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Cressida Cowell [00:00:14] Hello there, I'm Cressida Cowell, author and illustrator of How to Train Your Dragon, Wizards of Once, and Which Way to Anywhere, my new book series. And I'm so glad you've joined me for the Reading is Magic Festival. Sometimes things that you do or say have a way of turning into something bigger than you imagined and carrying on longer than you thought they would like the Reading is Magic Festival, which started in 2020 when I was the Waterstones Children's Laureate. It was inspired by my belief that reading is magic, and magic is for everyone. All the events during the festival explore the themes of the charter I wrote when I was the laureate and celebrate all the things you have the right to: creativity, having a planet to read about, seeing yourselves in a book, reading for the joy of it, and getting brilliant advice about books and about reading from people whose job it is to do that. I hope you enjoy this event.

Lauren Layfield [00:01:33] Everyone welcome along to another exciting event at the Reading is Magic Festival. It's Lauren here. I've got my black top on, I've got a pink bobble and I'm in front of my Reading is Magic bunting today. And did you know that we have all got a superpower? And that superpower is called empathy, and it allows us to understand each other and connect with one another. So to help us understand a little bit more about this, we're going to be joining Paul Jenkins from Empathy Lab, along with authors Sharna Jackson and Helen Rutter to find out more about empathy, what it is and how it can help us. So let's go.

Paul Jenkins [00:02:17] Hello, everybody. Welcome to Reading is Magic and particularly today, reading for empathy. My name's Paul Jenkins. I'm from Empathy Lab. I also work as a poet. Today I am wearing a black t shirt, a snazzy black and white waistcoats. I'm a white man with brown hair and a bit of a bald spot and wear my rainbow rimmed glasses so I can see my computer. Also joining me is Sharna.

Sharna Jackson [00:02:41] I am an author and I am a black woman with big curly hair, red lipstick today, a yellow shirt with a weird little safety pin in its collar. And also with us is Helen.

Helen Rutter [00:02:55] There's nothing weird about that safety pin whatsoever. It's utterly fabulous, Sharna. My name is Helen Rutter, and I am also an author. I'm sitting in my little writing room at the moment, which is basically a shed in the garden that's got very fancy geometric wallpaper on the walls, which makes everybody's eyes go a bit funny when they're on Zoom. I'm wearing a black t shirt and I've got long brown hair and that's it, I think, from me, Paul.

Paul Jenkins [00:03:22] Excellent. Well, today we're talking about reading for empathy. And empathy is an amazing thing. It's what we call our human superpower. It's the ability to stand in somebody else's shoes or look through their eyes, which kind of feels a bit weird. But it means that we feel the things that other people are sometimes feeling. And books are an amazing way of showing that. And authors such as Sharna and Helen have got brilliant ways of showing that empathy. And the best thing about empathy is that, first of all, you can feel it. Then you think about what you're going to do with that knowledge, and then you can actually do something about it and you can change the world a little bit at a time. Tell us a little bit about your books and the and the characters in them. We'll start with Helen and then we'll go to Sharna. Helen, you want to talk about your latest book, The Boy Whose Wishes Came True. How did your characters show empathy in this book?

Helen Rutter [00:04:16] Well. So in this story, this is a story about Archie Crumb. Who's here. Archie Crumb is going through a really tough time at everything. He feels like he's not good at anything. And that feeling comes because he's struggling at home. He's looking after his mum. His mum's not. She's she's really struggling herself. And I think that everything once he starts to feel like everything's going wrong, that feeling can spiral. And then it kind of infects all of his life and he feels like he's just not good enough. And so when his wishes start coming true, it's like a small little moment that he can grasp onto where he can start actually getting momentum in a different way towards a different thing, towards hope and towards happiness and towards all of those things. And hopefully, hopefully my readers can empathise with Archie because I as a writer, I feel like it's like I'm so lucky because it's kind of my job to practise empathy. And I think you do need to practise it. It's like working out. It's like a muscle that you need to actually actively work on. And I have to do that because when I sit down and write characters, that's what I kind of have to do. Even if you don't really want to on that particular day or you don't feel like it, you are not feeling it. You actually have to sit and try and empathise with the characters you're writing, which is brilliant. And hopefully, you know, if the more I empathise as I'm writing, the more you can empathise when you're reading.

