EPISODE 2: DEBORAH ELLIS

**0:00:06 Eli**: Hi there and welcome to another episode of A Little Bit of Genius, a podcast series run by Nord Anglia Education students. If you're new to the podcast, thank you for listening.

**0:00:15 Angelina:** For today's discussion we are hugely honoured to be joined by Deborah Ellis, a distinguished and internationally recognized author and activist. She has written more than 20 novels, the majority of which were revolve around how children are affected by war, poverty and oppressive regimes.

**0:00:32 Eli:** Ms Ellis has also been named a member of the Order of Canada and awarded the special commendation from the Jane Addams Children Book Award. Thank you so much for joining us today Ms Ellis, we're really happy to have you here.

**0:00:42 Deborah:** Oh, thank you, I'm really happy to be doing this.

**0:00:45 Angelina:** To start today's conversation we actually have a quote from Malala Yousafzai, it goes “one book, one pen, one child and one teacher can change the world”. I'd be really interested to hear what your initial thoughts are on this.

**0:00:59 Deborah:** Well, I think that's incredibly accurate because not only does learning and teaching help us to develop our knowledge and our skills, it also changes the way that we see ourselves. We begin to see ourselves as people who can learn, who can do things, who can reach out to the bigger world and affect change in that world, and it affects the people around us too, and they see us developing these skills, they gain a new sense of their own possibilities, and it's absolutely true.

**0:01:32 Eli:** Our next question would be as, obviously someone whose work is very closely tied to creativity, what does creativity mean to you personally?

**0:01:41 Deborah:** It's about taking what is and imagining what can be, it's also about looking at, oh gosh, it's a whole bunch of different things, and everybody is going to have a different version of it because all the things that we do in life involve creativity, whether it's math or science, or whatever it is, we have to use the creative parts of our brain to figure it all out. That's part of the excitement of being human I guess is that we get to use our brains in these really interesting ways that we don't even know what's in there yet until we start practicing those skills. So, it's about changing things, and reflecting things, but also just you know trying to figure out who we are and letting the world know that.

**0:02:27 Eli:** I'd like to actually ask a few questions about you as a writer. So, at what point in your life did you sort of develop an interest in writing, and at what point did you decide to sort of make a career out of it?

**0:02:41 Deborah:** I was kid, oh, I was like 8 or 9 years old when I decided that was what I wanted to do. I had a lot of jobs to pay the rent when I was figuring it out and I wrote a lot of books but I didn't end up publishing one until I was 39, so those are a lot of years of writing really bad books but nobody would publish.

**0:03:01 Eli:** I'd also like to ask about how kids that are looking to be writers, what path they should follow and how they should practice their writing, things they can do?

**0:03:11 Deborah:** A couple of things, one is you need some quiet time, you needed time when there's nothing plugged into your ears, when there's no voices kind of coming at you, when you can just sit and be alone and have some quiet time for your thoughts. Second thing is get out a pen and a notebook, and I recommend doing it by hand but if you do it by computer and that's where you’re more comfortable go for it, but just get used to writing without worrying about it, have fun with it, give yourself 20 minutes a day to sit and write and not think about it. Don't care if it's good or bad, usually I write about 20 pages of garbage before I get to one page that is good, and just accept that it's gonna maybe take a little bit to get to something brilliant, or it might not you might get lucky the first time, but have fun with it explore it, and read a lot. Read everything you can and read hard stuff to give you a really good feeling for what the language can do.

**0:04:08 Eli:** What was it like having your book be adapted into a movie, obviously there were some big names working on that movie, I think the executive producer was Angelina Jolie, I'm not sure but yeah, so what was it like? It must have been unreal.

**0:04:25 Deborah:** It was pretty exciting. I was very honoured to have this amazing group of people take on the project and so they spent a lot of time working on the artwork, and different countries contributed to the project, it was very internationally done and I remember going to one of the initial showings that was held for the cast and the crew, in a big movie theatre in Toronto, and most of the people in the theatre were Afghan Canadians because they'd used Afghan Canadian casts, and musicians and so forth, and a lot of people would talk to me about how the story in The Breadwinner was very much the story in their own family and it was just really, really cool. I was very honoured by the whole process.

