



Episode 7

A Lifestyle of Reading Aloud Guest: Melissa Wiley

Sarah: Today, I'm chatting with Melissa Wiley, the author of more than a dozen books for kids and teens including some of our family's favorites: *The Prairie Thief*, *Inch and Roly*, *Make A Wish*, *Fox and Crow Are Not Friends*, and all of the Martha and Charlotte *Little House* books. She lives in San Diego with her husband and their six kids. And Melissa has been blogging about her family's reading life since 2005 at [Here in the Bonny Glen](#). Her blog is one of my very favorite resources for book recommendations.

Sarah: Hey, Melissa! Thanks so much for joining me today.

Melissa: Hi there. Thank you for having me.

Sarah: Well, can you tell our listeners just a little bit about your family and your writing before we get started.

Melissa: Sure. I have six kids. My oldest is just finishing her freshmen year in college. Actually today, she's writing her last paper of the year.

Sarah: Wow!

Melissa: Yay. We get to go pick her up tomorrow so I'm excited about that, and then at home I have a 15-year-old, 13-year-old, let's see... 10-, 8- and 5-year-olds.

Sarah: Okay, he's five!? Really? Wow.

Melissa: Yeah, I know. Can you believe it?

Sarah: No.

Melissa: He's 5½ .

Sarah: Oh, my goodness! The pictures of him when he was roly-poly baby just killed me.

Melissa: I know. Well, he was such a little chunk and then that curly hair...

Sarah: Yeah.

Melissa: Yeah, now he's a big boy and he's reading now, so it struck me recently that I've taught the last of my children to read. Well, I've watched the last of my children learn to read. I don't really teach any of them.

Sarah: Yeah, that's a major like shift when you're a whole family full of readers, I bet. I

still have three babies so I'm not there yet. But, wow!

2:14 Melissa discusses her family and her writing schedule.

Melissa: Just a little mind blowing when suddenly we're here, with everybody could pick up a book. So that's the family and then my husband, Scott is a writer, like me, and like me he works from home, so we take turns. He writes from 9 to 3 while I'm with the kids and then from 3 to 9, that's my writing shift and he makes dinner and I come out and eat and so that's really nice. So I don't have to cook.

Sarah: Yeah. Can't get any better than that.

Melissa: So that's our routine and it's been that way for the last four years since Scott returned to freelancing, so it's a really fun arrangement for the whole family.

Sarah: Yeah, I bet. That's awesome. Now you guys have read aloud a ton in your family all along, right? That's just been a big piece of your life.

4:16 The formation of Melissa's family read-aloud culture.

Melissa: Yes, actually Scott and I started reading aloud to each other. I think, well a little bit even before, like even before we got married. Sometimes on car trips I would read out loud while he was driving, but then it really picked up when my oldest was born and when I was nursing her we decided to do this thing where we... there were childhood favorite books that each of us had that the other one had not read. So Scott started

reading them out loud to me, while I was nursing, so he'd do one of his and then one of mine. So *The Great Brain* was one of his...

Scott and I started reading aloud to each other . . . even before we got married.

Sarah: Ah, I haven't read that one. My daughter just finished it though.

Melissa: Well, it was really fun to hear it from him. That had been one of his favorite books as a kid. And then, he had never read *Harriet the Spy*, which I just couldn't hack. So he read that out loud and we just went back and forth with that, so family read-alouds have been part of our family culture since really day one, since we brought the first baby home, and yes we... now it happens in all kinds of different permutations where I read a lot. A lot of what I do all day long is read out loud.

Sarah: Yes, that's probably, well I don't know... I've been following your family's homeschooling kind of adventures over the years because you're so inspiring, but it seems like that is the bulk of what your role is in teaching your kids, is that right?

Melissa: Yes, it really is, and even with the older ones we'll have some kind of meaty history book or science book that we're reading together and they like it, for me to read it out loud, and it's really good way for us to kind of keep pace with each other, and we stop and discuss a lot so even with the higher level nonfiction stuff with my teenagers, it's been a really great way for us to learn together.

6:24 The differences (and similarities) of reading aloud with teens as compared to tots.

Sarah: So do you think you read less often, more often or just kind of the same but just different things now that your kids are older, than you did maybe a handful of years ago?