Paul Jenkins [00:05:47] That's brilliant and all of your characters in that book and these and it's an amazing story about wishes coming true right? I mean, who wouldn't want to wish for that much ice cream then? I'm not going to spoil that. I'm not going to spoil the story. But who wouldn't want to wish for that much ice cream? Go and read that book, everybody. It's an ice cream fest. Sharna, now you've got a very, very slightly different kind of take on things in *The Good Turn*. Your characters are almost built for empathy. Aren't they? That's their main reason for doing a lot of stuff.

Sharna Jackson [00:06:14] They are. They are. So *The Good Turn* is about three friends who are neighbours and are school friends and they're led by a young girl, Josephine. Josephine Williams here. My little lovely Josephine and Josephine is a girl who's obsessed with Googling and finding out facts. And one evening she's Googling the origin of a name and she comes across someone else called Josephine. A Josephine Holloway, who was a real lady who lived in Tennessee in America in the 1940s and fifties, and started a scout troop, the first scout troop for young black girls when everybody was segregated, meaning that people who were different colours couldn't live and work together. So Josephine, our Josephine, inspired by this, starts her own scout troop with her friends Margot and Wesley. And while they're friends, they have very different home lives. So Josephine is very strong, but she is secretly quite upset by a new arrival. Her mum is having a baby and I think she always wanted to be an only, so she's a bit shaken by that. And Margot has more money than the other two, but she's very lonely. Her dad is always away working and Wesley has a very full house. His dad's not around anymore and his mom's not well, and he has three younger siblings that he has to take care of. But they're all coming into this group to do something very, very kind indeed. I don't want to spoil it, but they really do put themselves into somebody else's shoes and really do their best to sort out what is a terrible situation. So, yes, lots of empathy in this book. Definitely. And it was so interesting hearing what Helen said. She's completely right that it's our job to be empathetic. And if we weren't, we'd be creating some pretty basic, not very good or interesting characters if we weren't doing that. So we are very lucky that we have to be thinking about other people and how they feel constantly.

Paul Jenkins [00:08:20] And in your two books, I love the fact that when I read your two books, there's a bit of a crossover there because you've got two people that care for a parent, and that must be really good for somebody who is in that situation to read that

book and go, You know what? There are other people like me out there who are looking after parents. Why did you decide on those ideas to get those characters into the books.

Sharna Jackson [00:08:41] For those reasons that you describe. For me, it's important that people who are going through certain situations or don't feel that they're seen in books are able to be seen. Well, for empathy reasons, absolutely. Because once you see yourself, more things can be possible. You can dream bigger or you can feel comfort in knowing the other people are going through a similar thing. And then for those who aren't in the position but are reading the books, they can begin, begin to say, okay, I can understand why this person may act the way they do because of what's going on, you know, beneath the surface or at home or, you know, something that people don't want to talk about out loud.

Paul Jenkins [00:09:28] And Helen, what about what about you? What was the decision to make Archie in that particular situation he is with his mum?

Helen Rutter [00:09:34] Well, because so in my my first book, *The Boy Who Made Everyone Laugh*. I'd used stuff that was happening in kind of in my real life currently with my son. And then once I realised I had to write a second book, I was like 'Oh no I've used I've used everything, what I am going to do?' And so then you have to delve a little bit further down. That's what happens with book two. You really go there and you have to start thinking a little bit deeper. And so a lot of it, a lot of it came from my childhood. I went further back and my mom was ill when I was young. When I was Archie's age, my mom was ill through all of my teenage years and I never really knew that that was I don't think the term young carer existed when I was young at all. And so I don't think that was it. There was no sense that there was anybody else out there dealing. I had no idea that there were all the kids out there, you know, who had to you know, I did parent and that was not like other people's parents that so I just thought, oh, it's just, you know, it's just annoying and, you know, and I was just kind of like I used to kind of try and make things up and pretend that it wasn't the way it was and all of those things. And anyway, once I started looking at that, I was like, Oh, maybe there's a story here. And so, yeah, so then, I mean, once I've gone through all of my life and all of my children's lives and my husband's, I don't know what I'm going to do.

