

# READ-ALOUD REVIVAL

## Episode 130: Reading Aloud as an Obstinate Act of Love, with Meghan Cox Gurdon

Sarah Mackenzie: [00:12](#)

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.

Hello, hello, everybody. This is Sarah Mackenzie and you've got episode 130 of the Read-Aloud Revival Podcast. I am really excited to share today's interview with you because I got to have a conversation with Meghan Cox Gurdon. She's a mother of five. She's been the Wall Street Journal's children's book reviewer since 2005, so she's been writing weekly columns about children's books for 13 years. She's the author of the new book, this year it just came out, *The Enchanted Hour: The Miraculous Power of Reading Aloud in an Age of Distraction*. So, of course, you knew I was going to have to interview her, right? I'll tell you what, this book was on my radar, and Meghan's work has been on my radar for awhile, but Kortney, our Community Director here at Read-Aloud Revival read the book first and she told me, "Sarah, you've just got to read it, like drop everything and read it. I just took four pages of notes." So I did and indeed I took a lot of notes too, used a lot of book darts, underlined a whole lot of passages, and I was really looking forward to this conversation with her.

So I'm glad she's joining us today. Before we get going with the episode, I'm going to be answering a listener question.

Melanie: [01:37](#)

My name is Melanie and I am from Newburgh, Indiana. My question is regarding summer and reading. I am a creature of habit and so in the fall and winter, I feel like I do a great job, setting aside a time to read with my kids. But the summer time poses quite the challenge with vacations and just a more relaxed schedule. I often find it difficult to make time for it. Do you have any tips or suggestions to continue reading throughout the summer? Also, any good audio books for the pre-school crowd - my kids are five and three, and that will be great, thank you.

Sarah Mackenzie: [02:17](#)

Hey Melanie, that is a great question because I bet a lot of us are feeling the same way. Whenever we slip out of our normal routines, important things that happen most days during the school year like reading aloud can kind of slip off our radar. So the first thing I want to tell you is to give yourself lots of grace. There's gonna be times you're on vacation, or you have family visiting, or something

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pops up and you just don't get your reading time in. Remember this shouldn't be a burden, your reading aloud is really a connection point for your family. So just the fact that you're asking the question, and you wanna be committed to making sure your family does some reading aloud this summer, means you're on the right track.

So don't be too hard on yourself on those days when it doesn't happen. That said, I think you can ask yourself what do we do all together every day? Maybe it's breakfast. My family doesn't actually all eat breakfast at the same time, so that's not a good solution for me. Ours is dinner probably because we do usually eat dinner altogether. So find a time of day when, for the most part you're already altogether, and then just peg your reading aloud onto that time. So I could say, Okay, for the most part, we have dinner together every day, so I'm going to, before anyone's excused from the table, read aloud for fifteen minutes before they leave the dinner table.

As you know probably already that if you say I'm just going to read aloud for ten minutes or for fifteen minutes, oftentimes that's just enough to get you going, and so you keep reading even longer after that. But saying it's only fifteen minutes kind of gets us over that initial hurdle of, "Oh, I don't have time for this." So if it's breakfast, it can be reading aloud while everyone's eating breakfast. And a lot of times doing it at the beginning of the day is a great way to go about it because you know you've gotten to the most important things first. And reading aloud is just a fantastic way to start the day.

Don't forget, of course, audiobooks, which are fantastic for road trips, which by the way you asked about audiobooks. Audiobooks for pre-schoolers. So let me tell you a couple of my favorites for the pre-school set. I love "The House at Pooh Corner" and "Winnie the Pooh" books read by Petter Dennis. The "Frog and Toad" books by Arnold Lobel are wonderful on audio, and they're written and read by Arnold Lobel himself. There's multiple books there: "Frog and Toad Are Friends," "Frog and Toad All Year," "Frog and Toad Together." And it doesn't matter how many times you've read those books, the audiobooks still delight. So that's another really wonderful one for pre-schoolers. Let's see, "Princess Cora and The Crocodile," which is written by Laura Amy Schlitz and illustrated by Brian Floca, that is a great audiobook. It's about 40

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minutes long, so it's kind of perfect for a little quiet time or downtime. It's funny, really well done on audio.

And then there several books in the Rabbit Ears audiobook series that are wonderful for pre-schoolers. For example, "The Tale of Mr. Jeremy Fisher" by Beatrix Potter is read aloud by Meryl Streep for Rabbit Ears audio. She's a wonderful narrator, so that's a really good one. There's also "The Velveteen Rabbit," also read by Meryl Streep. There's Rudyard Kipling's "Animal Tales," like How the Rhinoceros Got His Skin. That one's narrated by Jack Nicholson. So what I love about the Rabbit Ears audiobooks is that they're really well done, there's usually good music tied in with the story, and they are read by famous actors and actresses. So they're just really a delight to listen to.

