



RAR 97 – The Lowdown on Reading Aloud to Teens

Sarah: You're listening to the Read-Aloud Revival podcast. This is the podcast that helps you make meaningful and lasting connections with your kids through books.

Well, hello, hello. Welcome to episode 97 of the Read-Aloud Revival podcast. We are just inching our way up to 100, aren't we? I'm Sarah Mackenzie, your host, and today's show is all about the low-down on reading aloud with teens. Yep! I said teens. This is going to be a good episode. I can't wait to start.

1:03 Book surprises

Before I do, though, I have to share a couple of my favorite things I've heard people saying about the new book I wrote, *The Read-Aloud Family* because they're making my day. Samantha wrote in and told me that "the book surprised me, pleasantly, I must say, because I have a few booklist books already and I love her recommendations for newer titles." That made me really happy because I worked really hard in this book to choose lots of books that have been published recently and are excellent. But, it can be really overwhelming to go into a bookstore and see all those new books coming out and have any idea if they're worth our kids' time and attention. So, that's what I was hoping to do in *The Read-Aloud Family* is give you really new, relevant book recommendations. There are some classics and old stuff in there, and definitely some old favorites as well, but hopefully lots of new titles you wouldn't have been familiar with. So, Samantha, thank you. And then Calista wrote in and said, "I was surprised with how easy this book was to read. I don't always enjoy reading

non-fiction or parenting books but this one I read in two sittings, I couldn't stop," which also made my day. Jill also mentioned that "she was surprised to have found new books that she's never even heard of before." So, if you're wondering if *The Read-Aloud Family* has something for you, it probably has some good book recommendations you've never heard of before. You can find *The Read-Aloud Family: Making Meaningful and Lasting Connections with Your Kids* anywhere books are sold.

2:34 Reading aloud with teens = magic

I've got a few teenagers myself, and here's what I know about reading aloud with teens. It's kind of a magical experience. One thing that's really amazing about reading with teens is the books you read with your teens you'll often enjoy every bit as much as your kids do, and this is a time of life when our kids are naturally going through a big transition, they're starting to pull away from us and become more autonomous, and it's really good, it's really helpful as parents who want to have good relationships with our kids to have a regular habitual way to connect with them. And, books can be that way. We're going to talk about that because they can serve that job, they can do that job of helping us connect with our kids in a few ways. The first way is just that when we're in the read-aloud habit, when we're reading aloud a novel and so every couple of days we're coming together to read-aloud, it forces us to spend some good, productive time together. Some time present with each other not both staring at our screens, or chatting about when basketball practice, or who's driving who where, or when the curfew is, or what is due this week, or when the orthodontist appointment is at, but really connect



with each other and just be present and enjoy each other's company. And you parents of teens know, just like I do, it's important to enjoy each other's company and it's not always easy but it can be a lot easier with a book. OK, another way it does that is that a book can be a really safe way to approach some of the nitty-gritty, hard conversations you've gotta have with your teens. These are the things we don't really want to talk to our kids about but we need to, right? What I have found is really hard things in the world can be softened a little bit when we read a story about it and then we have a conversation—it's a safe way for us to get practice with some of the nittier-grittier, harder, tough stuff of life. We can talk about it in the context of a book and we get to have these conversations that we probably wouldn't open up on our own otherwise, or that might be kind of awkward to open up on our own otherwise. So, those books can be a really safe way to approach hard things in life in a really natural conversation starter.

4:39 What to know

So, here's what I want you to know about reading aloud with your teens. It is never too late to begin. So, if you have teenagers and you think, 'Well, they'll never go for me reading aloud with them now because I've not been reading aloud to them before,' there are some strategies you can use to help you. One of those strategies is simply just to start with audio books and play audio books in the car. Now, this works best if you just turn on an audio book in the car and you don't say it's for your child, you don't say, "Here's a book for you to listen to!" You act like it's a book that you want to listen to, even if they go, "I don't want to listen to that," you can say, "Oh sorry, I really want to listen to it," and then turn on

something that's hard not to get engaged with, like, *The Fellowship of the Ring*. That can be a game-changer, because it's sort of like taking advantage of a captive audience, but what your child, your teenager doesn't want to feel like is they don't want to feel like your project. So, this is something that trips us up: we tend to want to do things for our kids that will help them become better humans, help them become better adults, and functioning adults, but our kids don't want to be our projects—so if they feel like we're reading to them or sharing books with them because we're trying to improve them they will resist, but if they feel like reading is something we do for pleasure and because it's a part of our family culture, that's different. But, you might have to ease your way. So, listening to audio books in the car could be a good way to go, a good way to start. I have a few other ideas in *The Read-Aloud Family*, the new book I wrote, and you can pick that up anywhere books are sold and it has some other ideas, too, for helping your teens get involved in reading aloud and start reading aloud with your teens even if you haven't been reading aloud to them before.