Paul Jenkins [00:11:00] Well, we'll have to come up with some stories for you, Helen. You can write about being Sharna. It'll be fine. Thank you. Now we've got we've got this human superpower between us, this use of empathy. Now, you mentioned earlier how it's something you've got to practise, and if you practise it, you can kind of build that power. And we were really lucky, this empathy day, which happened in June, to launch the Empathy Superpower Challenge. Now we're going to do some of those bits and pieces from the Superpower Challenge, just three different activities that you can do to kind of help yourself understand characters a little bit better and understand the world around you. And so I've invited Helen and Sharna to make the empathy superpower x ray glasses. Now I'm going to take my my rainbow rimmed glasses. Okay, for a second, because you can see how ridiculous mine look. And I'm going to invite Helen and and Sharna to join me in putting on their empathy glasses, because, I mean, look, look, I mean, these are amazing. These have been designed by Jen Carney. And they actually the good thing is that I can put my glasses over the top and still see everybody. You've got... How have you gone for yours, Sharna, What was it?

Sharna Jackson [00:12:10] Well, I was thinking about being in the theatre when I was making mine and I eschewed the stems and I thought I would go for little, little chopsticks

as my support. I was feeling fancy when I did it. I had a massive, massive assist from my son. And so lots of big thanks to him. And it was a really nice thing to do together, actually, because we talked a lot about empathy, empathy and how we could both do better ourselves. So, yeah, it's lovely.

Paul Jenkins [00:12:45] It's a nice thing to do with a group of people, isn't it, sitting colouring in things and cutting things out and sticking it, it's great. And Helen you've gone full colour. We've got some white patches on ours, you've got full colour in yours.

Helen Rutter [00:12:55] Now Sharna, how are you still managing to look glamorous with those spectacles on? I'm really, really upset and jealous about that. Mine. I mean, there is I'm so far from glamour and I stuck mine on some sunglasses, so I can't really see a thing, but I can see enough to know that I look utterly ridiculous.

Sharna Jackson [00:13:16] No, you look amazing.

Paul Jenkins [00:13:18] We are a team of empathy, superheroes between us. I think the good thing about this, I mean, this is not just a bit of fun. This is this is for for anyone who thinks, you know what? I need to think about how I'm going to show my empathy. It really does help you focus and think right now I've got these on. You know, what is somebody else feeling around me? What is somebody else, you know, doing what are they thinking? And you try and put yourself in their situation. And that's the thing: it helps us look. We can take these off now because I think possibly, oh, there we go. And I think once you've got your empathy glasses on, you start to spot the empathy around you. You start to see the empathy, particularly in the books that you're reading. Now, obviously, I've got two recommendations for everybody, I hope, and one of them is *The Boy Whose Wishes Came True* by the wonderful Helen Rutter, and one of them is *The Good Turn* by the wonderful Sharna Jackson. Two books which I've read and loved and enjoyed. And I'm going to do my empathy power pose because these books give us that empathy superpower. Now I'm going to choose the most ridiculous empathy superpower pose that I can such as this. And that will be my empathy power pose. I wonder, Helen and Sharna, could you and let's start with Sharna. Could you give me your best empathy power pose and explain to me what your book is that you've chosen to recommend to everybody?

Sharna Jackson [00:14:39] Okay. My empathy power pose. I haven't practised this properly. It is this. It's this.

Paul Jenkins [00:14:45] Awesome.