Melissa: That's a good question. I mean, it's definitely shifted as they got older but I probably read about the same amount of time in a day, over the course of a day, you know. It just breaks up differently but I'll read... I try to read at least one or two picture books to my younger set every day.

So that would be Rilla and Huck, the 8-year-old and a 5-year-old. So we have a little chunk of time usually after lunch, before their iPad time starts... and that's kind of my thing, is I always want to read to them before they're going to get on and play games.

And I love the game playing, I love it. I play a lot of games with them but I always try to get reading in there first, so we read together. Even though Rilla's 8 she's, you know, of course, loves picture books still and so, we'll usually wind up with a good size stack on the bed by the time we're done because I'll finish one and somebody will grab another and you know how that goes...

Sarah: Yep. Now my 2-year old she's really funny, because now she's realized that when we say "Okay pick your book before bed," that if she picks a whole armful then you know we just sort of, "Okay."

Melissa: It's really hard to say no to that.

Sarah: She'll kind of grab like four, tuck them under her arm and look at us then grab

another one and look at us to see kind of like, "Are they going to let me get away with it?"

Melissa: "How far can I get away with this?"

Sarah: Yeah, year.

Melissa: Then the 8-year-old also, now that she's... You know, we just finished *The Secret Garden* recently, so I'm reading books that her little brother is not quite interested in yet so we have that chunk of time for ourselves to read. And then whatever I'm reading with the older girls, the 13-year-old and the 15-year-old, the younger ones that are usually in the room when that's going on, sometimes they wander off and play somewhere else but they're around for a lot of it, so they're absorbing a lot of what we've been reading for history or science books that we've been reading, which makes for some interesting discussions because one book that I've been reading with my older girls this year is called *Wormwood Forest*.

Sarah: I don't think I've heard of that one.

Melissa: Jen McGonigle at [As Cozy as Spring...](#)

Sarah: Yeah, yeah, I love her blog.

Melissa: Wonderful blog. Jen recommended it. She read it and I thought "Oh, that might be fun" and we started reading it, the girls and I together, and it's fascinating. It's about Chernobyl and what's there now, all this time after...

Sarah: Okay, I'm writing that down so I don't forget to link it in the show notes.

Melissa: So, you know, I'm reading about this sort of nuclear post-wasteland and the 5-year-old is with huge ears in the room. So it does make for some interesting discussion

sometimes when the little ones are in on what the bigger ones are doing.

10:00 Recommendations on reading aloud poetry to all age ranges.

I read a lot of poetry to everybody and so this year the older girls and I read a lot of Spenser's *The Faerie Queen* and we did big chunks of *The Canterbury Tales* and then just lots of... we have been working our way through. We got us as far as the English romantic poets so far this year. So tons and tons of stuff, and again the younger ones are around for that.

Sarah: Do you have a favorite? Does your family have a favorite poet? Or do you all have different favorites?

Melissa: I think everybody has different favorites. I know that for a lot of them, Emily Dickinson is their favorite.

Sarah: Yeah, that's my daughter's favorite.

Melissa: And especially because—do you know the books, well, there's *Emily* by Barbara Cooney

Sarah: No. I don't know that one, which maybe I should because Emily Dickinson is my daughter's—my 12-year-old is a huge poetry buff and she loves Emily Dickinson. By Barbara Cooney—the *Miss Rumphius*...

Melissa: Yes, *Miss Rumphius*, she illustrated it. I want to say she wrote it, too, but now I'm second guessing myself. It might have had a different author. Well, anyway, it's a picture book and it's lovely. It's one with a little more text, and all of my kids just adored that book, it's really sweet. A little girl moves in across the street from Emily Dickinson and

the two of them forged this very sweet friendship, not really through words, through kind gestures. It's delightful.

Sarah: *Emily* by Michael Bedard, that looks like, I just pulled it up on Amazon. I'm going to have go order this.

Melissa: The writing, I have to say the writing is absolutely lovely. It's one of my favorite picture books. So I'm deeply ashamed that I didn't know the author because I can actually picture it under the B's on the shelf. That's pretty close to C...

Sarah: That's pretty close, yeah.

Melissa: And then there's another book. Do you know *The Mouse of Amherst*?