Anyway, what I'm going to do is put several of those in the show notes for you. You can also go to [readaloudrevival.com/audible-deals](http://readaloudrevival.com/audible-deals) and you'll see all of the current Audible deals on audiobooks. And you can always grab them just one off, you don't have to have an audible subscription to get a good deal on those audible books. So if you go to [readaloudrevival.com/audible-deals](http://readaloudrevival.com/audible-deals), and you can even search there by age, so find your kids ages and see which audible deals we are recommending now for your kids.

Thanks so much for your question, Melanie. Hey, if you have a question you'd like me to answer on an upcoming episode of the podcast, go to [readaloudrevival.com](http://readaloudrevival.com), scroll to the bottom of the page and you'll see a button that says "Leave a message for Sarah Mackenzie."

I'm so glad you're joining us today, Meghan. Welcome to the Read Aloud Revival.

Meghan C Gurdon: [06:37](#)

Oh, Sarah, I am thrilled to be talking to you. I've been a great admirer, and I think your mission is wonderful, and it's fantastic to be in the company of a fellow zealot.

Sarah Mackenzie: [06:47](#)

A fellow zealot indeed. Do you want to tell us a little bit about your family before we can get going?

Meghan C Gurdon: [06:52](#)

Yeah, I'd love to. So my husband and I have five children. They range in age from 13, a girl, to 24, another girl. I have four daughters and one son.

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- Sarah Mackenzie: [07:01](#) And you've been a Book Reviewer for the Wall Street Journal for, well, I'd say since 2005.
- Meghan C Gurdon: [07:07](#) I started writing out at right before my youngest daughter was born, I started doing the column. When they started a new weekend section, and they were interested in having children's books represented, which is kind of interesting. And I lucked into it really, because I had written a lot for the journal over the years, I'd written a lot of journalism over the years. And I had been writing reviews for the books pages. And when this came up, it was, I was, maybe in some ways really the obvious pick for them, given that I had an in-house focus group.
- Sarah Mackenzie: [07:35](#) Yes. Well, I love the Enchanted Hour so much. And we're going to really dig in here because I filled my book with book darts, and notes, and underlines. One of the first things that just jumped out at me - It took place in your chapter called "The Rich Rewards of a Vast Vocabulary." And we've talked before on the podcast about how a good solid vocabulary, a rich vocabulary is an excellent predictor of future academic success. I love how in the book you discuss reading The Story of Babar. I expect this is a book many of our listeners are familiar with. And you spent a couple of pages just helping us see the visual riches that happen on the pages visually as we're looking at a Babar book.
- And then, on page 93, you say this, you say, "Everything I've just described appears in the pictures. Add the text, and a listening child will hear all sorts of other interesting and unusual words. Fond, Satisfied, Elegant, Learned, Becoming, Progress, Marabou birds, Scold, Promises, Calamity, Funeral, Quavering, Proposals, Splendid, Dromedary, Au Revoir, Honeymoon, and a gorgeous yellow balloon. It takes just under seven minutes to read the 46 pages of the story of Babar out loud if you don't linger for quizzes. In that time, a child will have vicarious emotional experiences, he will see tenderness and catastrophe, fear and comfort, pride and anger, death, marriage, sorrow and joy, such a profusion of image and word and concept.
- And if you've set aside an hour for reading, you still have 53 minutes left. Think of the language riches a child will acquire if this happens every day, starting when he is

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tiny. His mind will become a horde of glimmering, glinting gem studded things."

Meghan C Gurdon: [09:22](#)

Oh, that sounds lovely when you read it.

Sarah Mackenzie: [09:25](#)

Makes me want to drop everything and just go over and read a picture book with my kids.

Meghan C Gurdon: [09:30](#)

Oh, that's, well, my work is done. No, I really enjoyed actually writing about that because I think this is one of the things that we can easily, you know in life it's very ... to overlook the things that are around us. And even when we love picture books, and we love reading with children, you know it's easy to overlook just how rich and profound and deep the experience is. And in that passage, you alluded to quizzes.

Sarah Mackenzie: [09:54](#)

Yeah.

Meghan C Gurdon: [09:54](#)

That of course is our family term for the kind of interaction, that sort of informal interaction that you would have, right? With a small child and a picture book. So you're looking at the book, you're reading the words to the child. You might stop and say, well then where's the bunny? Or who can find the, in the case of Babar, who can find the andirons? Or the, you know the spats, or some other kind of esoteric thing that's in the pictures. You know as a way of kind of playing with the book, almost as a kind of a literary toy as you're going. So you're reading the story, you're interacting with the pictures, and in the pictures, there is, yeah, so much. I mean it was the brilliant, the brilliant thing about those De Brunhoff books, especially the early ones, was how much detail went into every picture and how, you know comparatively unusual many of the things depicted are or were.