Sharna Jackson [00:14:46] Extreme listening. Very good. I'll Add another arm to it. I don't know. Wow. Extreme listening and my book I've chosen is a book I'm hoping lots of people have read. I think they have because it's a very popular one, but is *A Kind of Spark* by Elle McNicoll. And it's a brilliant book about young Addie who is autistic and is bullied in her school and she is working towards putting up a memorial for witches who were the witch trials that happened in her hometown. So I don't want to say too much to spoil it, but it's just a wonderful, wonderful, wonderful story. And I really like and love Elle McNicoll as a person and as an author. And I think she's brilliant. And the work that she does to champion neurodiversity is fantastic. So this is my amazing book and here is my pose again.

Paul Jenkins [00:15:51] Excellent. We're going to do all of our power poses with our books in a second just to show we are a superpower team. Helen, what can you recommend for us?

Helen Rutter [00:15:59] And the one that I picked, I was hovering over A Kind of Spark as well. So I'm glad I didn't pick that one. I was looking at the shelves and this one popped out. It's funny, isn't it? Sometimes books that can be a little bit quieter than other books, but for some reason it popped out and I read a little while ago and I remember thinking, Oh gosh, I really I really empathised with that character. And it's called See You in the Cosmos by Jack Cheng. And it was an utterly lovely story with some similar themes about about a mum who was, who needed care and looking after. So my power pose is this.

Paul Jenkins [00:16:30] Awesome. Well, I mean, there's a whole library of books there. And as you can see, my my cats decided to get in on the action. She wants it. She wants to recommend a whole bunch of things. Henry. Say hello to everybody at home. That's alright, henry. It's a beautiful little tortoiseshell cat. It comes on every single zoom call I ever have. Now we're going to do all of our pow pow sites on. Helen, I think you're going to have to either mould your power poses together or choose one of your three. All right. I'm going to give us a countdown from three. And then so we get three, two, one, and then strike our power poses with our books, if that's possible. Okay, here we go. Three, two, one. And that, ladies and gentlemen, is how you form a superhero team with all of that empathy. It's unbelievable the amount of empathy you can get in your classroom. I saw whole classes holding books at a time. Parades of Empathy Power Poses on Empathy Day this year, and it'll be great to see everybody at home. Maybe you could do that as well and get your kind of empathy superpower poses together. But I mentioned earlier on that there's a last bit to empathy and it's the doing bit. It's that that feeling that we should do something. It's the difference between sympathy and empathy. Right. You know, if you see someone fall over on the playground, you could stand there going, oh, that must do it. Oh, you're right. Yeah. And then not do anything about it. But if you see someone trip. But there's all sorts of things you could do. Hey, you can help them up and help them be. You can have a look and see what helps what tripped them up in the first place. If there's a big hole in the floor. Get someone to fix the hole. There's all sorts of things that we can do to make the world just a little bit better for everybody. And so we make empathy resolutions. And the really good thing is that there's an empty resolutions template for a poster. Now, this is my empathy resolution. I have decided that I am going to listen more and try not to fix it all the time. And that's my, that's something that I do all the time. Somebody tells me that, you know, they say, oh, I just need to talk to you, Paul. And by the time they've told me, I go, 'Oh, you could do this, you could do this, you can do this, you do this.' And I try and fix their problems. And they didn't come to me because they wanted their problems fixed. They come to me because somebody they wanted me to to hear what they needed to say. And I was wondering, Helen, what was your empathy resolution that you've made for yourself?

