



## Episode 5

### Reading Aloud Imperfectly Guest: Jim Weiss

Today, I'm sharing the rest of the conversation I had with Jim Weiss from [Greathall Productions](#). In Episode 4, he gave us some great tips for character voices and helped us with some ideas for generally improving our skill as storytellers. It was a fantastic conversation. If you missed it, make sure you go listen and you can find that episode at [ReadAloudRevival.com](#). Just look for the button that says Episode 4.

In today's episode, Jim shares a little more of his heart. I think you're going to be really inspired by what he has to say. We aren't going to be perfect at reading aloud or really at any part of parenting so we can listen in and get encouraged and inspired by what Jim has to say about that.

**Sarah:** So I've heard you talk a bit about the need for parents to take the pressure off. We feel like we need to be perfect storytellers or do this just right, and I think sometimes we create this vision of reading aloud that maybe we're sipping tea and our toddlers are playing quietly at our feet. We have kind of this ideal story time and when we can't make that

happen, we get frustrated. So can you speak a little bit to that need for us to let go of the ideal of perfection?

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**2:25 Letting go of the idea of a "perfect" story time or read-aloud time.**

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**Jim:** Sure. Well, first of all, let me just put a little note in here. When you're telling stories or reading aloud to your child—and both of them are wonderful. Telling a story in your own words doesn't mean that you stop reading to your kids. Reading to your kids is just so valuable. Sometimes you want to read out loud, sometimes you want to tell. Sometimes you want to read out loud but there's a page that you know is going to be too scary or too complex and you decide, "I'm going to paraphrase this one page." Okay.

And it's all right if your child is drawing or putting Legos together. I mean, if they start throwing a ball around and shrieking, that's something else again. But the idea is that it's not necessarily that they have to sit still as if

they're military figures. A lot of the times, they will like to be doing other things but they'll be listening.

**Sarah:** Especially for my son, but I think all of my big kids really actually listen better when their hands are engaged with something like a drawing or finger knitting or something.

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**3:38 The problem of striving for perfection in reading aloud and storytelling.**

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**Jim:** So that's point number one. Point number two extends far beyond the realm of storytelling to what you do as a parent in general, what one does. We want so much to do the very best we can for our children, to give them the benefit of whatever knowledge, whatever wisdom, whatever love we possess. We want to make their lives wonderful and the problem can come when we put intense pressure on ourselves to do this on a level which maybe is not sustainable all the time.

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**5:45 Jim distinguishes between the parent's best efforts and perfection.**

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I spoke a couple of years ago at a homeschool conference, and I was in the question and answer section. In my teaching sessions, as opposed to the storytelling sessions, I will take questions all the way through. But this particular thing was near the end and there was a father there who kept asking questions. And I could see this guy was just so intensely wanting to do what was right for his son. And I was watching the guy shaking apart before my very eyes. And I finally stopped and I

said, "You know, I'm just going to say something and I don't know where this is coming from. And take it or leave it as you will, but if you're trying too hard, I think you're going to... First of all, you can't hit the level you're trying to hit all the time. And all you're going to do to yourself is make yourself feel like a failure and give yourself a heart attack or a series of migraines. And what's even worse is, your child is going to observe you doing this and your son is going to start trying to do the same thing."

**Sarah:** Wow. Very true.

**Jim:** And your son is going to end up with a heart attack or migraines or being unhappy with himself. Now I'm not saying that you toss away any idea of a high level performance in the things that you do or the things that your child learns to do. Obviously, you want to do your best. But it's your best. It's not perfect. And the greatest athlete, the greatest writer, the greatest singer, the greatest actor, doesn't hit a home run every time. You do the best you can do and you know first of all that your child is going to go on—if you've inspired your child to learn, he's going to go back and get this again anyway. They're going to study the middle ages again later on if they're turned on the first time. They'll do it on their own.

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**6:38 Creating lifelong learners and godly children rather than perfectionists.**

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What you're involved with now is first of all getting them turned on to learning, and lighting that flame, that passion to learn. And if you do that, you're halfway to being a successful parent, and the other half has to do

with your child ending up being a good person and a godly person, I think, in my way of looking at it. Some people just say a good person and that's okay for me. I think those are the things you're after. Is my son or my daughter growing up to be a good person? And is my son or daughter growing up to love to learn?

You can't be perfect and your child is not going to be perfect. And this is why we talk about lifelong learning.

