

A CONVERSATION WITH HELENA HAYWOODE HENRY

1. Why did you choose the medium of reality TV for the premise of the book? Why was that important?

"This is going to be great television. I will say that."

—President Donald Trump, February 28, 2025

I used reality TV for this book's premise because *Last Chance LIVE!* is, in part, a mirror that reflects America. The pairing of reality TV and the criminal justice system in *Last Chance LIVE!* seemed like a natural progression of our real-world existence; it reflects America's cultural addiction to television and America's historical relationship with flawed celebrities. *Last Chance LIVE!* debuts in an era in which the American electorate chose a reality TV show–like presidential administration—twice. The stakes for America are as high as for any season finale, as our choice might usher in the end of the American democratic experiment.

A reality TV show premise was important to the story of *Last Chance LIVE!* because the book is primarily about children who are floundering in America; these are children America generally does not recognize or value unless their lives are offered for entertainment—in social media reels of comedy routines or dances, inspirational sports narratives, or sensational crime stories. Though the book is fiction, realism was important to me, and a reality TV show was the most realistic way that American society would encounter and engage with this subset of children—and, perhaps, the only way America would truly see them.

2. Are there books or authors that you feel your book is in conversation with?

Last Chance LIVE! continues the vital dialogues sparked by Jason Reynolds's *Long Way Down*, Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give*, Nic Stone's *Dear Justyce*, Bryan Stevenson's *Just Mercy*, and *Break to You* by Neal Shusterman, Debra Young, and Michelle Knowlden. My novel asks questions about American society and human nature that I don't have answers to: Are there clear lines between the life-altering crimes of *Last Chance LIVE!*'s contestants and the mundane, everyday wrongs we all commit? If there is a difference between criminals and the rest of us, is it the result of our circumstances or our character? Would we make different choices in the contestants' shoes? Is the primary injustice depicted in *Last Chance LIVE!* systemic or individual? I invite readers to debate these questions and draw their own conclusions.

3. Are there parallels between the book's commentary and America's obsession with consuming true crime?

Last Chance LIVE! examines America's obsession with true crime stories. Our obsession comes from how these stories hijack our brains with a question—did he (usually, he) commit the crime? But there's a

second, more introspective question we explore that drives much of our fascination with true crime—would I do it if I was in his position? We ponder this question because beneath the trappings of our education, occupations, and associations, we often see part of ourselves reflected in the true crime story's villain. We recognize the darkness they harbor—because we harbor it too. Our wrongdoing seems inconsequential in comparison to the horrors depicted in true crime stories, but all types of wrongdoing springs from the same source: our dark, human hearts. I view the protagonist of *Last Chance LIVE!*, Eternity Price, as an everyman character because she embodies this truth about humankind—our shared darkness. We might think we're very different from her—but in some important ways, we are all Eternity Price.

4. Can you talk about why your book might resonate with viewers of the hit show *Squid Game*?

Though I wrote *Last Chance LIVE!* years before *Squid Game* premiered, the stories pair surprisingly well—both depict game-style solutions for broken real-world systems. *Last Chance LIVE!* and *Squid Game* offer a chance of victory to participants who might not otherwise survive without these games. The competitions don't let us viewers pretend that capitalism or the death penalty are fair and humane—they force us to engage with these systems as they truly are, with all their costs accounted for, and all their horrors on display.

5. What inspired you to write *Last Chance Live*?

Last Chance LIVE!'s premise was inspired by real-world death penalty reform efforts to raise the minimum age for capital punishment. *Last Chance LIVE!*'s protagonist, Eternity Price, was inspired by a little girl I met during my undergraduate years at the University of Pennsylvania. While at Penn, I volunteered in Head Start classrooms in a West Philadelphia public school, and met a four-year-old girl whose vivacious spirit deeply impacted me. I spent years contemplating how she was growing up in an impoverished neighborhood right next to an Ivy League university, but she would likely be unable to access most of its privileges and resources—and the trajectory of her life would likely be very different than the lives of most Penn students. To my knowledge, that little girl has not experienced or done anything like what Eternity has, but she and Eternity both grew up in the shadow of power and privilege. My hope for this young girl, and all children, is that they have what Eternity never did—confidence in who they are and what they are worth, and a community that reinforces this truth. I hope seeing America's reflection in *Last Chance LIVE!* helps us ascribe more value to these children, and less value to "great television."

