you are paying for. That is what you are taking the time to do—to have the intensive experience of learning and developing as a writer. That was one aspect. I also think I was fortunate that particular writers in my group—yourself included—became my support group afterward, my lifeline, my drinking buddies, my peeps—especially all of us who ended up for one reason or another back in the Bay Area.

DW: Speaking of the Bay Area, how did you end up relocating from New York City to California, and how did living out here influence the final stretch of your work for the book?

HW: The move was for my husband, who got a job as a scientist at one of the labs in Livermore. The Bay Area has a large literary community, and you always have the sense that unknown strangers are sitting close by, toiling away on their books the same way you are. It would have been different if we’d ended up somewhere that didn’t feel simpatico. This book took me seven years to write, so it might have been harder when people asked, “What are you doing?”—and if I told them, “I’m working on a book,” I’d wonder if they were thinking, “She’s wasting her time.” I took a number of jobs when I was working on this book. They weren’t bad jobs. Well, some of them were bad jobs, but most of them were just the kind of jobs you do to pay the bills while you work on your book at night or on weekends—administrative positions, things like that. On one job, completely by accident, there was another administrator at the same company, a poet, who had been at Columbia with me. So there’s this little hidden and not-so-hidden community of writers in the Bay Area. Everybody’s got something on the side, right? “Here’s the startup that I’m working on in the basement when I’m not working on the thing I’m getting paid to do.” Out here you have this sense of creative entrepreneurship. It’s the land of possibility. And maybe it’ll happen for you.

Dan White’s first book, *The Cactus Eaters*, published by HarperCollins in 2008, was a Los Angeles Times “Discovery” selection. Dan has his MFA from Columbia University.