Sarah Mackenzie: [10:42](#)

Yes, because I think especially for those of us who are in the habit of reading aloud, even those of us who are doing it on a regular basis is what I'm trying to say. It almost seems too simple, we almost, I mean, because it's something you just can pull a child free, right? You can pull under your lap, and crack open a book, and just read the words and then start pointing at the pictures and asking their child what they see. That just seems so simple, but when I read your description, a couple pages long of what's actually happening when you pull open a

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spread like Babar. It's a little bit jaw dropping, I mean, it's absolutely true.

Meghan C Gurdon: [11:15](#)

It is one of the most, well, as we're speaking to the choir here, singing from the same hymn sheet. But it is really one of the most consequential and beautiful and nourishing things we can do. You know it's absolutely free? The list of good effects of reading aloud is almost without end.

Sarah Mackenzie: [11:31](#)

So, let's talk about the phenomenon where kids want to be read a book again and again and again and again. Because I mean in our house it'll go by season, I was just telling someone last summer was, or no, last winter was the winter of Fritz and the Beautiful Horses by Jan Brett. I read that book so many times I could probably recite the whole thing in my sleep. But you say in your book, let's see, I'm flipping to page 100, "When a child asks for the same story again, again, he is telling us something important that we may never find out what that important thing is. The book may be helping him perform quiet, interior work having to do with fear or sadness that he can't articulate. The book may be an old friend whose familiarity feels comforting at bed time."

The reason I loved that so much is because it reminded me that we can't always know what's happening inside the mind or soul or heart of our child, but we can trust that when we're sitting there reading with our kids, something is happening there. And sometimes it may be a lot more substantial or formative than we even realize, especially when it's a book they wanna hear over and over. So I wonder if you can talk a little more about this important act we do as parents when we re-read.

Meghan C Gurdon: [12:38](#)

Yeah, again, no, I think that's absolutely right. And I think it's really if you look at the face of a child who is transported by a book, there is a kind of stillness, right? There's a transport you can see that the eyes may be focused on the middle distance, or sometimes I've looked up and seen my children looking at my face, but not as if they're really looking at me, it's more like I'm the portal or something. And so, yeah, so as you say, there is this, you know we can't know what goes on inside them. But with reading books again and again, we have, I mean there is some research now to tell us that in addition to these maybe more sort of gauzy and abstract ideas of

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what's going on inside a child, there are some important mechanisms of learning that are taking place.

There were some research done in England at the University of Sussex. And researchers there snuck in sort of odd made up words, and they smuggled them into texts, into children stories that they had concocted for the purpose. So, in, along with regular, you know, recognizable English terms were some other ones called like, there was something called a [Sprock 00:13:37] and something called a [Tanon 00:13:38]. And what they did was they read these books over and over to children to see what children would make of it.

And the again and again phenomenon seemed to confirm what they had suspected, which is that every time a child hears a story read again, they understand more of it, it's just making more sense. The language is making sense to them, the syntax is making more sense, it's as though they're consolidating their understanding through these again, again books. So I think that there are, you know there are a number of things happening. But there's definitely an emotional connection, you see the old friend. A book that was really popular in our family was a book called "Piper," about a little dog who is taken in by an old woman, and he's beaten, and runs away from a wicked man, and then he's taken in by an old woman. And when the wicked man tried to come back, the old woman doesn't give the dog up. And it's just this, you know it's beautifully illustrated by I think it's Emma Chichester Clark. She may have written it as well. That was an again, again book. And so, clearly, emotional content for sure. But I am quite certain that, as well, they were really wanting to master the language content.

Sarah Mackenzie: [14:52](#)

Let's talk about this term "Dialogic" reading, that comes up quite a bit in your book. And I think you have might touched on it already. But tell us what dialogic reading is, and why it matters.

Meghan C Gurdon: [15:01](#)

Yeah, so dialogic reading is what I was referring to before, in our family we call it "Quizzes." And that's exactly that, it's having a dialogue as it were fermented by contact with the book. You know, dialogue with your child, dialogue with the book, dialogue even with the pictures in the book. So, these are the impromptu kind of conversations and inquiries that you might have that

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books bring about. And this is very important, you know I'm sure you talked a lot on the podcast about the word gap, right? There are children who grow up in households where there may not be a lot of conversation, certainly not a lot of conversation directed to the children.

