Today’s guest loves talking children’s literature. She’s so passionate about children’s books, in fact, that she’s been republishing classic and historical children’s literature for the last 20 years through her company Beautiful Feet Books—books like the d’Aulaire biographies, the world books of Genevieve Foster, Albert Marrin’s biographies, and more. She also designs guides for teaching elementary and secondary students history using award-winning classic and historic literature. And those guides help parents and teachers incorporate classic living books easily throughout their curriculum. She studied children’s literature at Simmons College and in 2006, earned a Master’s degree in children’s literature at the Center for the Study of Children’s Literature in Boston. She speaks around the country, is a columnist for the Old Schoolhouse Magazine and is someone I had the immense pleasure of meeting earlier this year. So I’m so happy to welcome to the show Rea Berg. Rea, welcome to the Read-Aloud Revival.

Rea: Oh thank you, Sarah. It’s just lovely to be here with you. Thank you for inviting me.

Sarah: Well, can we start by having you tell us just a little bit about your family and your work?

2:20 Learning about Rea’s family

Rea: Absolutely. Let’s see, where should I begin? We are the very delighted parents of six children. We have children ages 15-35.

Sarah: Oh wow! Okay, that’s quite the spread.

Rea: Quite a spread. We have four biological children. Our oldest is 35, and when our very youngest biological was 15, we went to Ukraine and we adopted two little girls. So we are still in the parenting business. And in fact, it’s very funny because for the first time in 35 years, my husband and I are empty nesters for six full weeks. Our youngest daughter is a ballerina. And so every summer, she goes and does a summer intensive somewhere. So this year, she’s with Ballet West in Salt Lake City, Utah for six weeks and staying at the university and sleeping in the dorms and having just an amazing experience there. So it’s kind of a wonderful thing to have about six weeks of experiencing what empty nesters experience when you have been parenting for quite as long as we have, so it’s been really delightful for my husband and I to reconnect in that way.

Sarah: Very cool. Oh that’s so cool.

3:35 The beginning of Beautiful Feet Books

Rea: So back in the 80s, I started Beautiful Feet Books because I was just really falling in love with children’s literature and I thought, “Boy, if I love these books this much, I just know lots of other parents are going to, too.” And that was sort of the genesis of it. And from that point, I really started trying to put together curriculum so that parents and teachers could teach history using literature rather than textbooks.

So it was just a very small seed of an idea at the very beginning, but then it grew and grew into this tree where now we publish all kinds of children’s books and we’ve brought back into print, as you mentioned in the introduction, a lot of wonderful classic literature for children and that’s sort of one of the missions that I really love being part of, is just being able to locate these books that have gone out of print—and they’re just absolute treasures—and bring them back into print.

Sarah: It’s such a gift for all of us, I think, because we find out about some beautiful, wonderful, enriching book and find out it’s out of print. And then it’s either cost-prohibitive or just impossible to find them.

Rea: Yes. And that’s really what happened with our very first, we call it our very first book baby, because it was Leif the Lucky by Ingri and Edgar Parin d’Aulaire. And I had put together just a very simplistic guide for teaching American history using the d’Aulaire books, in addition
to a number of other classics like *The Courage of Sarah Noble* and *The Matchlock Gun*, and other Caldecott and Newbery-award winning books. And *Leif the Lucky* was so difficult to get that people were having to pay $75 to $100 to buy an old copy of it. So we really drove this market price up and of course this was before the days of internet. So you had to call around to used bookstores and put in a request and see if they could find it for you.

**Sarah:** Yeah, how much work that would be.

**Rea:** Oh my goodness! Yes. So that was what first sort of initiated that idea: *Wow! We should see if we could publish this book.* And of course we knew nothing. We were total neophytes to the whole publishing industry. But we actually met with... Ingrí and Edgar Parin had two sons, Nils and Ola. And Nils was at the time working for the Clinton administration and I had been invited to speak in Maryland. So we decided to contact him and see if he would meet with us about publishing his parents' book *Leif the Lucky*. And so it was very fun. I don't know if you're familiar with the book, but there's a beautiful picture of Leif Erickson on the cover of it…

**Sarah:** Yes we have it. One of yours, actually.

**Rea:** Yeah, and he's got this wild chunk of white hair and these bushy eyebrows and these big, gorgeous blue eyes. And then we knocked on Nils d'Aulaire's door. His little boy who was 10 years opened the door, and it was like we were looking at this character. It was just so fun, Sarah, because it was just like we knew we were in the right place and of course, Nils and his brother Ola were the models for their parents for many of their books.

