



## Episode 6

### How to Teach Your Children Shakespeare

Guest: Ken Ludwig

**Sarah:** Ken Ludwig is the author of one of my favorite books, [\*How to Teach Your Children Shakespeare\*](#). We are loving this book at our house. And I'm always raving about it on my blog.

Ken is also an internationally acclaimed playwright whose work has been performed in more than 30 countries in over 20 languages. He has had six shows on Broadway and six in London's West End. His plays have been commissioned by The Royal Shakespeare Company and the Bristol Old Vic. And his first play on Broadway, *Lend Me a Tenor*, won three Tony Awards and was nominated for nine.

He's also won two Olivier awards, which is England's highest theater honor. His other best-known Broadway and West End Shows include *Crazy for You*, *Moon Over Buffalo*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *The Three Musketeers*, *Treasure Island*, and several others.

He has degrees from Harvard where he studied music with Leonard Bernstein,

Haverford College and Cambridge University. *How to Teach Your Children Shakespeare* is a book that describes the methods Ken used while teaching his own children how to understand and love the works of the Bard, beginning with memorization of short, specific passages from Shakespeare's plays.

**So all the great authors  
that we love so much had a lot of  
Shakespeare in them and if we  
know our Shakespeare, we really  
become better at decoding those  
works and understanding them.**

It's easier and more enjoyable than you think, probably. I knew I had something of an affinity for Shakespeare myself, from when I was introduced to him late in high school, but using Ken's book with my kids has just absolutely lit me on fire. The book leads you and your kids on an adventure through plays

like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Twelfth Night*, *Macbeth*, and *Romeo and Juliet*. You don't need to know any Shakespeare to get going. It's pretty foolproof, which is why I love it so much. Ken makes Shakespeare very accessible. The book offers parents step-by-step methods for giving their kids and probably themselves a lifetime's worth of appreciation for Shakespeare's neverending art and wisdom. He tells you what to do, what it means, and how to explain it to your kids.

**Sarah:** Hello Ken. Thanks so much for being here with me today.

**Ken:** Well, thank you so much for having me. I'm just thrilled to be here.

**Sarah:** Can we start by having you tell us a little bit about yourself and your family?

**Ken:** Sure. I'm a full-time playwright. I live in Washington, D.C. I've been married for many years and I have two kids—two great kids, I might add—one in high school and one in college. And the book really describes the journey I took with each of the kids individually because they're four years apart, in trying to teach them all about Shakespeare, my sort of greatest passion.

**Sarah:** So when you first introduced your kids to Shakespeare, did you know how you were going to do it? Did you sort of feel like you were fumbling around to see what worked? Or did you go in with a plan?

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### **5:59 Ken's initial motivations in introducing his kids to Shakespeare.**

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**Ken:** I did not go in with a plan at first, but it wasn't long till I figured the plan out. What

happened was my daughter came home from first grade one day and proudly spoke a line of Shakespeare. She said, "Guess what, Daddy, I know a bank where the wild thyme blows," which is a line from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. And I was blown away. I asked her how she learned it and she said, "Well in school, our teacher's teaching a couple lines from Shakespeare." And it turns out their teacher was this wonderful—she still teaches at the same school—wonderful English woman who herself loved Shakespeare and thought the kids could learn a couple of lines. And I thought, "Gee, what a great idea."

I've loved Shakespeare all my life, it really has been my sort of private passion. And it had not occurred to me to start teaching the kids Shakespeare as early as that, but sort of a light bulb went off in my head, and I thought, "Ooh, what fun!"

So we tried it. And I started... so took the next Saturday and carved an hour out of the day and sat down with my daughter and started talking about Shakespeare. And as we talked about it, I tried to describe *A Midsummer Night's Dream* a little bit, which the teacher had started to tell them about. It really is the best of the plays to start with, with your kids. I started quoting from it and her eyes lit up and she really loved hearing the beauty of the language, it was just such an innate thing.

Six-year olds-love nursery rhymes in the same way. They love that beautiful rhythm of the poetry. And so that's when it occurred to me that maybe the key to getting her involved was having her memorize short passages of Shakespeare. And that's what we did.