There may not be a lot of books, and there may not be book reading. And, you know, children who grow up this way, in the early years in particular, are at a really profound disadvantage when they get to school in all kinds of ways. And it's very difficult to overcome that disadvantage. I mean, it's a comparative disadvantage, right? So, it means that the child who has never had stories read to him or her simply hasn't had that fortification that a child, you know, a read aloud family has given that child. And there are, you know, we can see that there are long term effects that are really, really unfair, and it's a shame, right? That this is the case.

And dialogic reading is one of the greatest ways to encourage, it's a great way as a parent to practice, you know, conversation with your child. And also just to kind of elicit conversation from them, and help them use the words that you know you're hoping that they're learning just in the process of becoming a civilized human being. And it's also a wonderful way, it's you know very helpful for parents who, let's say they are shy or they're not confident about their reading skills. Because this is a real issue, right? I mean some, not all parents find it easy to read aloud, not all children find it easy to sit for a read aloud. I mean there are difficulties that people encounter. And so, one of the things I love about quizzes or dialogic reading is that in a way there's a kind of demystifying process with the book, we're talking about picture books here, of course, right. But that the book can be a play thing, and it's an entry point to conversation as much as it is, you know, a story and a series of illustrations that both parent and child would take in.

So, dialogic reading, you know it's something it generally fades out after you move past the picture book phase. But it's immensely productive in those early years. And, you know, it's really little things, it's like, you know, "Good night, moon," "Good night, cow jumping over the moon," "Wait, where's the cow?" "Look at the cow, he's



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over the moon, he's in a picture on the wall," "Wait, what else is on?"

Sarah Mackenzie: [17:37](#)

Yes.

Meghan C Gurdon: [17:38](#)

So, again it's this wonderful kind of back and forth, and dialogic reading of course is the, you know, pedagogical term for it. And our term as I said was "Quizzes." My children always love to have, they love to compete to find things in the pictures.

Sarah Mackenzie: [17:52](#)

As siblings will, of course, compete over everything at some point, right?

Meghan C Gurdon: [17:56](#)

Silence is also very powerful; sometimes, during dialogic reading, or during picture book reading, just stopping, right? And just pausing and looking at the page, or maybe pointing mutely to something in the illustrations. You know, that's a kind of dialogue, too. I mean, there, and sometimes, you know, a moment of quiet, let's say it's a story that has you know some drama or sadness in it. You know, not just hurrying through the pages, but pausing and just sitting with what you see for a little while. You know, sometimes that brings interesting things out of children, it gives them a moment to process what they're seeing and, and you know comment on it. I mean that, and it's all beautiful stuff, it's all grist for the great mill.

Sarah Mackenzie: [18:33](#)

Have you seen, that just reminds me of a picture book I've just loved this last year, which is "The Rough Patch" by Brian Lies.

Meghan C Gurdon: [18:40](#)

Oh, The Rough Patch? Oh, I love that book.

Sarah Mackenzie: [18:42](#)

Yes, and that's, I mean as you were talking about slowing down and being quiet, there's a few pages on there that I remember the silence actually spoke quite a bit of volume I think, you know there was a lot going on there in the silence of the pages, yeah.

Meghan C Gurdon: [18:56](#)

And the illustrations as I recall, yeah, this is for your readers, or readers, sorry, your listeners who don't know the book, it's the rough patch is, is the rough patch that a fox that actually goes through when his pet dog dies. And the two of them had really enjoyed gardening together. I mean, of course, you know, the fox is a stand in for a human being. And when the dog dies, the fox is so

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distraught and desolate that he ruins his garden and it lead to, you know, cuts things and violently cuts down beautiful things and, and then the pages go if you remember kind of dark.

Sarah Mackenzie: [19:28](#)

Yes.

Meghan C Gurdon: [19:28](#)

And so there's a visual silence, as well, that depth of grief. You know and then he comes out of the rough patch, and then there's love again. We had, oh, Sarah, privately, in our family, I say privately, here it is for the world to know but, you know, we had a lot going on this, the beginning of this year. We had my daughter getting married, our daughter getting married, my book coming out, and our beloved dog died.

Sarah Mackenzie: [19:50](#)

Oh.

Meghan C Gurdon: [19:51](#)

Yeah, and I picked that book up the other day and I couldn't open it, you know?

Sarah Mackenzie: [19:57](#)

Yeah.

Meghan C Gurdon: [19:57](#)

It was too much, ugh. So, yeah, so these, I mean, a picture book is a portal to the human heart.

Sarah Mackenzie: [20:03](#)

Yes. Yes, and actually I will just mention here since we're talking about The Rough Patch that we do have a list of books that are especially helpful portals to the heart when you have, are experiencing loss or grief. And so we'll make sure there that link to that list of our favorite picture books for loss and grief those times when you don't ever want them, but sometimes you need them, so we'll put a link to that in the show notes.