**Sarah:** Oh, right!

**Rea:** And Ingrí d'Aulaire was originally European, well, she was Norwegian. So she had that connection with the whole Leif Erickson story. So that was our very first book baby and we learned a lot in bringing Leif back to life for a new generation and it was just an amazing journey. And from that point on, we ended up publishing all the d'Aulaire biographies and of course many other books. But that was really how the whole publishing thing came about.

**Sarah:** Very cool. So where did your own passion for children's literature... Where did that come from? Is that something you've always had, you know, like a little flame that's always been burning or is there something in particular that ignited it?

**Rea:** Well, you know I think the flame was really there as a child because I remember being so just enchanted. My parents had a leather-bound book of like old English poetry or something and I remember just going to bed with that as a very young child. I probably didn't understand most of what was in there but I remember going to bed with a flashlight and just feeling through the pages of that book like I entered this completely foreign country, that was just sort of enchanted and mysterious and wonderful. And so that was there but it was never fed as a child. I wasn't one of those fortunate ones that was taken to the library every week and had very literate parents that were constantly reading. And so it didn't really come sort of full flame until I became a mother myself. And then... and actually even before I had children, I read *For the Children's Sake* by Susan Schaeffer Macaulay. Are you familiar with that one, Sarah?

**Sarah:** Yes. I was just telling somebody it's my absolute favorite book on education ever and it's one that I reread every single summer.

**Rea:** You're so wise because to me, it sort of established an entirely new paradigm for what it means to educate our children, and it's where we get so many of those notions of sort of whole-hearted child and living books and nurturing the child's heart and spirit in the process of education, because if we don't nurture the child's heart and we're just filling their minds with knowledge, then we can essentially create monsters.

**Sarah:** Very cool. So where did your own passion for children's literature... Where did that come from? Is that something you've always had, you know, like a little flame that's always been burning or is there something in particular that ignited it?

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And so I think making sure that that notion of **my most important calling is really to nurture the heart and soul of this child.** And so I think literature is such an incredibly important tool in our toolkit as parents, to make sure that we're training the hearts and the minds of our children while we're educating them intellectually so that there's... you know, just the strength of that. We don't want to create just intellectual geniuses that don't have the humanity and the compassion and the empathy that
I think we learn so well through the very best books. So the passion was there or the flame was there but then it was really ignited when I started having children and then I just wanted to find the best books for them. And so that was right about the time that *Books Children Love* came out by Elizabeth Wilson.

**Sarah:** That’s a favorite of mine.

**Rea:** And that book was like my bible. I took that to the library every week to get books for my children. And of course, I would always grab some that weren’t in her book and always found out that 90% of those were not worthy of our time or our energy or our focus. And so that made me start developing my own list in addition to what Elizabeth Wilson recommended in her book. And so that was kind of how I started putting together *Oh, this would be a great book for early American history and this would be a wonderful book for learning California history*. And so eventually over the years, those things just started accumulating and then some friends encouraged me, “You just need to write it all down, you need to write”... and I was like, “Oh no, you guys can do this.” But eventually, I succumbed to the peer pressure and I just... we bought our very first computer and I sat down and started learning what a word processor was and putting together these very simplistic—you know, in my very limited knowledge—guides. But they became very popular very quickly and that sort of set us on our mission to make those available. It really struck a chord at a perfect time in homeschooling history.

**Sarah:** Yeah, I think so especially with... I mean, I know so many homeschooling families who really want to teach through literature. There just seems to be so many benefits to teaching through literature. Like you were just talking about nourishing the child’s heart and it reminds me... I don’t know the Charlotte Mason quote off the top of my head, but I think she has a quote... There’s something in one of her books where she says that it doesn’t really matter how much the child knows or we shouldn’t ask the question how much does the child know. We should ask the question, how much does he care?

**Rea:** I mean culturally when we were first homeschooling back in the 80s, the emphasis really was on character building. And I think there’s been a shift and the pendulum has swung, I think to our demise in a way, to this notion of the intellectual development of the child and academic excellence. And mind you, I am as much for academic excellence as anyone but I think when academic excellence [replaces] character and child development, in terms of teach our children empathy and compassion behind. I think that’s where we get this potential for education, because some of your notorious white-collar crime is committed by highly educated people.

**Sarah:** Right. Exactly. Yeah.

**Rea:** And so education really can’t be the goal. I think if we keep our goal the character development of the child, I think that education will come along with it. And I have four adult children now so I’ve seen my fruit of our labors and I have to say I am just always so touched and moved by how compassionate my children are—my adult children—in terms of their ability to care for others and to care for the needy and to care for the oppressed and put themselves out there for people that just need that hand of compassion and empathy.