**Sarah:** What about your relationship with Shakespeare's work? When did you first fall in love with Shakespeare?

**Ken:** I fell in love with it when I was, I think, in high school, sort of junior high school. My parents very kindly for one of my birthdays... They had seen on Broadway years before this moment in time, Richard Burton's *Hamlet*. There was a famous production of *Hamlet* on Broadway with the actor Richard Burton, who a lot of kids may not know now and some parents may not know, but he was in his time one of the great heartthrobs on stage in the movies. He was married to Elizabeth Taylor. He was also a very, very great Shakespearean actor. He's Welsh. And he did *Hamlet* on Broadway that was directed by John Gielgud, and it was the longest-running *Hamlet* in Broadway history.

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### **8:27 Falling in love with Shakespeare in junior high.**

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And there was a recording of it on LP's and my parents bought me that as a present and I started to listen to it when I was in high school and I just loved it. For whatever strange reason, I just loved it. And my love of Shakespeare really took off from there.

**Sarah:** Wow, okay, that's very inspiring. Well, it's inspiring to hear that it was something that was introduced to you in youth and it's that innate love for the beautiful and the true and good things that's really encouraging. So what surprised you the most about the way your daughter reacted to Shakespeare when you first introduced her? Was it the beauty of the language resonating with her? Was it harder to do, or did it come more easily to her than you expected it to?

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### **10:00 What surprised Ken the most about introducing his young daughter to Shakespeare.**

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**Ken:** Very astute—that's exactly right. It came more easily than I expected. If you had asked me "Could I teach a 6-year-old some passages from Shakespeare?" I would have thought "Gee, probably not." But this teacher had inspired us that way and it became clear to me early on that, of course, the ones that she was able to pick up... Really, it wasn't a question of their having easier words because kids often learn nursery rhymes. They don't always necessarily know the words at first, so you explain it to them. But it was the beauty of the sound of the passages.

That very first passage: "I know a bank where the wild thyme blows, Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows, Quite overcanopied with luscious woodbine, With sweet muskroses, and with eglantine. There sleeps Titania sometime of the night, Lulled in these flowers with dances and delight."

Well, it's a very beautiful reassuring passage that children really relate to. It describes flowers, it's gentle and non-threatening, and she just took to it.

**Sarah:** Yeah, it just kind of rolls off your tongue. My 8-year-old son... So I have three bigger kids—they're 12, 10, and 8—and then three babies and toddlers, but they're not memorizing Shakespeare, of course. So my 8-year-old son is the one that kind of floored me because I didn't expect him to take to Shakespeare so much but he was the one that memorized it the quickest and that was really just caught up in the beauty of the language.

And yeah, that's really... that's pretty powerful.

**Ken:** That's great. That's great to hear. Very sweet.

**Sarah:** So what was your greatest challenge in teaching Shakespeare to your kids?

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### **12:12 The greatest challenge in teaching Shakespeare to children.**

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**Ken:** Well at first, it was more of a joy than a challenge because... I mean, it did take me some work to figure out, try to think now, let's see, what passage should we try next? I know my Shakespeare pretty well, but I wanted to put them in a real sequential order where again and again it was something that she was ready for. So by the time she finished age 6, she'd learned maybe—because I think I started late in her sixth year—maybe four passages. And then... In the book, there are 25 passages, but those pretty much represent from being a youngster to maybe being in your early to mid-teens because I do an overview in the book of passages from easy to more difficult. In between the passages you see in the book, there may have been three or four other passages that again were nice. The first 10 or 15 were all *A Midsummer Night's Dream* because it's so accessible. That's such a sweet story. It's a fun story because of the magic.

So I think from the time she was 6, we may have spent two full years *A Midsummer Night's Dream* passages, maybe a little less, because there were so many. I have about four or five in the book but she probably learned 15 or 20 passages. And they got more

and more complex, too, because when you get into Oberon and Titania, they become a little more complicated in a wonderful way, a magical, romantic, almost mystical way. And it was just shockingly great how much, again, kids love to memorize. It's a natural thing to them.

**Sarah:** It is, yeah. It always shocks me at how much quicker they can memorize something that I can. I have to work so much harder at it.