**Sarah:** Yeah. Well I love this. I love that you say that because I think maybe an obstacle to a lot of parents starting to do something like reading aloud is because we make it too big of a project. I talked to Adam Andrews last episode about talking to our kids about books. And I know one of the things I struggled with when it comes to talking about the stories with my kids is that I think I don't know the right questions to ask so I'm just not going to ask any. And instead, it's really helped for me to go, "Okay, I'm just going to take this one picture book or this one fable, or one small story and I'm going to tell it really well and we're going to chat about it and it doesn't have to be perfect." And if we just take it in this little bite-sized chunk and go, "It's a connection with my kids no matter if it's done really, really well or just done good enough."

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**8:25 Jim's reminder that a discussion isn't always necessary after a story.**

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**Jim:** And I think there are times that you don't even have to have a discussion. We all have this tendency to say I've got to make this significant so let's talk about it. There are

some stories, especially the ones where you see your child is just transported at the end of the story, into this magical place. I say don't pop the bubble. Let that be one of the times when you say, "Hey, let's just take some time now to be quiet." or let's go out and toss the ball around or whatever you do and maybe don't talk about what have we learned that time.

**What you're involved with now is first of all getting them turned on to learning, and lighting that flame, that passion to learn.**

**Sarah:** You just let the story work its magic on the child without putting yourself in between.

**Jim:** Yeah. If you do it most of the time, if you start talking about... "Do you think he did the right thing when he made that choice? Or what else could she have done?" If you do that a lot of the time, they'll be looking for it in every story anyway. They'll start looking for that element in every story they encounter.

**Sarah:** Yeah, that's exactly what Adam said. That's awesome.

**Jim:** Yes and it's there. If you think about it, stories are all about people overcoming challenges or trying to overcome. Sometimes they don't actually overcome the challenge but they're trying to for whatever reason. Otherwise, it's not a story. It may be a series of events but it's not a "story" story.

And I think you can talk about it. You can talk about composers who had challenges—

Beethoven writing after he's deaf and creating his greatest masterpieces. You can talk about painters, inventors, engineers, scientists, anything and talk about why these people, what they were facing in there and what was the challenge and why do you think he did it the way he did it. What else could he have done in this situation?

But you don't always have to do that. It's just going to be there on the story anyway. And once they're used to it, they'll spot it and they'll start looking for it in their own lives, by the way, too, and in the people around them. It's one of the ways that you start judging people that you encounter in your life. Is this somebody who sees something important and is willing to do something about it? Or is this somebody who isn't? And maybe this first person might be a little more worth my time than this second person, but that one isn't.

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### **11:07 How often should we check for comprehension when reading aloud and storytelling?**

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**Sarah:** Yeah. So when we're telling stories to our kids or reading aloud, how often do you think we should stop and be sure that they understand the figures of speech or different new words, vocabulary?

**Jim:** This is one reason I do what I do and I don't always read it right off the page, because there are some stories where I know they won't get some parts of them. Now a lot of the time they'll still get it in the context. They'll be able to figure it out in the context of things. And I think it's okay occasionally if you come up with something particularly

kind of obscure to stop and say to your child, "You know what that means, honey?"

Other times, maybe you don't want to break in to do that. One way that you can get around this, something that I came up with for myself years ago, is if I'm telling a story... An example I always use is a Sherlock Holmes detective mystery story. If Holmes is explaining something and I look out at my audience and from the expressions I see there are some people who don't get what I just said, I don't stop and say, "Now this is what he was saying." What I'll do in that particular case is I'll have Holmes' friend Dr. Watson say (in character) "I say, I'm not quite clear on the last point. Would you mind explaining it in some other fashion?" And then I'll say, "I'd be delighted to do so, Watson." And I'll just paraphrase it in another way. I let Holmes do it.

**Sarah:** Oh that's great! I never even thought of that.

**Jim:** Yeah, well why not? Now there's nothing wrong with stopping. But you don't want to stop and break in all the time because then the whole thing breaks the flow of the story. It's one of the things authors learned. If they're good author,s they learned that sometimes the particular detail that's so interesting to you is one that is too much of a digression and you better take it out. Or make that the basis of your next book instead, because you're going to lose your audience.

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### **13:21 What about kids who think they are too old for stories?**

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**Sarah:** Right. What would you recommend for older kids who think they're too old for

stories? Now, I don't have any of those yet but I do know that some of my listeners have said that they have older kids that feel like storytelling is for babies or for younger kids. So do they just need to find the right stories to share with their kids?