And so I think that literature is just such an important component. And honestly, I have to say for myself, I was not raised in a Christian home and I think when I look at the lives of people who have had a very rich literature-based education, where literature has been such a major component on their lives and their focus and their worldview, those people are the people that I love to be with, those are the people that are authentic. They’re real. They’re still laying down their lives for other people. Even as they age, their focus is not on themselves, it’s on *how can I use whatever talents and faculties and gifts that I have to minister to a broken world.* And those are the people that I want to pattern my life after and of course with all of the media blitz on *Go Set a Watchman*, I think it explores that whole notion so much more clearly. We’re just putting out another study guide for high school, for contemporary American and world history, so I’ve just finished writing study notes again for *To Kill a Mockingbird.*
Sarah: Yes.

14:40  A look at To Kill a Mockingbird

Rea: And when you look at the character Scout, and of course the character Scout is really the character of Harper Lee. And when you look at just how incredibly rich her childhood was in literature and how she was read aloud to from the time she could remember and then this was of course the fictional character of Scout. But the fictional character of Scout is Harper Lee. There is no question. And the rich literary background of her life enabled her to see racism for what it truly was. Even though she was couch and raised and nurtured in this cultural environment of the South where racism was just such a part of who you were and how you viewed the world because her father was constantly pouring into her such a rich literary world, she was able to break out of that and see racism for what it truly was. And that’s why the character of Scout is so endearing because she speaks to us as a child, the wisdom of the child. And so I think that same notion of what the [distorted] said and what you said about, not how much they know, it’s how much they care. That’s our goal.

Sarah: Well then it puts education in the service of people rather than people making education this sort of almost like a false god or an idol, where we’re trying to give our children this rigorous education but when we ask why, well an education is always to serve people and help them love each other better, then we get a more clear picture of what that education should be about and I think that speaks right to what you’re talking about here.

Rea: Yes. That is such an important point, Sarah, and I think that when we realize the power that literature provides for us because even for myself as a homeschool mom, I mean homeschool will put you in the fiery furnace quicker than anything in terms of your own character and your flaws.

Sarah: Yes, the refining fire for sure.

Rea: Yes, and I think that literature—because like I said, I was not raised in a Christian home so I didn’t have a lot of those character qualities that I think are so essential if you’re going to be a homeschool parent. I mean literature was that constant reminder to me of what my goal was, not only for my children but for myself. It’s like I’ve got to be working on that whole character component in my life… with my children. And that’s why I think literature can call us into account quicker than anything. But if we are reading the very best books, we’re getting enough character lessons ourselves all the time. And that really helps to keep us on the straight and narrow because I think… I mean, homeschool moms, I don’t think there’s another demographic on the planet that is as busy, and whose time is so incredibly precious because you’re not only a wife, you’re not only a mother but a full-time educator too. Just like the constraint on your time and your temperament and everything you are is so extreme. Like you are really just… the demands of so many people are focused on you. And so I think that’s where… we have to realize that we’ve got to be constantly nurturing our spirits if we want this thing to be successful. I mean we can send kids off to Harvard and we can send kids off to elite colleges but if we really miss the boat in the character department, that is going to become a curse to us. It’s not going to be a blessing.

18:23  “Oh, I read good books”

Rea: There’s a really sweet story of a family that they’ve kind of followed Beautiful Feet Books from the beginning and then different educational modes and fashions have come and gone and at the time that they were homeschooling their children, a new paradigm came along where it was just academically super rigorous and there was an incredible emphasis on memorization and this is what you need to do if you want your children to get into the best schools and all this stuff, and so her friends were constantly coming her and saying, “Oh, so what are you doing for Greek and Latin,” and “What are you doing for any of those rigorous academics?” And she says, “Oh, well, we read good books.” And then someone else comes along and “What are you doing for this and what are you doing in that?” and, “Oh, well, we read good books.”

And so that was always her constant refrain for the peer pressure. So she kept on the road that she felt was the right one for her family, even though she was having to stand against a lot of peer pressure. And lo and behold, her son gets into West Point. All of her friends, their children were burnt out by the time they were done with high school. And a good majority of them didn’t even want to go to college because they didn’t like education any more.
They had lost their love of learning. Her son went to West Point and it was tough there. It’s a military academy and it’s military life and it’s a tough environment, especially for a fine, young Christian person. And so he would call up and sometimes be lamenting to his mom, “It’s tough here, Mom. Military life is really tough,” and she’d go, “I hope you’re okay.” And he’d go, “Oh yeah, I’m fine. I read good books.”

Sarah: [laughter] I love it.

Rea: And it was just like that skill that he had learned, and the way he learned about life. I mean he achieved that academic excellence, obviously, but he also had this incredible life skill that he took with him and he knew that when you needed that place, a peace and rest and for his soul to be nourished, that he could go to good books and find it there. So I love that story because that’s a story that we got to see walked out and realized.