6:20 Assignments versus book clubs

Another thing that trips us up when reading aloud with teens is we have this tendency to make reading more like school and less like our own adult book clubs. I dedicated an entire chapter to this in *The Read-Aloud Family* because I thought it was so important; this need to create a book club culture in our home. And, I actually read that entire chapter for you here on The Read-Aloud Revival podcast. It's episode 93, and if you haven't heard it yet, go to ReadAloudRevival.com/93 and you'll be able to



hear chapter 6 “Creating a Book Club Culture at Home,” and you’ll be able to find out what I mean by not schooling it out of your kids, not schooling a love of reading out of your kids. Especially with teens we want to treat their reading lives a lot more like a book club and a lot less like they’re used to having it treated in a classroom. That can go a long way toward helping our kids become readers, self identify as readers, want to be read-aloud to, and fall in love with stories. Conversations with our teens actually matter at least as much, probably more than actually, the reading. Now, this is something that’s really important to remember: having conversations with our kids, with our teenagers about the books we’re reading, about the ideas we’re encountering, about the decisions the characters are making in the books, and about all those things happening in our kids’ lives, those are as important as the book. So, if you can only read-aloud half as many books with your teenager in order to make room to talk in your schedule, to talk with your teenager, that is a good call. If you need to, to find time to have good conversations, leisurely conversations with your teenagers, if you need to read less to do it, then read less to do. But, remember that the conversations are as important, and probably more important, than the reading itself. You’ll find a lot of details on how to have good conversations with your teenagers in chapters 10 and 11 of *The Read-Aloud Family*. Those are actually chapters dedicated toward how to have good conversations with your kids, but there’s so much there, and some good examples of how to have good conversations with your teens.

8:28 Continuing picture books

Remember, the last couple of weeks I have been saying that you don’t want to give up on picture books, that we don’t actually graduate from picture books like we’re stepping up the rungs of a ladder, but think of them more as like expanding concentric circles, right? We read picture books and then we read picture books plus middle grade novels, and then we read picture books plus middle grade novels plus YA plus adult books, so expand your child’s reading horizon don’t narrow it by cutting out picture books. I actually mention a couple of picture books that are really well suited for teens in *The Read-Aloud Family*. There’s some books by Jacqueline Woodson and Patricia Polacco that are heavy, heavy, heavy—they cover some hard things like civil rights and slavery and all kinds of things like that. Those are really good to read with your teens, especially if you are trying to have a conversation with your teenager about something in the world today as it relates to one of those topics, for example. A picture book can be a great way in to those conversations, so don’t be afraid of picture books for your teens.

9:29 Book recommendations

In *The Read-Aloud Family* I’ve got a ton of recommendations of books for teens but let me give you a couple today. The things we’re looking for when we’re looking for books for our teens are primarily we want to expand our child’s horizons. We want them to read stories of people and places they are not familiar with. This is how our kids get to slip into the shoes and walk a mile in the shoes of someone else. This is how they grow in empathy and compassion. This is how they learn to listen and see the world from



someone else's point of view. There are studies that show that people who read fiction are more compassionate, empathetic people than those who do not read fiction; that is because we get to spend an entire novel slipping into the shoes of someone else, and taking on someone else's point of view. We live in a culture where we all talk at each other, it's really hard to hear someone else's point of view, it's really hard to think we're not right about something, it's very combative and argumentative, and everybody's looking for a fight, and when we read stories we get a chance to listen and really experience life from someone else's point of view, and that is an amazing skill to give a teenager, and an amazing experience to give a teenager. So, expand those horizons by reading stories about places and people and settings and issues that are not familiar to them, and then make sure you leave time to talk about them with your teenager, because like I said, that's just as important, if not more important, than the actual reading itself.

Don't be afraid of meatier subjects with your teens. This is going to depend on whether your teen is 13 or whether your teen is 17—I understand that 100%. I have nearly those ages, both, in my home at the moment and there's a very big difference between the maturity, emotional maturity of a 13 year old and a 17 year old, for example. But, as they grow don't be afraid of meatier subject matter knowing that a conversation can go a long way toward helping your child appropriate and understand and put into perspective whatever they're encountering in their reading. Another thing I would say not to be afraid of is reading aloud books that are underneath your teen's reading level. We have this tendency to want to push our kids to books that are as high as they can possibly get, right?