I love how in your book you don't need minimize the amount of effort it takes to read to our kids, especially as they grow. I mean it really is counter-cultural I think to take a half and hour, even 20 minutes, and read with our kids, especially when they're old enough to read to themselves. I know in your book you say, "Making the time to read together is almost an obstinate act of love." And I just love that because I really think, yes, reading aloud is, it's an act of love.

Meghan C Gurdon: [21:00](#)

Oh, for sure it is, and it is a sacrifice of time, and it's, you know, it can be difficult. I mean I read about this in

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the introduction, of course, referring back to the earlier days. But you know when my children were young and you're of course still in those trenches, you know getting to the read aloud at night sometimes felt like almost an insurmountable task, like how, it's madness, and it's dinner, and it's bath time, and it's everything.

But I made it absolutely something that was never to be missed. I mean it was one the one thing, it was like flossing your teeth, it was the thing that we absolutely always did, even if it was really late or even if we could do only do it for a little while. And invariably, I mean without exception, you can fight your way through the kind of furious waves of the day. And then, ugh, when you got to the read aloud, it was actually that was, that's when I would think, wait, this is what I should have been doing all day long. This is the way to live, this is the reward, you know? And I liken it to a life raft, it was the turbulent waters of, you know, childhood, you could pull up out of that turbulence and just rest together in this place of mutual encounter.

It is, it is a sacrifice, it is a discipline, but you know what? What worthwhile thing does not require some effort, you know?

Sarah Mackenzie: [22:13](#)

That's right. I also like that in your book you consider the question of whether reading aloud to someone is a form of cheating, right, or infantilizing them. And I like how you say that the difference between reading the words on the page for yourself or having someone read them to you is much like the difference between walking and running. You wrote, "Both walking and running are good ways to reach a destination. Is it babyish to walk? Which takes longer, but requires less effort. Is it more mature to run? Expend more energy and arriving sooner." And I remember laughing out loud when I read that the first time because I thought, yes, that's exactly right, we have this tendency to think if they can get it for themselves, and get it faster, that's better.

Meghan C Gurdon: [22:52](#)

We have a false idea of reading aloud versus reading with the eyes I think. Or there's this sort of almost a hierarchy of goods, right? And we, there's the assumption that reading with your eyes, decoding graphic symbols with your eyes, and processing what you're reading in your brain is, in some ways, superior to taking it in through

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your ears. You know, reading by listening. And I think is unduly limiting.

And, you know, honestly, you can even argue that listening to a story is not only more natural, but is almost more human than taking in a story through your eyes, because, because speech, what we process, which is how we of course process storytelling, which is someone reading aloud to us. Speech is our natural language, it's our, it's the way that all human beings, you know take in, well, apart from those who can't hear, that's a different set of the story, but those of us who can hear, right, that's how we learn language.

Sarah Mackenzie: [23:43](#)

Right.

Meghan C Gurdon: [23:43](#)

We learn from hearing and speaking. So it's very natural, it's very easy for us. And, you know, slightly off this topic, but in a related sense, you know one of the really beautiful things about reading aloud to a mixed group of people and it might be a mixed classroom, it might be a group of children of different ages or of different abilities, is when we read aloud to them, we bring a story within reach of those who are competent readers and those who are, you know, struggling readers. And they get it at the same time and with the same ease, because again, you know, speech is natural to us. And I love that, it's like reading aloud is this, ugh, well, it's a gift, it's a rising tide that lifts all boats, to use an economic argument.

Sarah Mackenzie: [24:26](#)

Yeah, yeah.

Meghan C Gurdon: [24:26](#)

You know-

Sarah Mackenzie: [24:27](#)

That's right. There is a spot on page 134 and 135 of your book that I have starred, and underlined, and put arrows to. So I'm just going to read it aloud. This really goes - so one of the questions we hear a lot at Read Aloud Revival is, am I reading a lot? Is it possible for me to read aloud to my kids too much? Especially homeschooling parents who say that their kids, their teenagers sometimes want them to read aloud their assignments to them because they're struggling with them.

And this is what you wrote, you wrote, "Knowing what I do now, I wouldn't hesitate to read a school assignment

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out loud if one of my children were having trouble with it. I wish we could back in time and recoup the miserable hours that Phoebe spent wrestling with Johnny Tremain in the summer before her fifth grade. It seems obvious to me now that the language and ideas were pitched a bit too far ahead of her. She couldn't read the novel with ease, so she couldn't read it with enjoyment. If I had brought it to life for her by reading it aloud, she might have relished spending time in revolutionary Boston with poor, mangled Johnny, and the rebellious sons of liberty. Rather than grinding through an ordeal that left her hating the author, Esther Forbes, she might have been able to appreciate the book's force and sentiment and beauty. And isn't that point? I mean, what else is the purpose of reading literature.