**Ken:** Me too.

**Sarah:** Well that's something I really appreciate about your book, actually. You don't just say, "This is a great way to memorize Shakespeare. First you do this and then you do this," and techniques. But you tell us: First, memorize this passage. And then you go a step further and say, this is what's happening. Because I think for a lot of parents, for a lot of us, we never have been exposed to Shakespeare in a way that we feel like understand it. And so we're really kind of intimidated to start. And so probably what I appreciate best about your book is the way you hold our hand all the way through. "This is what's happening in the play. And this is how you should memorize this particular passage. Okay, you got that? Now, let's move on to the next piece." And it's a very accessible way for the rest of us to understand what's going on. It's made it less intimidating for me to jump into Shakespeare with my kids, so I love that.

**Ken:** I think Shakespeare is intimidating to all of us at first, and the more I've gotten into this... I've been thinking a lot about it because I'm going to be delivering some speeches up at the Stratford Festival in

Ontario in about two weeks. They asked me to come up and talk about the book. And the thing about Shakespeare is that it's almost like a foreign language. That's how I like to talk about it, and I'll be talking to everybody up there about it, is that we all feel intimidated when we first hear it just the way we would all feel intimidated if suddenly we were plopped down in Italy and we heard people speaking Italian and we were told gee, we should understand this.

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### 15:30 Shakespeare as a foreign language.

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Well, we can understand it. We can understand a few words. We get the gist when people talk to us. But it's when we learn what some of those words really mean that we can really relate to it and that demystifies it. Suddenly, it becomes less intimidating when... You can't listen the "To be or not to be" speech without knowing what the word bodkin means. Bodkin means a dagger, it's a sword, and he says, "To be or not to be." The word comes up in the first, say, eight lines. There are words that we just don't understand unless we have definitions of them.

**Sarah:** Yeah and I think even in that very first passage that you have us memorize, "I know a bank where the wild thyme blows." I think you may have even explained that "blows" would be understood as "growing."

**Ken:** Yeah, I think so too.

**Sarah:** Yeah, so it is like a whole different language. I think that's the big piece of why it's confusing or why it's intimidating, I should say.

**Ken:** Until you learn it and then one of the things when I speak about the book, I take people through one of the passages. Often with adults I will use... If there's kids in the audience, I'll use "I know a bank" or "What is love? 'Tis not hereafter." But when I'm with adults I often use the passage from *Twelfth Night*, "Make me a willow cabin at your gate and call upon my soul within the house," and by taking it sort of almost word by word in making sure that we understand what the character is saying. It's a young woman who's expressing how she would declare her love to someone and she says, "make me a willow cabin at your gate." She literally means to construct a little house made of willow leaves. "And call upon my soul within the house." Well, does she mean her own soul, or does she mean the person she's talking to? Because she fell in love with that person, is that become like her own soul?" And kids get this. They understand it, once you explain very simply and carefully, they get it.

**Sarah:** Yeah, and then once we've done that a few times, what I've noticed is that my kids are not intimidated by Shakespeare at all the way that I am, and I think because they have all these experiences of meeting him in very accessible terms so that it's not so intimidating to start. So that kind of leads me into another question I wanted to ask you, which is what do you think of reading Shakespearean retellings to our kids? I've heard people say that reading retellings doesn't really count as encountering Shakespeare, so I wonder if you can speak to that a little bit.



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**18:45 Why retellings of Shakespeare still count as encountering Shakespeare!**

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**Ken:** I can, absolutely, and I think it's great. I think it's absolutely great. I think any way at all that the kids get introduced to Shakespeare, learn the stories, learn the names of the characters, is good. It doesn't mean that we're not encountering Shakespeare and Shakespeare is great not only for his language and his words, he's great for the stories he made up. Many of them were adapted from other works of literature prior to his lifetime. Some were original. The stories are great. The characters are great. Gee, I would use books with sort of... there's some sort of almost cartoon-like retellings of the stories. Some are just with pretty illustrations. I use those for the kids all the time.

**Sarah:** Okay. That's great to hear. When we started working through your book, we got the young reader's Shakespeare version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and I'll link to that in the show notes because actually we have tried to get our hands on pretty much every one in that series because they're really well done. They have really beautiful illustrations.