So, we think if you can understand *Pride and Prejudice* we should read-aloud *Pride and Prejudice*. Well, maybe. But, maybe there's a lot to benefit from middle grade books even with teens. You'll find that many of the recommendations that I suggest for reading aloud with teens in *The Read-Aloud Family* are middle grade books and that's because I think the content, the storyline, the plot, the character development, all the pieces of that book have a lot to offer a teen and parent's conversation, and understanding of the world. Reading is still primarily about connection when we're reading with our teens. That is still the number one benefit from reading aloud, is connection. Never forget that. Never think that reading the classic itself is more important than the child in front of you. Never think that reading through a certain book list is more important than connecting with a child in front of you. Connection is still of supreme importance.

12:53 Read-alouds versus read-alones

Now, in *The Read-Aloud Family* you'll find a bunch of recommendations for teens. Now, I'm going to tell you this—this was a crazy, hard book list to make. And, I'll tell you why: because books that we're comfortable with handing to our teens because they're ready for whatever subject matter, that's different than a book we're comfortable reading aloud to our teens. There may be scenes or language or issues that are just not super comfortable to read out loud with our teens, that we're OK with them reading on their own and discussing. That ended up presenting a really big challenge to me because I wanted to make sure the books I was recommending in this chapter provided for pleasant read-aloud



experiences. So, I didn't choose books that were at the highest level or that would push the literary understanding of our teenagers, I chose books primarily about connection—that would lend themselves to good conversations and discussions, and help us connect with our teens.

13:48 3 Book ideas

Here are just a couple of favorites from those that I chose for the book. One is *Echo* by Pam Muñoz Ryan, and this is a book that is listed probably at your library as a middle grade book, but as an adult I want to read this one over and over and over. It's amazing. It is so complex and beautiful, and you will think about this book for a long time after you read it, but I actually don't recommend that you read the book at all. I recommend that you listen to the audio version. It's narrated by a set of narrators who do an exquisite job—it is an experience, really. The book basically tells the story, four separate stories that weave altogether at the end in this amazing—you just don't even know how she's just going to be able to tie all these stories together, and she does it. It's a masterpiece, one of my favorite books for all time. I put it in the teen section although I think you can probably read it with a child who's 12 and up, probably, maybe 11, but 12 and up could listen to it. I think teens will enjoy it a whole lot and you will as well. Another book I recommend reading with teens is *Fever 1793*. This is another middle grade novel that I think is ... you know, you could read it with your 10 year old and up, but your teens are going to love this book as well. This is by Laurie Halse Anderson. It's based on the true events of the Yellow Fever epidemic of 1793 in Philadelphia. And, it's a historical fiction novel about a girl named Mattie Cook and she's basically caught up in the middle of this plague.

It's an "edge of your seat" type book and it would be a quick read. I think, especially if you're getting started with reading with your teens, if your teens having been read to much, aloud, or if you're really short on time, maybe you have a big family, maybe you have a lot of commitments, maybe you work outside the home—if you're short on time and you don't have a lot of time to dive into a really big book with your teen, reading something short like this will still lend itself to some tremendous conversations and a great literary experience. That's *Fever 1793*. And, then another book that I included in *The Read-Aloud Family* because I think it's such a good book to share with teens is *The Hiding Place* by Corrie Ten Boom. This is, of course, the true story of Corrie Ten Boom who was a watchmaker and she was basically thrust into the Dutch resistance during World War II. I really think this one's best for older teens. I know that there are some 13 year olds who read it, I probably wouldn't read it with my own 13 year old, I'd be more inclined to read it with a 15 or 16 year old and up. It will absolutely shatter your heart, and your teen's heart. There are some pretty startling accounts of life in a Nazi prison camp. One of the reasons I think this is such a good read-aloud is because you can talk your child through some of the most horrific events in human history, and having those conversations and being able to talk with them about it and feel the depth of emotion they will feel when they're reading it can be a really positive thing for your relationship and for your child's ability to get through the book and understand this time of history. Teenagers are predisposed (is the word I want to use) to feeling things really extreme, and unfortunately, this is why in some cases we have teens who are just prone to deep despair or cynicism because the world seems like an awful place when you read