**0:05:13 Angelina:** So, not many writers can say that their books have actually been turned into movies. When you watched it, was it different to what you pictured in your head, and how was it eye opening to see a different perspective of how someone perceived your book?

**0:05:27 Deborah:** I thought it was beautifully, beautifully done and the story of people surviving in a time of wars or hardship is in many ways such a universal story, so it's based in Afghanistan but it could be in you know so many other places as well. I loved it that people took it as their own and then put their own stamp on it and I thought that is an amazing job.

**0:05:51 Eli:** To lean on from that, this is a question I've asked a lot of the guests, but how do you think that having a creative outlet can help children that are developing? How do you think that having a creative outlet can help them grow and learn?

**0:06:03 Deborah:** Well, whether it's a creative outlet, or whatever it is, if a kid has something that's theirs, that can't be taken away from them, whether it's writing, or an interest in geology, or sports, or music, or something that is absolutely theirs, then it doesn't really matter as much what's going on in the world around them. If the adult world around them is letting them down, if there's like other kinds of stress going on in their life, if they can retreat to the study of geology, or to books, or to something that is theirs, that they love and are passionate about, then the rest of the world can't do as much damage to the kid because they've got their own thing that is stable no matter what is going on around them.

**0:06:51 Angelina:** So, when we were speaking about creativity, you've written actually more than 20 novels, so what inspires you to have those ideas in order to make those books?

**0:07:03 Deborah:** Well, I've always wanted to be a writer, so that's always been my thing, no matter what else was going on in the world, or in my life, that was always the thing that sustained me. So, over the years I've been able to meld both my love of writing and stories with my desire to see the world be made into a kinder place for everybody. The kind of work that I generally do is I look at things that they, like if I write for young people, young people have a fairly small world, generally, it's a family and school, if they're lucky, and it just kind of the world in their immediate area, but the bigger adult world intrudes upon that child's world in so many different ways, sometimes not in good ways, and sometimes in good ways. So, I look at the big events of the world that have been going on, and look at how that those big events impact children, because children have no control over those big events but they have to live with the results of it, so it for me it's looking at our decisions, how we make decisions, how we can make better decisions, and to do that we need to understand the impact of our decisions and the power that we have to make better decisions.

**0:08:17 Angelina:** So, your books go through many topics that some people are very sensitive about. Do you think that your books are more directed towards adults or children?

**0:08:26 Deborah:** I write for young people, and now I'm not a parent, if I were a parent and had children of my own, I might feel differently about it. I don't know, I hope I wouldn’t. We tend to think that we need to protect children, but only some children, like some children are like really valuable, and have to be protected, and you know clothed in feathers and kept safe, and other children there are, they're disposable. They're children working and in all kinds of horrific labour conditions that are just killing them, and we don't care because they're disposable children. So, I think if we're going to have a world where we do these things to children, then that should be reflected in literature for children, and if we're not prepared to explain to children what we're doing in the world, then we shouldn't be doing it. If we're ashamed to write about it, then we shouldn't be doing it. Plus, I think kids are pretty smart, I think they know when they're being lied to, they know when things are not really quite what they seem to be, and I think having the access to information about what's going on in the world both sort of acknowledges and respects that intelligence, but it also says to them that they have a role to play in what they want to do next, it's about choices that we make.

**0:09:44 Eli:** As you mentioned, you write most of your books for children, so how important do you think it is to inform children and young adults about deep societal issues, and what's the best way to do this? Perhaps even besides books, and what can parents do?