20:40 The most formative part of home education

Sarah: That’s so beautiful. And you know my friend—one of my very best friends Mystie Winckler—she was homeschooled and so was her husband. They have this great second-generation perspective on homeschooling that most of us don’t have, I think, and one of the things she says is that the most formative thing, the most important thing in both her education and her husband’s, now from adulthood looking back, they can see that the thing that formed the most was their reading. Actually, their free reading I think is what she says, what they read in their free time. And so that really guides her homeschooling decisions now is knowing that as much content as you try to dump into your child’s brain, the most formative thing is going to be the connections they make with the stories they read.

Rea: And that’s the thing, because stories really speak to that which is most universal to the human heart and those are lessons that we will constantly come back to as human beings and it just reminds us of what’s really important and when we look at what’s really important it’s probably relationships with others, and of course our relationships with others are the very reflection of our relationship with God.

Sarah: Yeah, that’s absolutely true. That’s beautiful. Going back to that idea of choosing books, what criteria do you use when you’re choosing books either for Beautiful Feet to publish or books that you just used with your children when you were reading. What would you say to somebody who’s trying to get their feet underneath them when it comes to choosing really good books?

22:08 Choosing the best books

Rea: Well, have really good sources. So the very first thing I would recommend, of course, is just like you do. Read For the Children’s Sake and read it over and over again, by Susan Schaeffer Macaulay. And then always go the library armed with either Books Children Love or Honey for a Child’s Heart. The criteria that we use at Beautiful Feet is literary beauty so the book has to have beauty in terms of how the artist wrote it and their ability to speak to the human heart using the best words, the most concise language, and all of the incredible literary tropes, allusions and devices that make a book truly worthwhile. I mean, C.S. Lewis said that. if a child’s book cannot be enjoyed by an adult, it’s not a good child’s book either. We sort of know that intuitively when we sit down with a wonderful classic children’s book, you know the… I mean, whether it’s the Grimm’s fairy tales or Andersen, we love reading those to our children because there’s inherent beauty in the language and then for us as publishers, we always look for incredibly beautiful illustrations, too, because when we first start presenting books to our children, we want their palate formed by beauty. And Matthew Arnold described that as the best that’s been thought, the best thoughts of mankind and that’s what we want to form their palate with because if we form their palate that way, they will never—I believe with all my heart, and I’ve seen this played out—they will never be entranced or enchanted by the tawdry and the banal, and just the ugliness that’s out there because their palate… That which satisfies their spiritual and emotional palate has been formed with beautiful words and beautiful pictures and noble thought. And that is just such an incredible safeguard for our children as they go out into the world and are presented with a smorgasbord of all that is tawdry in this world… and that notion of forming their palate.

So when we publish books, we’re always looking for visual and literary beauty and that’s what we focus on and I think when you look at the history of children’s publishing, so much of that which was published from...
the beginning of the 20th century through the latter half, it was just a golden era of children's books and there's just so many wonderful books that are now... You know, it's not that they've completely gone out of favor, but in the publishing world, unless a book sells something like 50,000 copies a year continually on the back list, most publishers aren't interested in it. It's just not profitable to them. So there's all these little wonderful gems out there that small people like my husband and I can come along, and if they sell a few thousand copies a year, and to us, that's just restoring a treasure and keeping it part of our literary heritage alive, with these wonderful books.

Sarah: Well. I completely can understand the idea of forming a child or helping them cultivate a taste for good books. I think I've seen that in my oldest daughter who's almost 14 now and she has a pretty good discernment for good books. She'll ditch a book if it feels kind of twaddly. I almost don't have to do too much of the discouraging if she picks up something twaddly because I know she'll drop it by the first chapter and then she'll go pick up something else like Lucy Maud Montgomery or something. So she's been, I think, formed by enough really good stories that it's starting to shape her understanding of what's worth reading, so that's fun. I don't know if all my kids will have as much discernment but it's been fun to watch with her.

Rea: Yes. We're starting to see some of the fruit of that and that's such a beautiful, exciting thing to see.

26:13 Starting with American history

Sarah: Well, one of the things you recommend is starting history studies with American history, which is really interesting, especially considering right now there seems to be a trend in home education circles of people wanting to study history chronologically. Do you want to walk us through why you start with American history?

Rea: Okay, well first of all, from a very practical sense, the very best children's books are about American history. There aren't a lot of classic children's works about ancient history and so what I have noticed with a lot of this new generation with that sort of focus is that they've missed some of the very best children's books when their children were little and when they're most appropriate for those ages. And so from a very practical perspective, the most important I think is that if you're not focusing on early American history when your children are little, you're going to miss just a wealth of beautiful books for your children.