Meghan C Gurdon: [25:39](#)

I'm glad you liked that. I mean, I do, I do wish I could go back, that poor child, you know it was like, it was like the child at the dinner table left to try and eat the asparagus, or whatever repulsive is.

Sarah Mackenzie: [25:52](#)

Yes.

Meghan C Gurdon: [25:52](#)

Forced eating never, you know, or compelling people never endears something to them, you know, that's the trouble.

Sarah Mackenzie: [25:58](#)

Well, and maybe that is part of the power of reading aloud is that it is this invitation into, here, come sit next to me, let's do this together, or let's dive in together. Rather than here, go read this, it feels a lot more like being handed a plate of vegetables, especially if it's hard, you know? Which a lot of the classics are.

Meghan C Gurdon: [26:14](#)

Right, and well also to go back to the point that you were raising earlier, you know, is there really, is it really so wrong to read aloud? Is it really so wrong to take in a book through the ears than at, you know, than through the eyes. Is it worse? Is it infantilizing? No, absolutely not. In the course of my research, I interviewed a wonderful guy named Matthew Rubery, who has written a book called "The Untold History of the Talking Book." And it's a history of audiobooks, and he was drawn into the subject because he was very interested when a friend of his father, so a gentleman older than him or older than he, she officially confessed to having read quote, unquote a book on audiotape.

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And Matthew Rubery thought, Oh, that's interesting, why would you, why do we feel apologetic when we listen? What is that about? And so he looked into it. And one of the interesting things he found was that, you know, neurologists say, you know, we do, we do have to train the brain to read. And that's true if we're reading in regular English prose, it's true if we're reading Braille, or whatever. Understanding speech is very natural, you don't have to train the brain to understand speech. And but one of the things interestingly that he found is that when people do this kind of dual reading, which I actually at the beginning mentioned to you, I had been reading a novel both on audiobook, and simultaneously reading it that way and then, at other times in the day reading it on paper. The human brain does not seem to remember how it got the information.

Sarah Mackenzie: [27:33](#)

Right.

Meghan C Gurdon: [27:34](#)

So what he included from this was that basically, since we can't remember, we remember the story, whatever is, we remember the characters and the language. But the fact that we don't remember or distinguish between what we've read on the page and what we've heard through our ears tells us that, you know, one way or another, our brain is reading and it's fine to listen.

Sarah Mackenzie: [27:53](#)

Yeah, so then I guess the question is, you know, as parents, when we're thinking about a particular book or assignment or something with our kids, if the goal is to get the information into our child, or if the goal's to share this story with our child, then it doesn't matter if they'll be reading it through their eyes or their ears. If the goal is to help them become better readers with their eyes, then reading with their eyes makes sense. But I mean if we kind of step back, for the most part what we want is usually for the thing that's been written to get into our child, right?

Meghan C Gurdon: [28:19](#)

Yes, yes, indeed.

Sarah Mackenzie: [28:33](#)

Okay, so, can we talk about problematic books? Because this is something a lot of us are wrestling with. "Little House on the Prairie," for example, beloved I would imagine by the majority of listeners to this podcast, myself included. And yet, I think for a lot of us we struggle with some of the racial prejudices our kids

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encounter in those books. And others like them, Caddie Woodlawn and other similar. So, first of all, I wanna read a little snippet of what you've written about that book in particular.

So for anyone following along at home, An Enchanted Hour, this is from page 173. Meghan, you wrote, "We can read our children Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House on the Big Woods. And then we can read them Louise Erdrich's The Birchbark house and let them see, let the authors show them, at once, how similar life is when you are a little girl with annoying siblings, who lives close the land and must engage in yucky, tiresome chores. And how different westward expansion appeared, depending on the type of house and society you occupied. The solution to problematic passages in any particular book is not fewer books, but more of them. No single book has to scratch every itch. If the problem is that some literature expresses old fashioned views, the solution is to read our children more books of every kind. The more reading, the more voices. The more voices, the more imagination. The more imagination, the more opinions. The more opinions, the more the freedom of thought. And the more children engage in freedom of thought, the better.

Meghan C Gurdon: [30:02](#)

I mean children are going to encounter problematic things in the world, right? I mean we live in a world that's on a trigger, you know, is trigger happy for a problematic subject. You know, where better than at home to talk about these things, right?

Sarah Mackenzie: [30:15](#)

That's right.