**Ken:** They are great, yeah.

**Sarah:** And it really helps you understand what's going on in the story so then when we would get to the next passage that you'd have us memorize, we'd totally understand what was happening and already have kind of a relationship with the character that was saying it, so it was kind of fun.

**Ken:** That's great. That's a great idea. I did the same with my kids.

**Sarah:** So did you have a timeline in mind for how long it would take a parent and child to work through the book? Is it something that you think we work through from beginning to end over a childhood, or something we use as a jumping-off point...

**Ken:** No. It's a jumping-off point, I think. As I said, the passages in the book do span what I taught then kids from maybe age 6 because when my son then came along, we started with him at the same age, and right almost until my daughter Olivia went off to college. Simply because we liked doing it so much, and I'm glad to say in all truth, they just looked forward to that time on the weekend. We'd always do it in the weekends.

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**20:34 A timeline for working through a passage.**

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As school got busier and busier of course, by the time Olivia was about 16, it started to fade away because there were so many school obligations. And boy, she put way over a thousand lines under her belt. It's really gratifying. We were with friends the other night and they just started bantering off lines to each other because they just liked to do it. They just liked it and so we sat and we did it every single weekend religiously because we loved it, every Saturday and every Sunday. So it was two hours for each kid, each weekend. I never did combine them together because it was really kind of a special time with each one.

**Sarah:** Yeah that's neat. I do combine mine. It's more of a necessity, I think just to be able to make it a priority. But I definitely see how my kids would love to do that as a special time with Mom or Dad.

**Ken:** Either one works. The times we did combine, which we did several times, then they would have the fun of, in a way, competing with each other.

**Sarah:** Right, who can remember more. What's the first thing you would say to a parent who says to you, "I am so intimidated by Shakespeare. I just don't know where to start." What would you say to them besides, "Get my book," because that's what I tell everybody. Just get this book then you'll know where to start. But do you have anything you would like to say in particular?

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### **22:41 What do you say to a parent who is intimidated by Shakespeare?**

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**Ken:** I do. A couple of things... One is in addition to the book itself, Random House has done a terrific job in creating a website for the book. It is [HowToTeachYourChildrenShakespeare.com](http://HowToTeachYourChildrenShakespeare.com). And you can print all the passages in that nice big type that I mention that makes it more accessible.

But even better than that is, I convinced some actor friends of mine to record all the passages in the book. And you don't have to buy the book to have done it. There's no password and you can just go to that in any old time. And they are spoken so beautifully and so simply and with so much integrity and beauty that that's one of the ways a parent wjp might say, "Gee, I've never encountered

Shakespeare in a way that I was comfortable. Could we just turn those on and listen to those passages?"

And I think you'll be reassured that it's not intimidating, or I guess intimidating is how it strikes you personally, but it's not difficult. You simply have to go slowly at first and learn every word of every passage. Learn what each word means and then just repeat them aloud. And listening to the passages is a big help on the website.

**Sarah:** Yeah, one thing that we really appreciate about those audio clips you have on your website is that if I don't know how to pronounce a name, it's really great. I realized I was saying /hi-po-**lie'**-tə / instead of saying /hi-**pāl'**-i-tə/. Or am I getting that mixed up now? So that kind of thing is really helpful...or if I'm just kind of struggling with the cadence, although you break that down well on your book, too, but it is nice to have those audio clips to listen to.

**Ken:** Reading aloud really is helpful, isn't it?

**Sarah:** Yeah, very helpful. And then the quotation sheets or the passages that you have there to print out are great, too. They make it very easy to memorize when you see it broken down the way you've done that, so that's really helpful. So some families I know seem to shrink away from Shakespeare because they're a bit apprehensive about any impropriety in his work, so can you speak with that a bit in how you have handled those kind of issues with your own kids or in the methods that you outline in your book?

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**25:26 Handling any impropriety and difficult passages of the Bard.**

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**Ken:** Sure, absolutely. First of all, I don't think any of the passages that I use in the book have any improprieties. I think it is important. At 6 years old, and 7 and 8 and 9 and 10 and 11 and 12, I didn't want to use anything that would be really inappropriate for that age. I feel exactly the same way. I'm a parent. And I don't want the kids dwelling on those things so I didn't use *Titus Andronicus*—boy, talk about a terribly violent play. It was an offense in the early plays of Shakespeare. It's almost like a modern horror movie.