Sarah: No, I don't.

Melissa: Oh my goodness, you're going to love this book. It is something—it's sort of a cross between a picture book and a little short chapter book. It's size is small but it's longer and more text typically than a picture book would have. It is the sweetest story. It's a mouse who's a little poet mouse living in Emily Dickinson's house and they write poems back and forth to each other. So like, "I'm nobody, who are you?" Is Emily writing to the mouse?

Sarah: Oh my goodness...

Melissa: It's just, it's one of Rilla's favorite books, it's one of everybody in my house's favorite books. And, oh, is it Elizabeth Spire's—I'm looking it up now, too. Yeah, it's Elizabeth Spire's, just beautiful, beautiful books. So those two books plus the *Poetry for Young People* series.

Sarah: Oh yes, we have a lot of those.

Melissa: Okay, so that—their Emily Dickinson volume is just a favorite one around here. Then also Robert Frost. My daughter Beanie loves Frost especially. I'm a huge Yates and Haney person, so we get big doses of those guys. One of my kids is a Lewis Carroll fan and so that *Poetry for Young People* volume is another big favorite one in the house.

Sarah: That's like "Jabberwocky," is that right?

Melissa: Yes, that's "Jabberwocky," yes, and "The Taming of the Snark"—"The Hunting of the Snark." And then what is the—oh good, it's right over there. I was trying to think of the name of—I have this beautiful volume of Langston Hughes' poetry that's illustrated by Brian Pinkney, and it's a picture book style. It's just a wonderful book so it's called *The Dream Keeper* and it happens to be out on my shelf because we read it a lot, so that's why I was able to look at it and grab the title because I couldn't remember what it was called.

Sarah: Okay, *The Dream Keeper*. Awesome, great. The Amazon cart's going to explode after this conversation. My husband's going to be very appreciative, I'm sure.

Melissa: I've been told I'm a dangerous friend to have. [laughter]

Sarah: Okay, so you say that you have regular read-aloud time before they get on the iPad, but do you have other regular times that you do every day or is that kind of something you fit in or is it a mixture of both or do you schedule it?

14:34 Melissa explains the variety of types of reading aloud she does in her home and why she loves pegging reading aloud to meal times.

Melissa: These days it's a mixture of both. I've always tried to pin read-alouds to certain activities, like I always used to do breakfast and poetry. Because breakfast happens every day, so then poetry would happen every day.

Sarah: Right.

Melissa: That was when my kids, my older set were little. Now I will say that then they got bigger and I stopped having to get up to get everybody's breakfast.

Sarah: Yep.

Melissa: So that little peg, I always call it like a peg. Actually, I got that term from Leonie, a friend on Charlotte Mason message boards. She had this great notion of pegging things that you want to make sure that they happen every day. You think of things that do happen every day and that's your peg that you're going to hang your other thing on, your activity on. So mealtimes were really good times for us, as read alouds for a very long time.

Sarah: Yes, because everybody eats and it keeps them pretty quiet.

Melissa: And their mouths are full. It just meant that I've then always had to kind of eat later. We still do that a little bit. Nowadays at lunchtime, that's when we do German lessons, so I still am eating later but it's the same principle. We've pegged that to lunch so it happens every day, so it works out well for us.

Sarah: Well then, I think it takes less will power, or like you have to work up less gumption when it's just something that you do at the same time every day. It's just seems easier to slide back into it every day instead of having to work up the enthusiasm.

If [reading aloud] is slotted into a certain time of day . . . it seems to work well for everyone—especially with the little ones, because they know, "Okay, now it's poetry time."

Melissa: Yeah, yeah, that initiative can be the hard part for me in deciding now I'm going to do this thing. So if I've got it slotted into a certain time of the day and there's a routine to it, then that seems to work well for everybody, especially the little ones, because they know, "Okay now it's poetry time." And they like that. They embrace that rhythm and shape their day around it really naturally, I find. So we have, nowadays, with the assortment of kids that I have, we do—I do read aloud stuff with the older kids in the mornings between nine and noon, not for that whole time straight, of course, because that would be crazy. I would have no voice left by lunchtime, but they're doing a lot of other things in there, too. But that is the chunk of the day when we know that we're going to find some time to sit down and read stuff together. And then after lunch, with the younger ones. Then my husband reads out loud to everybody at bedtime.