**Jim:** To some degree, it depends on the child. My experience is that there are certain ages at which kids will say that and yet they're really hoping you'll continue. Randy had her own national awards as a teacher and a counselor and her national awards, state awards came about after she created a program for high risk middle school students. And they were tough kids to deal with and she would read to them and inevitably they would say at the beginning of the year, "What does she think, we're babies?" But once she started reading, if it if it was the right story, and if it was one that she read with sincerity so they knew that she was into it, they'd stop complaining. They'd ask her to read another chapter.

I think part of it is that age, especially around what we think of as middle school or junior high school age, because at that age kids are starting to delineate who they are as individuals. And they have one foot still in being a little kid and one foot in being older. And they want to appear to be older and yet they feel more secure if mom or dad is in the room. Even if they want to be on the other side of the room, and so they'd like the idea that you're there. And sometimes that's true with stories, too.

Now, obviously, there are going to be some stories that they may want to read on their own at that point, although you hope that they're appropriate stories. There will be some point in time where your child is no

longer... when you're no longer making all those decisions. It's inevitable. They're going to grow up and they're going to start reading stuff on their own that they choose to read. And it's all the more reason why you want to give them good things to read early on so they can tell the difference. And they won't be as interested in reading the junk later on.

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### **16:02 The value of talking about the authors behind the stories.**

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I think it's okay to share stories, and I also think without saying why. Sometimes it's a another good reason to talk about the authors and the storytellers, to talk about Homer telling his stories to audiences of adults in ancient Greece. The whole Greek civilization was built on Homer.

**Sarah:** Well here's the other thing I kind of think. If in our homes, if only kids are listening to the stories, if that's all they see, is that stories told out loud are for children, then that's what they think stories are for, but I love listening to audiobooks. I think if kids kind of see their parents listening to stories themselves then maybe they'll stop seeing it as just a childish activity because it's not. Storytelling has never been....

**Jim:** In the same way you want them to see you reading books because you're modeling that behavior. And by the way, those moments when you turn to your husband—or your child for that matter—and say, "Oh listen to this," and you read them a paragraph that you thought was funny or interesting, you're not only giving them the content, you're demonstrating the fact that you're still excited by the stuff you read. And I think it's good.

It's one of the many reasons in my recordings that come from literature, as opposed to the history recordings, that I love to tell whenever possible about the author or the origins of the story, because I want kids to realize—I want the listeners to realize—that this book didn't just appear on a shelf. Somebody went through something to get this thing out to us and they worked at it. And it was not something that just flowed out in fifteen minutes. Once or twice you'll hear of that kind of thing happening, you know: Coleridge writing "In Xanadu did Kubla Khan, a stately pleasure dome decree," and started to write it. He never finished the poem because the mailman came with the mail and interrupted him.

**Sarah:** Is that right? Really?

**Jim:** True. He had the whole poem in his head and he started to write it down and fifteen minutes into it the mailman came and by the time he'd left, the thing was gone. So we have this fabulous classic poem which is unfinished. Robert Louis Stevenson wrote *Treasure Island* in about three and a half weeks.

**Sarah:** No! I didn't know that, really?

**Jim:** He basically... It was like it was channeled. But he was shocked because it was the only time that ever happened to him, and this is the guy who wrote so many classics. All the others he wrote the way the rest of us do, which is you write it and you rewrite it and you rewrite it and you rewrite it. He was stunned that it happened this way. And the reason that it is such an interesting and shocking thing is because it doesn't happen that way and people have to really sit down and work at this stuff. Even if it's

joyous, it's still work. And that makes it less of a just "Oh let's just toss this thing off. It doesn't mean anything." I like to talk about the authors. It's another case of somebody overcoming challenges. I like to talk about that as another example of what literature can do for us.

**Sarah:** Well, what has been your all-time favorite story to tell? Do you have a favorite?

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### **19:38 Jim shares some of his favorite segments, anecdotes, and stories.**

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**Jim:** I have favorite anecdotes and segments. There is not one story. I know the ones that I tell the most frequently for one reason or another. I love telling Aesop's fables like *The Tortoise and the Hare* and *The Lion and the Mouse* and the others because they're fun. I get to do lots of voices and accents.

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### **20:04 The foundational aspect of Greek mythology in the Western world.**

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I love Greek mythology because there's so much depth in those stories, which is one of the reasons that Greek mythology is one of the foundations of Western literature, the other one being the Bible. And I'm not equating the content of fictional mythology with the Bible. But I'm saying this is where we get our storylines and our stock characters. Those are the two sources.