**Sarah:** I'm not familiar with that one.

**Ken:** It's tremendously disturbing. I don't like it and it's not a very good play. *Macbeth* is about a murder but it's really about someone who is so struck by the horror of his own deeds, with his conscience. He struggles with his own conscience about the deed he has committed. That's a play that I didn't introduce to my kids until they were maybe 12 or 13, because... But when they were old enough to discuss issues like that, what a great time to discuss those issues. What a good way to do it.

**Sarah:** Yeah, it's a great channel right into that conversation.

**Ken:** Same with *Romeo and Juliet*. Gee, when you're young you can be impulsive and if there is any great example of look what being impulsive led to in the wrong way, it's *Romeo and Juliet*.

**Sarah:** Well, I have some questions from readers. I don't know if you're up to tackling a few of those.

**Ken:** Oh absolutely.

**Sarah:** Okay. Sherry recently purchased the book and she wants to know if she should read through it first and then teach or she can just kind of launch into it right with her kids. I have an opinion on that, too, but I'll let you say what you think.

**Ken:** I think launch right into it. I feel it's going to be great.

**Sarah:** Yeah, that was what I was going to say, too.

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**27:40 Should parents read through Ken's book first, before teaching it?**

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**Ken:** Again, it's a little intimidating even for a parent to try to get the whole thing under their belt. Maybe stay a chapter ahead. Read the chapter ahead. But go ahead and launch into it and have fun with it.

**Sarah:** I haven't even been a whole chapter ahead. I think I've been a few pages ahead of where we've been so far and that's worked great. And there's been no problem.

**Ken:** Good. That's great.

**Sarah:** Are there adaptations or retellings that you in particular recommend like the Charles and Mary Lamb or the Nesbit. You know what I'm talking about? I don't remember...

**Ken:** I do absolutely. I mentioned them in the bibliography and you've really hit on two of the ones that I like best. Charles and Mary



Lamb is from Victorian times, so it's a little old fashioned but they were done with such care and such beauty. And they were also very careful. They didn't address the subplots or anything that would be disturbing to children. It was really meant to be a retelling for the children. It's called *Tales from Shakespeare*. And it's beautifully written. It's a work of art in itself. And it's very accessible. So Charles and Mary Lamb, absolutely. It's been in print for the past hundred and fifty years.

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**28:22 The adaptations and books Ken recommends.**

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**Sarah:** Yeah, I think there's even on [booksshouldbefree.com](http://booksshouldbefree.com)...I'll look and I'll put a link in the show notes, but I think there are some audio versions that are free that you can listen to and stream...

**Ken:** Yeah, I'm sure. Absolutely, and that's really great. And telling the story overall, it's very nice. Actually I'm very near... As we're talking here, I'm very near a shelf I have of Shakespeare for Kids and retellings. Oh, yes. The bibliography contains a whole section on retellings. There is one called *The Young Person's Guide to Shakespeare*, and it is written by someone named Anita Ganeri. And this has a CD with it. It has very beautiful photographs and illustrations. It's a big picture book; most of them are photographs. Very intelligent, and it's about Shakespeare overall, who were the leading actors and actresses and what the Globe Theater looked like. And it's great to give the kids an overview.

I'll never forget telling my son, and I recount the story in the book... And there's a whole

book about this incident, when Shakespeare was a member of this company called the Lord Chamberlain's Men as an actor and was a shareholder in the company. They lost their lease on the theater that they played in which was one of the very, very first theaters ever built in London and that theater was called, to make things a little confusing, The Theatre, that was its title, the we say The Globe or The Rose or the... it was the "The Theatre," with a capital t.

And when The Theater... They lost their lease on it but they lost their lease on the ground it was built on. There was a different way of looking at property in those days. They didn't lose their lease on the timber because they had built it. They owned the timber. And they knew the person who thought he owned all of it would be away and one night—it was in the wintertime, it was around Christmas—all the company got together. They disassembled the theater and they put it on boats. They crossed the Thames and they built The Globe Theatre out of the same timbers and the same sort of design. And it's a great story because it's like kind of a thriller. It's a fun story. And there's a book about that. Those sorts of things kids just love.