But really from a child development perspective, I think it's important to look at... child development experts really believe that the human brain grows and is developed intellectually in gradually expanding concentric circles. So just as we first start nursing our infants, we are their whole world. And then eventually Daddy starts to come into that world and then their siblings and their understanding of the world develops that way even as they emerge into early grammar school. They are still learning the world in these expanding concentric circles. And so... I mean, I mean if anyone is kind of interested in this just from the scientific perspective, I would recommend the works of Jean Piaget, the French philosopher. And really, he was the one that really studied how the child's brain develops. And so our child emerges into this world of the nuclear family and then that world is expanded by the grandparents and the aunts and uncles and the cousins and then eventually, the church community or the school community and their wider community, and then their identity as the citizen of a nation.

And so for us, from a simple childhood development perspective, it's just in keeping with what scientists understand about how the brain forms. And so I think also that because what we really want is our children to respond to these stories, and in a very vicarious way we want them to relate to these characters that are the Washingtons and the Lincolns and the Benjamin Franklins and the forefathers of history of their country. Once they come to know and love those figures and appreciate them and look up to them, then they're able to more realistically understand and relate to a larger world scene.

So I think that... And this isn't a hard and fast rule, but I think that it tends to work better for young children to learn about the history of their own country first and then once they know and love their own country then they can know and love the histories of other countries. And so that's kind of been how we have felt like you can best develop this love of history. And it seems to have worked really well over the last three decades that we've been doing this.
Sarah: Yeah. Another one of the homeschool mom mentors that I really look up to is Laura Berquist, at Mother of Divine Grace School and this is something she recommends as well, to start with your child’s own nation and I think it’s the same concept of the best children’s literature. Really, the best children’s American history literature is like the d’Aulaire books like the ones that you published. And those may not appeal to your middle schooler so if you wait until they’re middle school before you get to that age, you’ve kind of missed the window for that book to really have the same kind of impact on them.

30:25 The Children’s Homer

Rea: Yeah, and I think that’s really true because, again, we want our children—especially when they’re in those tender years—we want the books that speak most powerfully to them. Now, as far as ancient history, first of all, there isn’t a single classic children’s picture book that’s ever won a single award that’s ever been acknowledged to be of extraordinary literary beauty for primary students.

Sarah: Wow! I did not realize that. Okay.

Rea: No, they don’t exist. Now, one of the classics of ancient children’s literature is the work of Padraic Colum, The Children’s Homer.

Sarah: Oh yes, okay.

Rea: Padraic Colum was an Irish man of letters, a poet, and a total wordsmith and he knew the value of The Iliad and The Odyssey and so he wanted to write a children’s version of it and so he did The Children’s Homer. And it’s beautiful. The illustrations are beautiful but that… you couldn’t read that book to a primary child. That book is for intermediate to junior high level child. And you know the concepts are too complex and all of that, so there really is nothing like that for a primary-age student either. And you really forego this notion of really concentrating on literary beauty and the gorgeous picture books if you want to teach chronologically. You really do forego that. And I think then you’re just using mediocre books. Remember this is when your child is learning to love books.

Sarah: Yeah, right.

Rea: You’re using all mediocre literature and you’re not really teaching history so it’s a bit of a misnomer. You’re teaching cultural studies because there aren’t any really great books on the history of Greece, on the history of Rome for primary children, so you’re teaching pyramids and you’re teaching mummies and you’re teaching chariots and so you’re really not doing history, either. You’re doing cultural studies. So it’s just a bit of a misnomer and it’s…

Sarah: Yeah, that’s a very good point. I haven’t thought of it that way. That’s a great point.

Rea: Well, and it’s never been done in history, this notion of teaching chronologically. It’s a brand new paradigm and so if people understood that they wouldn’t be so convinced immediately that oh, this is the best. This makes total sense. If you look at it historically, history has never been taught this way.

Sarah: Yeah. Well I think Memoria Press—and we’ll link this in the show notes—but they have this great post titled, History is not Chronological. And it kind of turns that whole idea of…

Rea: Well, I have to look at that. That sounds great.

33:09 The role of memory work

Sarah: Yeah, I’ll send you a link. It’s pretty great. Okay, so the way that many of us were taught history in school included a lot of dates and memorization and that’s also the way a lot of us teach our kids various subjects not just history. But I’m curious to know what your thoughts are on memory work and memorizing dates and facts.