17:41 The logistics of Dad reading aloud at bedtime.

Sarah: Okay, like from a chapter book or...

Melissa: Yeah, and usually the boys go to bed earlier, so he reads to them or sometimes it will be—I'll go and then read to them or one of the big sisters will read to them but always they get their reading time at their bedtime. And then the girls stay up a little bit later and Scott always picks a book, he kind of has—well, I guess he goes back and forth. Sometimes he has the youngest one in mind and sometimes he has the older ones in mind but he's always picking things with an eye toward everybody's going to be in the room and when my oldest is home, even though she's 19 now, she'll drift in or she'll sit with her door open so that she can hear because Scott's a really great reader and everybody likes to be there for his read-alouds.

Sarah: Yeah, you've mentioned that on the blog before. Now, so he chooses the book, right?

Melissa: Yeah. Sometimes I'll say, "You know what, Rilla has never heard *By the Great Horn Spoon!*," or something, and he'll say "Oh, okay I'll do that one next," but he has his own roster of books that he loves to read. So he reads. He's the one who reads *The Lord of the Rings* and I'm so grateful because... [laughter]

Sarah: Right, I'm reading *The Hobbit* right now and... [laughter]

Melissa: That's like months of investment, and I crave change and variety, so I've always been excited when it's time to start the next book, but Scott is awesome about—he'll pick

a long book or a long trilogy and hang in or he'll read all *The Chronicles of Narnia*. He'll read things that—you know that's what they're doing for the next four months.

Sarah: Okay, yeah so I struggle with that. I tend to read the first book in a series and then sort of be like, "Okay, if you want to keep going you get to read it on your own."

Melissa: Or sometimes in the middle of the novel, I'll be like, "You know, you guys, if you're dying to know what happens you can go ahead and finish." [laughter] So I start—I read the first half of a lot of books and then I probably finish every third book or maybe every other. It depends, but that's very, very common. If it's a novel, I often will read the first half of it and then turn it over to them to finish. It depends. If it's a family favorite that we're revisiting because the older ones wanted the younger ones to hear it, then I'll read the whole thing.

**It just seems like we're always
overflowing in books
no matter how many I give away.**

20:28 Choosing read-alouds.

Sarah: Okay. So, do you work off a book list or do you just—have you created your own or do you just sort of grab what you feel like reading?

Melissa: We have a really insane number of books in this house. From having worked at...

Back in the day, in grad school, I worked at a children's bookstore and brought home very

little money from that job. [laughter] I got a huge discount. And then I worked at Random House and then I worked at Harper Collins, in children's books both times. And it was just unbelievable there because people would clean off their shelves and put boxes of books in the hallway that were free to take. I used to, every night, just lug armfuls of books home. I couldn't believe it. It was like living in a candy store. Signs that said, "Yours, help yourself."

And then you know, now, I get a lot of review copies. It just seems like we're always overflowing in books no matter how many I give away. So usually when I'm looking for the next thing to read, I will just sort of walk through the house and grab what jumps out at me. I do have certain things in my—you know, when we're reading, I always like to have a historical fiction selection kind of going along with wherever we're reading about in our nonfiction history studies. So I usually will pull together maybe a dozen books onto one shelf for the teens or anyone who's of reading age really—so now all of them, I guess—you see I'm not used to that yet—to grab. It will be like, "Oh, this is a really good book about the Civil War. You might enjoy something from this row," for them to read along to further immerse themselves in the period. And I have certain books that I really like us to read together in that vein.

Sarah: Okay, so actually I'm going to interrupt you now, too, because you have said two things that are piquing my interest, making me think that your books are very well organized. Because you said earlier—you said they're alphabetized. And now you said, "From this row." Now my books are not

remotely organized. So how do you organize your books?

22:50 Organizing the family library.

Melissa: Well, it's different depending on the kind of book, and I will say that right now we are in a state of disarray. I need to do some re-alphabetizing, but that's a job I like to hire some of the kids to do over the summer.

Sarah: Yeah, that's a great job to hire them to do.