All of Western civilization is built on the Bible and Greek or Greco-Roman mythology. And Aeschylus who basically invented the tragedy, the first real playwright, and who is still considered one of the four greatest

playwrights who ever lived. He said, “Everything I did, was just the crumbs left over from Homer’s feast.” What he was saying was the story, Homer’s stories, told together as a diverse group of stories led into what we now think of as Greek civilization, which is one of the foundations of the Western world. And the Greeks knew it at the time.

So if you look at it, our entire foundation is built on stories, the stories from the Bible or the stories that formed Greek civilization and later shaped Roman civilization.

**Sarah:** Ah, this reminds me of Andrew Kern from the [CiRCE Institute](#) who is a favorite of mine. He says, “There’s nothing you have to do in education or in life of your child, except you have to read the Bible and you have to read Homer.” Those are the two things you have to do and so that kind of reminds me of...

**Jim:** I think, and I would not stop with Homer and obviously with the Greeks, but yes, those are the plot lines, those are the stock characters that appear over and over again. And they are two of the three sources from which we most frequently get our everyday phrases in our conversations. The most quoted source is the Bible, particularly the King James version or translation. Number two is the works of Shakespeare and, by the way, Shakespeare knew Greek mythology very well and ancient history very well. And the number three is Greek mythology.

And we refer, we use phrases from these all the time and we refer to them in our conversation and in our newscasts and in our writing. If you don’t know what a Trojan

horse is, that’s when that is mentioned in the news, you don’t know what they’re talking about.

**Sarah:** Right. I’m going to be talking with Ken Ludwig. I don’t know if you’re familiar with his work. He wrote *How to Teach Your Children Shakespeare* which is a fantastic book and so I’m going to be chatting with him in a couple of weeks for this podcast.

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### **22:55 Teaching your children Shakespeare.**

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**Jim:** I’ve been doing a session this year on how to teach Shakespeare and I have been reading so many of the books in addition to the years I’ve spent thinking about it and doing it already, including looking at Ken’s book, by the way. There are many different methods but what’s really interesting about it is when you go to the actors themselves, the greatest Shakespearean actors, whether it’s Kenneth Branagh or Kevin Kline right now, Olivier or Gielgud, a generation or two ago, or whoever it is, sooner or later in the interview—every single time without exception—they end up saying, “Everything you need to know is right there on the text.” Without exception.

Now, this and the Bible are the classic examples of feeling overwhelmed like you’ve got to do this perfectly and putting this pressure on yourself. And you have to remember that Shakespeare didn’t. He didn’t do it himself. He was writing to fill the seats and he was making his money selling the tickets. And the fact that he could write Hamlet or Macbeth in a way that filled the seats just shows what a genius he was. But the fact of the matter is, it’s there in the

characters already and it always, always—Shakespeare or not—comes down to the character. It always is built around what's distinctive about this character. Because you could put Hamlet and Macbeth into one another's situations and they would handle it differently.

**Sarah:** Yeah, that's a great point. I never thought about it.

**Jim:** Every story, every great story... Let me put it this way... not the ones with cardboard characters, but anything that's a great story, it always comes from the character. What's special about this character? How does she respond in difficult situations or funny situations or heartfelt situations? That's what I have to know, because that's going to carry him or her along on a certain path. And that's the whole thing. You read—Harry Truman said—you read in order to learn how people operate.

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

**Jim:** And the stories that you love, whether it's a film, a novel, a short story, a play, whatever, or a true story... the stories, the ones that stick with you inevitably are the ones where that character and you are just on the same wavelength, where you're resonating with that person and what he or she is going through. That's what you have to look for in a story. And that's what makes a story work and that's why when you're sharing a story with your kid, you need to make sure that there's something there of that character. It's not just a recitation of first he did this, then he did this, then he did this. We have to feel something that the character's feeling.

**Sarah:** Wow! Yes, absolutely. Jim, this has been so fantastic. You've given us some really good practical tips for characterization and helping us get into the stories and staying awake and being interested and so much inspiration for why this is so important. I really appreciate your time. This has been very enlightening for me.

**Jim:** I hope so and I hope it will be for your listeners, too, and I want to just end with three quick thoughts if I may.

**Sarah:** Absolutely.

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### **26:50 Take the pressure off yourself: perfection is not the goal!**

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**Jim:** The first one is to repeat that business about not going for perfection, and remember that I'm not just talking about telling stories now. I'm talking about this as a parent in general. Take that pressure off of yourself. Do the very best you can but don't hit yourself over the head with a board if it's not perfect because it's not going to be perfect, just what you can do.