Rea: Well, I think memorization is one of the extraordinary faculties of the human mind. I mean, it’s really quite something what people can memorize. And oh my goodness, when you look at the histories of some of the great leaders and thinkers like Abraham Lincoln and Winston Churchill, their capacity and their ability to memorize was extraordinary. The difference between the educational culture right now and those great leaders who achieved amazing feats in history was the content. None of those leaders ever memorized dates and facts—ever—but they would memorize… Winston Churchill would memorize whole chapters of classic literature.

Sarah: Right, okay.
Rea: And poetry that was extraordinary. So we have this amazing faculty for memorization and yet we're just putting meaningless dates and facts and times in our child's brain, when they could be memorizing really... I mean scripture, the power of memorizing scripture is so extraordinary. Those scriptures that you memorize as a child will stay with you your entire life and sometimes they will mean the difference between life and death. I mean your emotional health and in some other things that you have to face in your life. The power of memorizing poetry, I mean it's extraordinary how poetry can speak to us. Poetry speaks to us in a way nothing else can. I mean that's one of the reasons memorizing scripture is so powerful, because much of it is poetry.

Sarah: Right. This is actually really affirming for me because... Well, about two years ago, we had three babies in two years. We had a baby who was nine months old and then we got pregnant with twins. So it was baby, baby, baby. And we have three older kids we're homeschooling. And so at the time, I had this sort of frightfully ambitious list of things I wanted my kids to memorize but because God sent all these beautiful babies to us, our time was extremely limited, and so what I ended up doing was paring down our memory work to just beautiful language because I thought okay, we only have a certain amount of time so the most important thing I want... and I would pare it down to mostly scripture and poetry and sometimes beautiful passages from literature. And we've kind of just kept on with that and I've never really brought the facts back in and now I'm thinking, I think we'll just keep on doing what we've been doing then.

Rea: Oh that's so wonderful. Yes. Wasn't that a delightful diversion.

Sarah: Isn't that great? Yeah.

Rea: Oh my goodness!

Sarah: We think the babies and toddlers are getting in the way but actually they're refining us...

36:25  The power of humor for Lincoln

Rea: Oh, that's just wonderful. What a great story! Well, I just think about... especially for children, they have such a delightful sense of humor. What a wonderful time in their lives to teach them the crazy limericks of Edward Lear or, you know, memorizing the poetry of Shel Silverstein. I mean, how fun and what a great way to bring humor into your daily routine and the levity of some of these amazing poets who bring humor. That was one of the things that was so lifesaving for Lincoln because Lincoln had that very melancholic disposition and he was given to deep, dark depressions. When you look at his life it was so tragic. I mean his very first love, Anne Rutledge dies when they're teens and then shortly after that, his only sibling dies in childbirth. His mother died when he was 9 or 10 years old so the significant women in his life all died at a very young age.

So he has this tremendous capacity for melancholy and depression, but it was humor that saved him and even like his chief of staff and staff, they were so frustrated with him as President because they were in these darkest days of the Civil War and he would come into the office and he would begin the day by a humorous anecdote and I think it was Stanton at one point that said, “Will you just stop the stupid jokes?” And Lincoln just says, “If I didn't laugh I would weep.” And it was just like the incredible redemptive power of laughter when we're going through... I mean, here is a man who suffered such anguish and then he lost his beloved son while he was in the White House, and you just look at a life that is just beset by so much tragedy and heartache and flaws and yet he learned the power of humor.

And I think that is something that we sometimes really miss in our homeschool days, especially if we are so consumed with this notion of academic excellence. And sometimes I think as mothers we really have to look at our own hearts and we have to evaluate what is my purpose and what is my motive? Is it because I feel like I didn't get the education I deserved or I should have gotten, or I feel inadequate in my education, that I've got to make my children into academic superstars so that I can sort of live vicariously through them, so I can somehow be successful through them. And I think we really have to put those—I mean those are little demons that will really rob us of the beauty of what it means to be a mom and what it means to really nurture our children and I think those are things that we need to be aware of our potential, just potential little foxes in our lives that can really spoil the fruit, and to really look at those.
The life-giving aspect of memorization

Rea: So when I'm talking about memorization, I'm thinking this is an incredible faculty and power of the human mind, but let's use it for that which is really life-giving. And that was one of the things that Lincoln did. He had long, long passages of Shakespeare by heart and even there's a beautiful story in one of the books we published called *Abraham Lincoln* by James Daugherty, and there's a beautiful story of after the fall of Richmond and Lincoln is on one of the steamships going back to D.C., traveling along the Potomac River there, and they just had this incredible victory. The Civil War is over and he's in this steamboat and he's reading Shakespeare to his staff and his wife, and I just loved the vision of that because he was talking about that passage in Shakespeare about the kings. I think he was reading either Macbeth or King Lear, I can't remember right now, but he clearly had some sort of foresight into the nature of power and how kings can lose their thrones in a moment and he had this premonition that he wasn't going to live long, and you feel that coming through as he's reciting this play of Shakespeare's and I would have loved to be a fly in the wall at that moment and just imagine that scene with his lovely, kind of southern drawl, reading Shakespeare, and this incredibly poetic person and how beautifully that spoke to him at that moment in time. And we have that legacy. He was just one of our incredible forefathers, and so it's so neat to have that connection and to think how he had that connection with Shakespeare and how that spoke to him at that important moment of his life.