Helen Rutter [00:18:51] So my empathy resolution. I hadn't thought of this until this morning, and I walked, I walked up to school. It's about a mile up to school. And it was raining very heavily this morning. And we were trying to cross a road, a very busy road, and there was lots and lots of cars and we were getting splashed with water and it was all, you know. And then a car stopped. It's quite a fast road and the car stopped and waited for us to cross. But on the other side, the cars kept going for ages and ages and ages. And I kept looking at the guy who'd stopped going, 'Oh, I don't know what to do. Sorry.' And he was like, 'Don't worry.' And my daughter was like, 'Oh, he's waiting for a really long time'. And I was like, 'Yeah, he's really waiting for a really long time.' And he had to sit there. And

I thought he was just going to go like, 'Oh, sorry', and keep going. But he waited and waited and waited. And when eventually somebody stopped to let us go. It was a really nice moment. And I thought, that is what I need to do. I need to be like him and be more patient because he was empathising with, oh, it was getting wet in the rain and that's why he was patient. And I think sometimes I can be a very impatient person. And so actually that doesn't allow me the space to empathise sometimes. And I think sometimes when we slow down and are more patient, we have more time to put ourselves in other people's shoes.

Paul Jenkins [00:20:06] I think that's a brilliant one. We all need to be a little bit more patient from time to time. Sharna, what's your empathy resolution?

Sharna Jackson [00:20:15] So, I live on a boat in a city called Rotterdam. And Rotterdam is in the Netherlands. And in the Netherlands they speak Dutch here and I don't speak Dutch because one, I'm a bit lazy and two as soon as I start to speak Dutch or try to, people just recognise the English and then just switch because they also want to practise English with me. So what I feel I'm missing out on or what I like to do is listen like you said, well, let's listen more. And I like to listen to my neighbours more because we sometimes have a language barrier, especially with the older neighbours here who do come round and I can help, we can help each other, but I don't get to really understand them a lot. Um, so my resolution is not to simply learn Dutch, which I mean I should, but it's to cultivate curiosity. And by cultivating curiosity, I mean doing lots of little things that make me more open to being empathetic. So one of them is learning Dutch. One of them is when I get back to England, is doing some volunteering in the area that I used to live in so I can meet more people. And the third one is pledging to do some school visits at no cost, so I can meet schools that I can never go to before to talk about empathy and things. So cultivating curiosity is quite a lofty, big umbrella for lots of little different practical things that I would like to do. But yeah, I think that the key one is learning Dutch, so I can be of more value to the community that I'm in here now.

Paul Jenkins [00:22:06] Well, I think that's an amazing thing. And those schools must be really pleased. I'm going to be more empathetic to the builders who've started doing things outside my house during this call, which you've heard. If you've had lots of beeping in the background. That's because they're building houses out the back of my house. I got to be more empathetic towards them as well. It's been lovely to talk to you both today. It's really sad that we can't sort of carry on with this. But the good news is, is that everybody at home, you can do all of these things yourself. You could make your empathy superpower glasses. You could, you know, you could recommend books to each other. You could make yourself your empathy resolution. And there's actually six other activities on the Empathy Lab website. If you want to do all of them, you could do the superpower challenge, complete them. You actually get a certificate from Michael Rosen if you've done that, and that's quite impressive. So you can do all of those things. Just head to the Empathy Lab website and look for the superpower challenge and the links to all of those things and it will be available from the Reading is Magic Festival as well. I really hope you've enjoyed today's session. I want to say thank you very much to Helen Rutter.

Helen Rutter [00:23:08] Thank you so much. It's been absolutely lovely to talk to you both and to talk to everybody who's listening.

Paul Jenkins [00:23:13] Excellent. And thank you very much to Sharna Jackson.

Sharna Jackson [00:23:16] Thank you. This was such a pleasure. Like you said, I wish we could keep going.

Paul Jenkins [00:23:22] We all get emotional. There's too much empathy in the room. I'm just going to say goodbye to everybody. We'll see you very soon.

All [00:23:28] Bye bye.

Lauren Layfield [00:23:37] Oh, thank you guys for helping grow our empathy superpowers. I'm so looking forward to checking out some of those book resolutions. Oh, by the way, we would love to see your empathy glasses and resolutions and display them in our creators' galleries and do get them into us. And remember to check out the Reading is Magic Festival website as well for loads more lovely events.