Meghan C Gurdon: [30:15](#)

And one of the things I wanna say in defense of the Laura Ingalls Wilder's books, which I do, I absolutely love, I think they give us a priceless, irreplaceable look at whole worlds and ways of thinking of the past. And also ways of doing things. You know, we often joke that if ever there were the zombie apocalypse, we would grab those books and take them with us because those books tell you how to do everything. You can learn to farm, and butcher, and build things from like the-

Sarah Mackenzie: [30:40](#)

What to do with a pig bladder.

Meghan C Gurdon: [30:41](#)

Yes, exactly, which is obviously inflated, and play with your sister. Not get back.

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Sarah Mackenzie: [30:45](#)

Exactly.

Meghan C Gurdon: [30:46](#)

Yeah, but you know, I think that Laura Ingalls Wilder actually served her purpose very well in those books. And I think that she has done a disservice by being treated as a problematic author in this regard. You know as a child reading those books, I was left in no doubt as to this sort of retrograde quality of say her mother's opinions about Indians. You know I was almost embarrassed for Ma when I was a child because clearly she had a sort of bigoted view. And at the same time, as a child, I was unable to understand that there were perfectly good reasons for her to hold the views that she did. I didn't endorse them, but I think, you know, I think Laura Ingalls Wilder is a wonderful, she and her daughter, who worked with her on the books, they did a wonderful job of portraying the nuance of real life, you know? And when we've come across those scenes when I read to my children, we, you know, we talk about them.

I mean, how, of course, Native American mothers and children at that time would have had a different view of the settlers coming to the U.S. since that we do what we can to kind of, you know, provide some insights on that. But it's reasonable as well to explore the view of the settlers who are moving west. You know, it's part of our history, so we don't have to hide from it, we can try and understand it.

Sarah Mackenzie: [32:00](#)

What you say here is, "Be not afraid, let the stories flow. There are simple and sensible ways to convey optimism and openheartedness while acknowledging the limitations as we regard them of people who've gone before us. And then a little later you say, you say, "The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there. Children can understand this." And I thought, Oh my goodness, yes, this really comes back to I think giving our kids a lot of credit for being able to read about hard things, or circumstances in different ways, and hard things, and bad things that have happened in the past, with a kind of a sense of sensibility that we are not giving them credit for when you want to shelter or protect them from it.

Meghan C Gurdon: [32:39](#)

Yeah, I'm with you on that, absolutely right, yeah. I mean, look, on the sheltering question, right, everybody has to draw their line somewhere. But I don't think that we, you know, cultivating a climate of fear around books,

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especially classic books, is just wrong and shortsighted. And the idea that we as a civilization have reached the pinnacle of our development and have, are so without any culpability, or blame, or flaws ourselves that we can stand on these lofty heights and say, these, these books must all go, and we, you know have the one true truth of what it is good literature. You know, wrong; the future's gonna judge us, so let's be open minded and not be so quick to paper over the past.

Sarah Mackenzie: [33:15](#)

Yeah, I think that one of the things I really got reading from your book, it reaffirmed my trust and faith in reading with our kids. Books themselves end up becoming a gateway for conversation. You've talked about this before about how, when you're reading, like it stems from that dialogic reading you do with picture books and your kids. But as they get older, then your reading books that you know maybe tackle hard things in history, or hard truths about humanity, and I think it just kind of bursts, these doors bust open on conversations that might not come up any other way, right, but they end up being sort of a gateway to connect with our kids over these hard topics.

Meghan C Gurdon: [33:49](#)

Oh, absolutely, I think that's exactly right. And yeah, to make the point again, I mean where better to discuss these things than you know in the coziness of home. The book that has come up so much, with my daughters in particular, is "The Hundred Dresses." I mean it just came up the other day, my youngest daughter is in seventh grade, and she said, "Oh my gosh, this is just like the scene." At the end, there's a girl left her class because of bullying.

And in the book, as you may remember, the Wanda Petronski, the bullied Polish girl, leaves the class. Her father writes in broken English a letter to the teacher saying, you know, my daughter will not be treated cruelly in your class anymore. And you know these girls who had been toying with her, and playing with her, and having fun at her expense. You know you really saw how there was the deep feeling of one girl who'd known to be the bystander, right? The girl who'd known that what was going on was wrong and hadn't said anything. And, you know, it was just fascinating to see the same dynamic taking place in my daughter's class. And she was very

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aware of it. And in a way, you know, reading the book had prepared her for understanding what she was seeing.

It made sense to her that, you know, the girls who had chiefly persecuted this particular child in her class kind of covered up for it. They didn't really wanna take responsibility. Whereas others, including my daughter, who had, in fact, to her credit stood up for this girl. But you know, they had had the moral qualms about it, and they identified, or she identified with Maddie in the book, who is the girl, you know. I'm just very interesting how these books can inform our real life over and over and over again.