Sarah: Oh that's beautiful. Yeah. That's good. That's the kind of stories we need to have to spur us on when we start doubting ourselves, I think.

Stories that spur us on and connect us to the transcendent

Rea: Yes, because the very best literature has such eternal lessons and I think that's the other thing why really forming our children's palate with the very best books—it immediately at the most tender age, connects them to something much bigger than themselves and that's why you have those golden years with your children where they're just like sponges, just soaking everything up and you want to really capture that because it's such a sweet time for Mom and Dad reading to their children on their lap. It's just a cozy, intimate time and at that time, you want to really utilize your kid's maximum capacity and benefit, and I think when you're reading the very best books, you are.

And I think it's such an antidote for the narcissism of our age, because when you look at so many young people now and the culture we have of just the Hollywood stardom and the sports stardom, we live in a very narcissistic age. And the beauty of the best books is it connects us to something so much more transcendent than that, and so much bigger than ourselves. And the great line in *To Kill a Mockingbird* where Miss Maudie is talking to Scout and she's talking about talents, and she says something like, "Only a crazy person takes pride in their own talents." And yet we live in a culture that that's what we idolize, whether it's the completely unearned... physical beauty, or the talent of sports. I mean sports, yes, you have to nurture that talent. You have to refine it. You have to work it, but it's still a talent. It's still a God-given ability. You don't earn the body you're given. You're given this body and this body may be skilled at something and may be designed just right to throw the perfect pass, but that's not anything you earned and yet we live in a culture where people take so much credit for their own talents and their own gifting. And it's really tragic because those are the people that are on pedestals in our culture. And that's why I think the best literature helps our children to not fall into that sort of narcissistic thing like oh, I'm so...
think it’s… The other thing that I think is so important for reading to our children is they learn appropriate human emotions as they watch us respond to literature and I think that is such a powerful lesson, because when there’s a moment in which it is so moving, what has just happened, that as we’re reading we’re choked up and we can’t continue the story and we have to stop because our voice is very breaking and tears are coming to our eyes and our children learn, “Oh, there’s something here.”

And not every child reacts emotionally to literature. Children react in different ways, but one of our children seemed to always be pretty stalwart and we’d all sort of be choked up, and if I was reading I’d have to pass the book to my husband because I’d be choked up and then he would keep reading and he’d get choked up, and he’d have to try to pass it to one of our kids… But our son, it just didn’t seem to affect him quite as much. You know, you always wonder what is that point at which there’s a little bit of a break in that.

Whatever that armor is, whatever that vulnerability is, how do you reach that vulnerable place, because we all have different vulnerabilities, right, and so for this child, it happened to be… the first time he really feel racism for what it was, was through the pages of the book. He was 15 years old and he was reading Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry and Let the Circle Be Unbroken. I think he was actually on the third one of that trilogy. And I was standing in the kitchen cooking dinner and he came in and he was bawling. And this was the child that just didn’t bawl his eyes out. And his question was, “Oh my gosh, Mom! How can people treat others this way?” And that was that epiphany for him in that moment of catharsis, which is what the very best books do. And again, just like Atticus Finch says in To Kill a Mockingbird, it’s that walking in another man’s shoes and be able to empathize and feel their pain that breaks us out of our sort of prisons. Kilpatrick calls it our prison house is absolved with… I mean what better tool do we have in our tool chest, than to do that?

47:04 Letting the best books speak directly to the child

Sarah: Because as a parent, I feel like I do so much of that directing the way I want my children to think or feel, but when you use a book to do that instead, you get to step out of the way completely and let the book do that work on a child’s heart.

Rea: You’re so right, and that’s wise of you as a young mom, because it’s easy for us to fall into plying our children with questions and rather than just letting the book speak to them and letting what the characters are going through speak to them. And you know it’s not something that happens overnight. It’s something that happens over years of investment and over years of pouring into our children’s lives in this way. It’s such a joy now to watch my children be parents and watch how they’re taking so many of those lessons that they learned as children from the best books that they read and reapplying them in their children’s lives, so we’re seeing that second generation of those priceless lessons that they learned and the joy that they’re giving out of being able to nurture those things with their children. So it’s really a multi-generational thing.