**0:09:59 Deborah:** I think there can be done in all different kinds of ways and it starts with, really, the basics of how we treat each other and what we decide that we will accept some other people treating us, and what we how we decide what we are going to accept in the way that we treat other people. And that comes down to how we live in our homes, how we live in our neighbourhoods, how we react to people who have less power than us. What parents do, what we do is the whole adult community, and then having access to news and to information about what's happening, in the bigger world for sure, but also in the world just immediately around us, who's in our neighbourhood, who's hungry in our area and what can we do about it. I think that's really important and it also this is a really great sense of belonging to something which I think is very valuable.

**0:10:51 Host:** You're listening to a little bit of genius a podcast run by Nord Anglia Education students. Listen to the next episode to hear from Lord David Puttnam about his journey, from playing tennis at Wimbledon, to becoming an Oscar-winning film producer, “I've learned more from my failures than I've learned from my successes, definitely”

**0:11:10 Angelina:** So, I've heard that a lot of your books are actually based on places that you visited, are there any issues that you recognize there that help you write your books or do you research them yourself?

**0:11:22 Deborah:** Yeah, I research. I do a lot of research, I travel to where I'm going to write about, and I spend as much time and meet with as many people as possible. One of the things that I've learned is the universality of human experience, that there are things that we all have in common as human beings which makes the job of a writer easier because, you know, we all have things that are in common no matter where we live, or what period of history we've lived in, we feel pain, we feel hunger, we feel joy, we fall in love, we fall out of love, all that stuff is common to us as humans. I've learned that the things that divide us are smaller than the things that bring us together. Also, the incredible variety of human experience is just mind-blowing and really, it's really fascinating and something to be celebrated.

**0:12:16 Eli:** How exactly does your research process go from start to finish, before you have like the idea of a book and how does it go step by step to the publishing of the book?

**0:12:25 Deborah:** Well, the one that I'm just finishing up now takes place in Guyana and it's about suicide which is a huge problem around the world, and so I was down in Guyana with a group called Mental Health Without Borders and meeting with people there and learning about how people manage when they're in trouble, when they're an emotional trouble, and don't have a lot of resources to help them out with that in terms of doctors, and so forth. So, I knew I wanted to do something to support that organization’s work, so I was down there meeting with people and the story just kind of evolved out of that. It's kind of a process of figuring out first what you're interested in, and then what might be possible in terms of research, and going and doing it, and then working, and working at it until the story finally emerges, and then you just keep trying to make the story better.

**0:13:18 Angelina:** So, speaking of your research and the certain countries that you go to get your information, is there a certain country that you haven't been to yet that you would like to go to and discover more about?

**0:13:29 Deborah:** I've always wanted to go to North Korea. I'm hoping that one day that'll still be able to happen, but who knows right, there's like so many places around the world that are just so incredible and the world is always changing and evolving, and people are doing such interesting things around the world right now that you'll be good to meet with more, and more people and find out what's going on.

**0:13:51 Eli:** Jumping back to your books once again, how does your approach go with children? Writing for children obviously it's a very hard topic to get right, when you're writing for adults there's lots of different paths you can take, but obviously, you mentioned that children aren't stupid, they know more than we think they know, so how do you write in a way that makes things easy to access but informative and provoking deep thought, if that makes sense?

**0:14: Deborah:** A couple of things that when you're writing for children that I've learned, one is that you have to keep the child's eye at the centre of things, what would the kid know, how would they know it, how would they understand it, where would they put it into their framework of their life. So, if you're talking about AIDS and how much would that child know about AIDS HIV, how would they know it, how would they understand it, because you don't want to lecture anybody in a book because that just gets boring and tedious, you want to have it be a sense of experience, how does a child experience this situation? You have to leave the kid at the end of the book with a sense of hope, the child has to know that the characters at the end of the book, even if things are not really all going right, but they have to be at least a little stronger, a little wiser, a little more able to deal with whatever challenge is coming next. I think that's probably the main difference between literature for adults and literature for children, I feel you absolutely have to leave the child with a sense of hope at the end of it. Other than I think it's up to the skills of the writer, in terms of how they deal with different kinds of topics. There's some [topics] that I don't feel competent enough to touch, I defer to better writers who can do that.