about these horrifying true events in history. So, when we read these with our kids we are able to talk through them, let them feel the depth of that emotion, let them be shattered by it, and then get all the way to the end of *The Hiding Place* and this is a book that will lead you to tremendous hope. If you read *The Read-Aloud Family* you know that I believe every good book leaves the reader with hope. I don't think there's any exceptions. Good books leave the reader with the ability to see the world with fresh eyes, and with an overall sense of hope, and *The Hiding Place* miraculously does that, even after the story she tells. It's just a beautiful, beautiful book. Above all, I want to remind you that reading with teens, again, is about connection. Connecting with our teens it's one of those things that with our phones and our schedules and our teens' schedules which are oftentimes busier than our own, it can be really hard to make time for a meaningful connection. But, it's so worth it. And, reading aloud is a very simple, powerful, meaningful way in to connecting with our teenagers.

18:53 Let the kids speak

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.

Child1: Hi, my name is Riah, and I'm 7 years old, and my favorite book is *Josephina* and why I like that book is because they live on a ranch and she does stuff with her hands and she has a gulp. [mom: and, where do you live?] In Hager City, Wisconsin. [mom: Wisconsin].

Child2: Hi, I'm Celia, and 11 years old, from Tallahassee, Florida, and my favorite book that

I've read recently to myself is *The War that Saved My Life* by Kimberly Brubaker Bradley. I loved how I was able to connect with Ada who was also 11 years old in World War II. Usually, I'm not much of a history person but I recommend this book to any other 11 year old girls looking for a real page turner.

Child3: My name is Lucia and I live at Tallahassee, and 5. And, my favorite book is *The Very Quiet Cricket*. [mom: why do you like it?] Because it's very, very fun to see the pictures.

Child4: Hi, my name is Lydia. I'm 11 years old and I live in Texas. One of my newest favorite books is *Some Kind of Courage* by Dan Gemeinhart. The boy in the story, Joseph, has no family except for a horse named Sarah who he's set on getting back from an evil horse trader. It's full of heart and suspense and that's why I like this book.

Child5: My name is **[**inaudible**]** and I live in Kazakhstan, and I'm 4 years old. And my favorite book is *Peter Rabbit* because I like it when he gets away from Mr. McGregor.

Child6: Hello, my name is Rosemary and I am 9 years old, and I live in Belmont, North Carolina. And, my favorite book is *The Little White Horse* and I like the part when they have a tea party at the end, and they have three weddings.

Child7: Hi, my name is Bethany and I live in Belmont, North Carolina. And, I am 8 years old and my favorite book is *Harry Potter #5* by J. K. Rowling. And I like the part when Voldemort and Dumbledore have the duel and when Freddie and George go away from Hogsworth flying on their brooms.

Child8: Hello, my name is Kenneth [mom: Kenneth] and I am 6 years old and my favorite



book is *Calvin and Hobbes* and my favorite part is when Calvin jumps off out the window in a blanket that he was pretending to be a parachute but there's a little hole in the top so he just fell down straight away. And I live in Belmont, North Carolina.

Child9: Hi, my name is Abby. I live in Florida. I'm 9 years old and my favorite book is *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* by C. S. Lewis. My favorite part is when they all get into the wardrobe.

Child10: [mom: what's your name?] Trace. [mom: and, how old are you?] 5 years old. [mom: where do you live?] In Georgia. [mom: what's your favorite book?] *Bark of the Bog Owl*. [mom: what's your favorite part of *Bark of the Bog Owl*?] When the feechiefolks slobber meadow over Aidan's feet.

Sarah: Thank you for those book recommendations, kids. If your kids want to leave a message to be aired on the Read-Aloud Revival podcast, all you need to do is go to ReadAloudRevival.com, scroll to the bottom of the page, you'll see where to leave a message for the show. You can coach or guide your kids through those if they're small and you just want to have your kids repeat after you, that's totally fine. They can read off a card. Whatever it takes. We can clean the messages up that you leave and get them ready for the podcast. We just love hearing from your kids, it's so much fun. If you haven't subscribed to the Read-Aloud Revival podcast yet, go to your podcast app, whichever one you like to use on your phone. Look for the Read-Aloud Revival and hit subscribe, that helps us actually find more listeners, it helps iTunes and podcast apps know who to suggest the podcast to, and it also means that you won't miss an episode. And you don't want to miss the next

one. I'll be back in a week with episode 98. Until then, go make meaningful and lasting connections with your kids through books.