It speaks to that scripture you know, history endures to all generations, and wow, what a beautiful thing that we could be part of that generational passing on of that legacy and passing on of that truth and acquainting ourselves with the best books, with the books that have been seminal in American culture, the To Kill a Mockingbirds, and the Uncle Tom’s Cabins, and the books of Mark Twain, because those things spoke to particular issues of our culture. Now they speak to universal themes, but through the venue of the issues that our particular culture has dealt with. And of course the whole issue of racism has been really a defining part of American history and it still continues to be. When you look at what just happened in South Carolina, you realize that this is still a defining issue. We have to be constantly evaluating our worldview and our own particular… because we all have our own little cultural prejudices and sometimes we don’t even realize they’re there. But literature could help us see those things and can help us work through them.

Sarah: Well unfortunately, we’re almost out of time and this has been such a wonderful conversation but before I let you go, I am curious to know which book most shaped you as you were growing up.
The books that most shaped Rea

Rea: Well, like I said, I wasn’t raised in a literary home but I think… oh, gosh, it’s so hard to point to one book, but I think one of the books that I read as a teen that I really felt opened my mind in a way… what I like to think of is the words of C.S. Lewis where he calls it the baptism of the imagination. And I would say *A Wrinkle in Time* really baptized my imagination. We’re talking about the cultural issues of our day, and again, C.S. Lewis talks about the baptism of imagination but he also talks about this notion of don’t read more than one contemporary book out of every three books because every society is subject to its own blindness, and if we read the old books, those will help us to see our own cultural blindness. And one book that I would really recommend, especially for this generation of home educators is Charles Dickens’ *Hard Times*.

Sarah: I’ve not read that actually. Okay.

Rea: Well, that’s a book where he really tries to expose the mechanization of education and because of the industrial revolution and the wonders of what industrialization brought to humankind, educators thought *well this is what we need for education too*, so there became a real emphasis on making education devoid of any kind of emotion because emotion wasn’t scientific. And so when you read Plato, when you read Charlotte Mason, it’s just like there is no true education without the emotional component, but now there are certain paradigms where you are, you’re again divorcing it from emotions. So if there isn’t something that resonates in the human heart with what we’re reading and there isn’t some sort of emotional response, then we probably need to reevaluate. So *Hard Times* by Charles Dickens would be a great read for parents, just to really look at how education became mechanized, to the demise of society.

Sarah: Okay, I’ll put it on my list for this summer.

Rea: Yeah, it’s good.

Sarah: This has been wonderful. So for all of our listeners, if you are really interested in teaching your children through literature you really can’t get any better than what Rea and her team creates there at Beautiful Feet Books and you can find them at bbooks.com. They have literature packs for all different time periods in history. They also have a literature pack for history through science which is really appealing to me, and one that I want to get my hands on soon is the history of classical music through literature. That looks fantastic, Rea.

Rea: Oh, thank you. Well it’s been delightful spending this time with you, Sarah. Thank you so much.

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

“My name is Grace Pitt and I live in Texas. My favorite book to hear read aloud is *The Prairie Thief*. It is about a girl named Louisa. My favorite part is when Louisa meets the Brownie.”

“Hi! My name is Jack. I’m from Pennsylvania. I’m 5 years old. My favorite book right now is the *Magic Tree House*, book 45, *A Crazy Day with Cobras* by Mary Pope Osborne. My favorite part is when Jack and Annie get to the Emerald Rose out of the cobra’s nest. It was really fun to read.”

“Hi! My name is Kate. I’m 3 years old. I’m from Pennsylvania. My favorite book is *Sesame Street, I Can Do It*. My favorite part is when Elmo learns to swim. I love to read.”

“Hello! I’m James and where I live is Alaska, and my favorite book is *Waynetta and the Cornstalk* and how old I am is 5 years old. My favorite part is where Waynetta’s mom throws the magic corn out the window.”

Kids, thank you. That’s my favorite part of the show. It always is. I know you all love it too because that’s what we hear in the comments to the show notes and in emails and in the membership site. Everybody loves *Let the Kids Speak!* So do I. If your child wants to leave a message to be aired on the podcast, head to readaloudrevival.com. Scroll to the bottom of the page. It is super simple and we don’t mind how many times your child stutters or needs to start again or needs to be coached through what they’re saying. We can clean it all up and let the world hear what their favorite read-alouds are. So make sure you go do that.

That’s super fun. And again, if you wouldn’t mind, if you could go to iTunes and leave us a rating or review—
man, that would be just wonderful. I go there and read every single one. They make my day but beyond that, they actually really do help people in the world find out how to build their family culture around books. So we appreciate everybody who does that.

Until next time, friends, go build your family culture around books!