**0:15:41 Angelina:** So, speaking of adding hope at the end of your books, I've actually read one of them which is, I think one of the most recognized, it's The Breadwinner, and I've also watched the movie, but at the end the girl is looking at the mountain and she sees a good glimmer of light. Is there a reason that you think that adding the sense of hope at the end is important? How does that help prove your point because some other writers, they like to not make a happy ending just to further enforce and make it more serious so people realize that you can't always hope, so why do you incorporate that in yours?

**0:16:17 Deborah:** Well, I think we absolutely have to continue to have hope of some degree, and sometimes we have to work at it, right, because sometimes they just lose it, and we have to try to work hard to gain it back again because that's what keeps us going from day, to day, to day, to day, even if everything else is lousy around us.

**0:16:37 Eli:** I have a little bit of a personal question, but I've heard that you were threatened by the Taliban after giving a speech at a function for the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan.

**0:16:49 Deborah:** Well, the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan, or RAWA, are an amazing group of women doing really interesting things. Now, I met them in the Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan, really working hard on protesting the Taliban, educating people, finding ways to get women income in the camps, incredible group of folks. And they held an International Women's Day event, I think it was them, and I got to say a few words, I was so honoured they said “You're a foreigner, come here, please say hello from your country”, so I got to say hello from Canada at this amazing event. I think the thing about this threat that I was issued is, I had Canadian passport, I had money, I had way out of there, the more difficult situation is for the women who had to stay there, and the time that I was in Pakistan, at that time they were, you know, you hear about women being killed, and teachers being assassinated and of course inside Afghanistan that was happening all the time. So, I was fine, the greatest threat was for the folks who had to stay there.

**0:17:56 Angelina:** That's really empathetic for you to say, and not only look at something from your perspective. So, you're a peace activist, and the books that you write they always highlight and represent all the things that maybe some kids are never educated about, so how do you recommend kids to get more involved, other than just reading about or seeing it on social media.

**0:18:17 Deborah:** I think we need to do a couple of things, we need to open our eyes, look around what's going on in our immediate world, so you really open our eyes to see it, and that can be a struggle because we go through our day and we're busy, and kids have tons of pressure on them today, and not a lot of room in their schedule to just kind of sit, and think, and look, without people sort of at them all the time. So, I encourage kids to find some quiet time every day, and some time when they can just look around at the world and think about things, and then gets back to what I was saying before, about we need to find things that bring us joy, and then we find that and then we look at the world around all of that. If you like sports, can all kids play sports, if not, why not, and if that's the case, what can you do to encourage other kids being able to do the thing that you love to do, or music or hang with animals, or whatever it is so the information is out there I think kids are hungry for that information, and I think that they should be tenacious in seeking it out, and demanding to have it.

**0:19:29 Angelina:** So, I heard that you're a philanthropist, and threw out your books when you donate the money that you get to certain organizations. So, not only do you make other people feel a sense of hope, or feel better, how does that make you feel personally, when you do things like that?

**0:19:46 Deborah:** In my own life, I have no capacity for raising money. I'm not a good organizer, I'm just not good at it, so the fact that my books can raise money, I'm just overjoyed about that because it's something that I would never be able to do, so it feels like a bonus to me.

**0:20:10 Angelina:** Your books actually inspire a lot of people, but is there a book that you actually have a favourite of, or like a favourite author?

**0:20:16 Deborah:** There’s a Canadian woman called Jean Little whose books I read when I was a kid, loved them, and I still looked at them as models today. So, anything you can find by Jean Little, that's great, my other favourite book is The Plague by Albert Camus. It talks about people making choices in difficult times, and it’s one I read every couple of years.

**0:20:43 Eli:** Those books in particular, and any other books that you read, you mentioned that it's really important for children looking to write to read often, like how much do you think that those books have affected your writing, and your writing style?