Number two, I know you said you were going to mention where people could get ahold of my recordings to contact us and one of the things I want to mention is that on our website, there is a place where you can email me. People email me with questions all the time, and I'm always open to that. If I'm on the road, it may take me a couple of days to get back to you but I will. And you're not in this alone. You already know as a homeschooling parent that homeschoolers talk among themselves, but those of us including all of the people you've mentioned—Andrew and Andrew and Ken

and all the others—we talk with you because we care and we want to share stuff with you too. So feel free to ask the people as resources.

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**28:07 Creating a culture of story-telling amongst your family in a technological world.**

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And the last thing I want to say is this. We are living in and raising children in a very difficult time, historically speaking. There is so much change. We are bombarded with information and you can't really hide your son or your daughter from some of the stuff out there that maybe you could have hidden away a generation ago, because the media carries everything and you can't totally escape from it. What you can do is offer your vision of how you think we can best operate and how we should respond and participate in the world. And for me, and for a lot of other people you've mentioned in passing today, one of the most powerful ways to do that is through the stories you choose, because it is through our stories that we choose the examples of what not to do and of what to do. And because they're stories, they're memorable and they stay with us on a much deeper level than if you just say, "Do this. Don't do that."

**Sarah:** That's right. It's like it actually imprints onto us. It forms us.

**Jim:** Yes. So those are the three things I want to say to you and share the stories because the ones that mean something to you and if you are very fortunate, you will watch your children starting to share stories with others sooner or later. And you know you have built this thing.

**Sarah:** That's right. Well, I hope our listeners, please visit [GreatHall.com](http://GreatHall.com). You will be very blessed. That's Jim's website and you can see all of his recordings. You can see the offerings that he's got for all of his 49 recordings. He's got some new titles, *I Said I Could* and *I Did* as well as *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. He's got mythology stories for preschoolers, mysteries, Shakespeare, all kinds of classics. It will bless you to go to the website and see what he's got there. And you can also see where he's going to be, if he's going to be anywhere in your area where you can meet him. I did get to meet you once, Jim. It had to have been about ten years ago when my oldest was a toddler and I went to my first homeschooling convention, and I think I spoke with you for about 30 seconds. I was so overwhelmed because I was new to the whole homeschool convention thing, which is its own craziness so...

**Jim:** It's own crazy world, yeah. It is overwhelming sometimes, especially the first ones you're going to. And by the way, conversely here, this is also where people get in touch with us when they say, "Hey, can you come and perform here? Can you come and teach in our area? I'm not going to be near this conference that you're doing but can we set something up here?" And that's how that happens, too.

**Sarah:** Oh excellent! Okay. So you can get in touch with Jim at the website. You can also sign up for his monthly e-magazine which I get in my email box and it's always something I look forward to. So you can sign up for that right there on the homepage at [GreatHall.com](http://GreatHall.com). Again, thank you so much, Jim, for chatting with me today and I hope—I

know, actually I know—this is going to bless a lot of people.

**Jim:** Well, it was a blessing for me and I'm glad you're doing what you're doing, Sarah, and thank you very much for asking me.

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 Kenzie and I'm 8 years old. My favorite read-aloud is *Little House on the Prairie*. The story is about a little girl named Laura, her older sister Mary, who was effortlessly good all the time, the baby sister, their parents, and their bulldog. They move into the prairie deep in Indian territory. I enjoyed Laura's poetic descriptions of things and how it makes me able to picture the things and imagine the feelings."

"Hi, my name is Mary, age 9, from Florida. My favorite book is *The Princess and the Goblin* by George MacDonald. I loved the book. It is so neat because the two main characters are around my age. In the book, the goblins plot an evil plan against the Princess Irene. But can 13-year-old Curdie, a simple miner boy, save the castle and everyone in it before it is too late? And can 7-year-old Princess Irene save Curdie before time runs out? I suggest you have mom or dad read you the book. You'll love it. It shows how even the young children can do a huge deed."

"Hi! I'm Sophie, and I'm 7 years old. My favorite read-aloud is called *What Would Jesus Do?* It is about a girl named Claire, a boy named Bill, and a few of their friends. It

tells the story of what happens in their lives when they decide to ask the very important question, what would Jesus do?"

For show notes from today's episode, head to [ReadAloudRevival.com](http://ReadAloudRevival.com) and look for Episode 5. You can find the books recommended by today's **Let the Kids Speak!** guests in the show notes as well.

Remember if your child would like to get on the show, he or she can leave me a message at [ReadAloudRevival.com](http://ReadAloudRevival.com). Just scroll to the bottom of the page and you'll see the place to do that.

That's it for Episode 5. Until next time, go build your family culture around books!