**Sarah:** Yeah, absolutely. Okay that one's not in Anita Ganeri's book. Is it?

**Ken:** That story may well be in there. As I'm sitting here, there's one called... Wait, I bet the story's in here... There's another book called *Shakespeare's Theatre* by Andrew Langley. Some of these could be out of print but you can usually get them on AbeBooks or stuff like that.

**Sarah:** Yeah. I'll find them online and try to make it easy for people to find them.

**Ken:** Yeah, that's a nice one. And then there's a very nice series that I always love for the kids called *The Shakespeare Library*, put out by Heinemann. I think it's an English publication. These are nice, big paperbacks. They're thin. And there's one called *Shakespeare's Plays*, one on *Twelfth Night*, one called *Shakespeare's Theatre*, one on *Macbeth*, one called *Shakespeare: A Life*. I'm just looking at this pile of them. And they're all by Wendy Greenhill, who is head of education at the Royal Shakespeare Company, and Paul Wignall, and they're produced by Heinemann, that's the publisher. And they are a wonderful series for kids.

**Sarah:** Okay, good. I'll look those up. Very good. So if somebody wants to explore a play that's not included in the book, what do you think are the most important parts? I think you kind of explained this in your book, how to memorize. You explained how to memorize. So that would be pretty easy to figure out from your instructions in the book, but what other parts of the process of enjoying Shakespeare would we not want to leave out? Or maybe a better way to ask that is, should we just focus on the plot and the characters without too much analysis for the younger kids and just help them enjoy the language? Or what pieces do you think we should focus on?

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**33:59 Should we focus on the plot and characters without too much analysis?**

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**Ken:** Well, again I think the best way to introduce them to each play is by choosing passages in the plays in the way... I don't

have book at hand right now. But I know that in the back of the book, I listed 55...

**Sarah:** 55, I have it right here. Yes. Appendix 3.

**Ken:** ...55 additional passages that I use with the kids. So for example, because of the length of the book, I didn't get to talk about all of my favorite plays. *Much Ado About Nothing*... I didn't want to do all the comedies. I tend to write comedies as a playwright but I tend to love the comedies the best. One of my very, very favorites and such a great play and it's on right now in New York at the public theatre, Delacorte, is *Much Ado About Nothing*, very accessible for young people because it's such a fun story. The characters Beatrice and Benedict are so lively and they were the first loving couple that their arguments on stage were the stuff of the comedy and the way we knew how much they loved each other just the way I Love Lucy or... the great tradition of, sort of the warring couple.

And then you say, how do I approach *Much Ado About Nothing*? Well, the way to approach it would be, for example, to get one of the books for young people about it. Read a synopsis of it and then go right to the back of the book and pick those passages that I mentioned.

**Sarah:** Yeah you've got a lot of great ones here. This is enough to... I don't think I would feel like I needed to pick a passage myself ever. You've got a great treasure trove here.

**Ken:** Yeah, I took a lot time with those to come up with them so that parents would feel... Gee, because if you know if you're a parent and you don't know the play yourself very well, where would you start looking for

passages? Hard to figure out so that's what I tried to provide.

**Sarah:** Yeah that's great. Okay, and that's in Appendix 3 for all of you listeners out there when you get your hands on the book. They're right in the back and that's very helpful.

**Ken:** Yeah, it's right at the back.

**Sarah:** Do you recommend seeing a performance or watching a movie before reading a play or the other way around? Or does it matter?

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**36:18 What about watching a performance or movie before reading the play?**

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**Ken:** I'd say before if you can do it. You don't want to be... if it's an adult version of the play, it may get wearisome. The Globe Theatre in London has put out a lot of their productions now and I think they're great and they're wonderful, but they're full length, they're full text. And kids' eyes might cross by hour two and a half. And that's what we don't want. We want them to feel, "Oh wow! This is fun and accessible." So maybe do it, maybe put it on if you have access to a nice video and just look at first scene together to get things started.