- Sarah Mackenzie: [35:18](#) Thank you so much for coming on the podcast. This has been a complete delight.
- Meghan C Gurdon: [35:22](#) Oh, Sarah, I would love talking with you, and I would be happy to come back any day, and I look forward to listening to all the next 120 episodes.
- Sarah Mackenzie: [35:35](#) 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.
- Elijah: [35:48](#) Hi, my name is Elijah [Bashist 00:35:50]. I am from PA, Pennsylvania. And my favorite book is "Elijah of Buxton" because it has a lot of thrill seeking adventure. And a mystery that no one else can figure out until the end. I recommend this book for kids ten and older.
- Lacy: [36:07](#) My name is Lacy. My favorite book is "Fancy Nancy" because I like fancy stuff. I'm five, and I live in Golovin, Alaska.
- Olivia: [36:22](#) My name is Olivia, and I am from Alaska. My favorite book is "Owls in the Family" by Farley Mowat. And I like it because it was a funny, and it was good read aloud for our whole family. And I am eight.
- Aaron: [36:40](#) I am Aaron, and I'm four. And I like "Monkeys now Jumping on the Bed," because it's so funny. And I'm from Alaska.
- Jacob: [36:53](#) My name is Jacob. I live in Utah, and I am four year old. And I love [inaudible 00:37:04] because all of his friends come.

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- Liso: [37:09](#) My name is Liso. I live in Utah, and I am twelve years old. One of my favorite books that's been read aloud to me is "Magyk" from "The Septimus Heap" series by Annie Sage. One thing I like about the book is the way they do [inaudible 00:37:26]. I think it's a cool and interesting way.
- Speaker 9: [37:30](#) My name is [inaudible 00:37:30]. And I live in Utah, and I'm four years old. My favorite book is [inaudible 00:37:41], because the chicken doesn't get it caught by the fox and the mouse walks past the bow.
- Rachel: [37:55](#) My name is Rachel Kelly, and my favorite book is "Sarah Whitcher's Story." My favorite is part when they fly and get Sarah.
- Amos: [38:05](#) Hello, my name is Amos. I am six years old, I live in Mississippi. And my favorite books are: "A Father's Dragon."
- Speaker 11: [38:14](#) By Ruth Stiles Gannett.
- Amos: [38:16](#) And "Brownstone Family Vault Mythical Collection."
- Speaker 11: [38:21](#) By Joe Todd-Stanton.
- Amos: [38:25](#) And Edison-
- Speaker 11: [38:26](#) "The Mystery of the Missing Mouse Treasure" by Torben Kuhlmann.
- Amos: [38:30](#) Thanks so much.
- Sarah Mackenzie: [38:33](#) Hey everybody, this is ...
- Gemma: [38:35](#) Gemma.
- Sarah Mackenzie: [38:36](#) Gemma. How old are you?
- Gemma: [38:37](#) Three.
- Sarah Mackenzie: [38:38](#) Where do you live?
- Gemma: [38:40](#) Mississippi.
- Sarah Mackenzie: [38:40](#) What are your favorite books?

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- Gemma: [38:41](#) [inaudible 00:38:41], and "Jazz Man."
- Sarah Mackenzie: [38:45](#) "This Jazz Man?"
- Gemma: [38:45](#) This Jazz Man.
- Sarah Mackenzie: [38:53](#) Oh, thank you kids for your book recommendations. Thanks again to Meghan Cox Gurdon for coming to the show. I just loved that conversation. Really enjoyed her book, "The Enchanted Hour." We'll have a link to it along with all of the other book recommendations that Meghan mentioned during this show at [readaloudrevival.com/130](http://readaloudrevival.com/130). So if you missed any of those book recommendations, didn't catch titles, not sure where to find them, go to [readaloudrevival.com/130](http://readaloudrevival.com/130). We also have complete transcripts from every episode of the podcast. So, if you have a friend who you want to pass on the information from the episode to, who may be is hard of hearing, or doesn't like listening to podcasts, you can send them the transcripts. And again, those are at the same place. So, [readaloudrevival.com/130](http://readaloudrevival.com/130).
- I'll be back in two weeks. It's a special episode because Jane Yolen and Heidi Stemple are joining me here on the show to talk about their brand new picture book, "A Kite for Moon." This is a perfectly lovely, one of my new favorite picture books in fact. You'll know Jane Yolen as the author behind "Owl Moon." And 3-, actually I think almost 400 other books for kids. And Heidi Stemple is her daughter, who is a wonderful writer as well. And they have teamed up to make this new picture book.
- We're also going to give you some really good book recommendations for celebrating and reading about the moon landing. Because it's a big anniversary coming up as I'm sure you're aware. So meet me back here, same place, same time, in two weeks for that episode. In the meantime, go, make meaningful and lasting connections with your kids through books.