**0:20:56 Deborah:** I can't even imagine even maybe how to answer that question because the books that we read, especially that we read when we're young, they become a part of us because when we were young we tend to reread our favourites over, and over, and over again, more so that we do when we get old, I've noticed that, and so they become such a part of our brains. The language and the things that I've read, they're just kind of a part of me, as they will be a part of all of your listeners. Your favourite books will become, well, they'll become part of who you are, and I think it's pretty special.

**0:21:32 Angelina:** You were saying that when you were making the decision for being a writer, you actually got into the, we could say industry, a bit late, so what did you do during the hard times when you couldn't decide when to start, or nobody wanted to publish your books?

**0:21:47 Deborah:** Oh, well I kept writing. I knew that I was either gonna publish a book or die, I just didn't know which would come first. And I entered a lot of contests, I wrote a lot of books, and I went to work. I had to make money to, like I said, to pay the rent so that's kind of what life, I mean life was like that for me, that’s what I did.

**0:22:10 Angelina:** I'm not sure if I'm reciting this perfectly, but I believe that you said one of these really memorable quotes it went, “To the children that we made braver than they had to be”, I believe, so of course that's your own quote, so instead of asking what you think about it, what gave you the idea to say that or make that famous quote?

**0:22:33 Deborah:** Adults have one job, and that's to create a world where children can live, that's it, that's our only job, and since we haven't done our job, in many cases, very well, the young people who come after us are having to take care of themselves and take care of the world in a way that they shouldn't have to. In order to do that they have to be braver than they're supposed to be, they should be able to just be kids, but we make them do that, so that’s where that came from.

**0:23:05 Angelina:** So, were there any specific people that came up to you and told you how your book affected them personally, and how did that make you feel?

**0:23:14 Deborah:** Yeah, I've been very lucky to have had feedback from some folks, who're talking about the impact of the books. I think that's the great thing about books, right, and we can pick them up and sometimes they speak to us, and if they don’t, we can put them down and find another book. So, if any of your listeners are not quite sure what their favourite book is, if they don't really think they like reading, just keep trying because there's a book out there that absolutely belongs to you, and that you'll just pick it up and you'll just know that this is a story for you. So, on a hopeful note, there's so many stories out there you'll find your right one. Well, I've talked a lot about the things that are important to me, how about you two? What are the issues that are affecting you too the most, and that you hear about from your contemporaries?

**0:24:00 Eli:** Well, personally, like you mentioned before, I think global warming is a huge issue, I mean we're seeing the effects of that like first-hand, and things are only going to get worse from here. It's something that's going to affect me, it’s going to affect my children, my grandchildren, I mean the oil reserves are supposed to run out within my lifetime, and it's honestly really scary to think about that. So, climate change and global warming are something I'm certainly very passionate about, among other things, but that's certainly an issue that hits close to home for me.

**0:24:31 Angelina:** I often see it a lot on social media, a bunch of statistics, things about how around 2050, things are gonna be irreversible, and I think it's really painful to see because the world is giving everybody a chance, and it's like we're just taking and putting it in a shredder. We have a chance to live, to elongate our lives, to save our world, but it's often overlooked by economic problems and money by the people in power.

**0:25:01 Eli:** Deborah, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us today. It's been fascinating and really enlightening.

**0:25:08 Angelina:** So, unfortunately that's all the time we have for this episode, so thank you again for sharing your thoughts and you've been amazing guest.

**0:25:16 Deborah:** Awesome, thank you so much. You guys keep well.

**0:25:19 Eli:** Once again, this podcast is brought to you by Nord Anglia Education students. If you want to learn more about Nord Anglia Education, you can visit us online at www.nordangliaeducation.com.

**0:25:30 Angelina:** We hope you've enjoyed this episode and if you want a little bit more genius, subscribe to this podcast.

**0:25:37 Eli:** We'll be back again soon. Thanks again for listening and have a great day, goodbye.