**Sarah:** Or maybe even finding the scenes that are the passages you're memorizing from.

**Ken:** Yeah, even better. That's great.

**Sarah:** Okay. Well very good. Is there anything else you think we should know?

**I think...what kids gain from taking the time to learn these passages and then gain familiarity with Shakespeare is a kind of inner intellectual backbone.**

**Ken:** A couple things that crossed my mind as we were talking I didn't get to say. One is that in discussing accessible themes or themes to start with with kids—and I didn't get to say this in the book—is often the opening passage of a play, not always, but often, that will be helpful.

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**37:23 The opening passages of a play can be very accessible to kids.**

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It's very nice like in the *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—I think I get to it in the book, I don't remember—"Now, fair Hippolyta, our nuptial hour draws on apace" is a wonderful passage. And the opening lines of *Much Ado* are very simple and clear and straightforward. And the opening lines of *Twelfth Night*, when Orsino—I do have this passage in the book—"If music be the food of love, play on." Often, a trick is the opening lines of a play can be very accessible to kids.

Shakespeare has so much to tell us in the modern world. There's so many great moral values. The basic philosophy is a kindly, humane way of looking at life. He's very aware of the difficulties of life. King Lear is difficult, when this poor king is ravaged by the unkindness of two of his daughters, but ultimately lives through a cycle that brings him to a clear-eyed sanity. And that's so true of Shakespeare in general that he has us

through the stories live through trials and wonderfully engaging stories that illustrate those trials where the human spirit triumphs in some way, be it in the tragedies where the hero may die or in the comedies where the hero or the couple triumphed. So I think that's one thing to say that parents should keep in mind.

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**39:48 What kids gain from taking the time to learn these passages**

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I think another is that what kids gain, what I found with my kids and why the book was so important to me, is that what kids gain from taking the time to learn these passages and then gain familiarity with Shakespeare is a kind of inner intellectual backbone.

**Sarah:** Yeah, what a great way of putting that.

**Ken:** They probably will fool themselves. They didn't know they had it in them, to do it. And you suddenly can read a lot of literature as you grow older that's not Shakespeare but it gives you a frame of reference that simply makes you smarter. It gives you confidence. So they do do better on tests. You don't do it so you'd do better on tests, but you do it because you become a more intelligent being.

**Sarah:** Well, there's so many allusions to Shakespeare in books we read and just in the culture, in Western culture, so I think it does improve your intelligence, even if it's just from understanding where those kind of allusions are coming from.

**Ken:** Yeah, very good point. That's absolutely right. That's very important and I quote this quotation I use from Falstaff from *Henry IV*, Part One, where the great comic

character Falstaff says. "I am not only witty in myself, I am the cause that wit is in other men." And Shakespeare is just that. He is not only intelligent and witty in himself but all, all—I can really say this and know that... Nobody can fool me and go "Aha! You were wrong. Somebody didn't know their Shakespeare." They all knew their Shakespeare. There isn't a great writer or a great filmmaker or a great opera composer or any great artist or a visual artist, there is not a greater artist after Shakespeare who didn't know his or her Shakespeare.

**Sarah:** Yeah, that's amazing.

**Ken:** So when you watch, when you read Jane Austen, well, she has tons of allusions to Shakespeare in her novels. Charles Dickens, who loved to act and he was constantly acting Shakespeare as a young man, and his books are again constantly referring to Shakespearean kind of situations. You know, what is Fagin but a kind of Shylock figure in a way. What are his heroes but very much the young heroes from *Much Ado* and *Twelfth Night*?

So all the great authors that we love so much had a lot of Shakespeare in them and if we know our Shakespeare, we really become better at decoding those works and understanding them.

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**42:57 Helping our kids to become more fully human, helping form virtue in them.**

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**Sarah:** Yeah, and then I think what you said earlier, too. It's just kind of makes you more fully human or fully alive to kind of engage

with these great ideas, the great ideas of... are really all contained in Shakespeare.

**Ken:** Well said. That's exactly right. It makes you... You know, what we're all trying to do for our kids and for ourselves, but certainly for our kids, is to make them into better human beings.

**Sarah:** Yeah, that's right. And it's definitely time well spent. On this podcast we're often talking about building a family culture around books and I think the choosing of books that form really good humans is what we're trying to lean toward and Shakespeare cuts right to the heart of that.

**Ken:** It does. And by taking the time to... I mean all of us as caring parents, and I can just hear it with you obviously, but all of us—I mean, how many parents do we know that aren't that way, love to sit and read with our kids. A lot of the joy we take in life is transmitting our joy in books and great movies and things with our kids and taking the time to memorize something together. And ultimately you may decide, "Hey, I've done enough Shakespeare for now, maybe now having learned this sort of method if you will, I want to look at some Wordsworth together.

**Sarah:** Yeah, that's a great point. In the first episode of this podcast, I talked to Andrew Pudewa from the Institute for Excellence in Writing and he was talking about how the two best things that you can do for your child to help them become a good communicator or a writer is to read aloud and to memorize beautiful language. So when you think about that and you consider what we're doing here with memorizing pieces of Shakespeare's plays, that's like—well, I hate using the cliché

killing two birds with one stone—but it's really like a double whammy for your time...

**Ken:** I think so too. I'm glad you said that. Yeah. Memorizing is not a lost art, that would be overstating it, because there's too many of us like you and me out there who want to do it with the kids. But as we have gotten into this Internet age, the apparent answer, and it's not—I am using "apparent" in quotations, ironically—is that, "Gee, why do I need to memorize anything because it's at my fingertips. I can find it on the Internet in no time." It's not like, "Gee, I can't find it, which book is it in?" Or, "How do I track it down?" If you remember what two words were in it that were unusual, you type them in the Internet and bang, you get the passage on the screen. But of course, that has nothing to do with internalizing the passage and understanding it or getting the joy from the language or...

**Sarah:** Well, then you really can't call on it when you need it if it's somewhere out there and you think, "Well I just need to know where I can go to get it." But if you hide it away inside of yourself, then you always have it. You can always call on it to comfort you, or to thrill you, or to help you through a tough situation. It becomes a part of you. So I think memory works.

**Ken:** Exactly. Well said. That's exactly right. That having it in your fingertips makes all the difference in the world because it really is part of you.

**Sarah:** Yeah.

**Ken:** But it's not if... Just because you can find it, it's not part of you.

**Sarah:** Right. Well, it motivates me to want to memorize more, too, and I've been



memorizing with my kids, but like I said, they are faster than I am so I have to work a little harder than they do.

**Ken:** So are mine.

**Sarah:** Well, this has been fantastic and I hope it's encouraged all of our listeners to go get your hands on this book. Really, I said on my blog last year that I think the purchase of this book was probably... we homeschool our kids, my family homeschooled, and I think it was our best purchase of the entire year. It has been so fruitful in our home. So it's really blessed us. I think it will... I think you will be surprised by how excited your kids can get about Shakespeare even if you don't have any experience with Shakespeare before. So it is in paperback now. So you can get it on Amazon or wherever books are sold, of course. And I'll have links in the show notes to make it easy for you to find [How to Teach Your Children Shakespeare](#) as well as all of the retellings that we talked about in the podcast today.

And then remember that you can go to [HowToTeachYourChildrenShakespeare.com](#) to get more peeks of the book, an excerpt, and those audio clips that Ken was telling us about.

Now it's time for my favorite part of the podcast. This is the **Let the Kids Speak!** where kids get to tell us about the books that have been read aloud to them.

"Hello! My name is Lauren and I'm 10 years old and I live in the Gold Coast in Australia. I loved listening to [The Drovers Road](#) by Joyce West and published by Bethlehem Books. I liked it because it was very interesting and full of excitement. The main character is a girl named Gabrielle Allan. It tells the story of her adventures in New Zealand. My favorite part of the book is when Gabrielle and her cousin Mary nearly drowned in the secret cave. Get the book and discover how they were rescued."

Remember that your child can leave a message for me to be on the Read Aloud Revival podcast by going to [ReadAloudRevival.com](#), scrolling to the bottom of the page and leaving me a message there.

All the show notes, all the details are at [ReadAloudRevival.com](#). This is Episode 6, so just look for the picture of Ken Ludwig. Click the button and you'll be on your way. Until next time, go build your family culture around books!