Melissa: Yeah, yeah. So picture books, I try to keep alphabetized by author. But picture books are mostly in the girls' bedroom but then it seems like every room in the house has a shelf full of picture books so it's not—they're not perfectly organized. It's just that the books—that the 5-year-old likes best wind up in his room by his bed. But in the place where I have most of the picture books, which would be like a wall of picture books, they're more or less alphabetized. But for everything else, all the poetry is in one section in the living room, nonfiction sort of tends to be all in one section and sort of grouped by topic. And then all the fiction, all the middle-grade fiction, which we have a lot of, is—in one room is all the fantasy and science fiction, and in the hallway, we have three big bookcases going down the hall and that's where all the historical or contemporary, realistic, middle-grade fiction is. And that I try to keep grouped by the chronology of its setting.

Sarah: Okay, well that's helpful because I've kind of wondered about that before. Mine end up just being really not organized

whatsoever. But I would love to teach my kids... Actually, that would be a great summer project for them to do and to practice their alphabetizing skills.

Melissa: Yeah. I think that they'll have fun with it and that is a chore that I tend to pay for. I mean, everybody's got household chores that are just part of life, but for special jobs I like to hire them. So that's a good one. Anybody who wants to earn a little money can always make it by re-shelving.

25:08 Fitting in read-aloud time with babies and toddlers in the house.

Sarah: Okay, so I've been excited to talk to you because you have six kids like I do and I get a lot of questions about how to fit in read-aloud time when there's toddlers and babies that are pretty hellbent on sabotaging it. And I always say, "I don't know. I'm still trying to figure that out myself," so I want to know what you've done with toddlers and babies?

Melissa: It is such a good question and for such a huge part of my life, that has been exactly where I've lived, is in that space of forever trying to find the best solution. I think I've been successful in different ways at different times. The best way for me was always to plan our big-read aloud time for whenever the baby would sleep.

Sarah: Okay.

Melissa: And that's not always possible, especially if you have one who's not a really regular napper. Because it can be hard if there's not that kind of routine, to pull everybody else away from what they're doing in the moment because, "Now the baby's gone

down and I'm ready to read to you." But I used to try pretty hard to get the babies to have at least one good morning nap and I would just make sure I treated that as totally sacred time. I would not answer the phone, I would not touch the computer, I would not do anything in the house. I would sit down and read the moment I put that baby down.

Sarah: Okay.

Melissa: So that was one. With toddlers, I would try to include them, but I have always done a quiet time with my kids so usually it would be an hour after lunch. Everybody was expected to go to their rooms and they've always shared bedrooms so sometimes I would split them up—one kid on my bed, one kid on the couch, one kid in the kids' room. This is more when my big girls were little. I would rotate so that I had some one-on-one time with each of them and reading aloud. That would allow me to read something—read *The Secret Garden* with an older kid, and three picture books or board books with the toddler.

Sarah: Oh yeah, okay.

Melissa: The thing that worked for me was practicing it a lot first. Not expecting everybody to just do this because I said were going to do it this way, but to start out with 15 minutes and work our way up to an hour over the space of maybe two weeks. But to be really clear about, "You're allowed to be on your bed. You can play quietly with toys or you can look at books, but you don't get off your bed, and it's quiet time. This is what we do now."

And we just sort of practiced our way into it until it became a routine. And they all really loved it. They all loved—they knew they were

going to get alone time with Mommy they would start to look forward to. I sometimes would save special little toys like little dolls or something that they were into that would be only the quiet time toys. That worked really, really well having—and actually that's worked in different permutations other than quiet time. Like if I had a set of cool blocks or something that I only bring out when I'm going to read aloud to someone else, that will keep the toddler busy.

28:46 Doesn't Mom need her own quiet time?

Sarah: Yes. Okay, I've found that to be really helpful, too. So then when you would go and have one-on-one time—I always find that I am kind of craving a break by around after lunch, so would you spend that whole hour with on one-on-one time, or did you take a little time to yourself, then go in there, or how does that work?

Melissa: At that point, I would spend the whole hour because it felt like it would really fast.

Sarah: Yeah, I could see that.

Melissa: But it's true. I would try and build some other point in the day, usually before that, like to give them a video or something where I could then slip away and have a little collect-my-head time. So I would do that first usually, and then lunch and then quiet time.

Sarah: Yeah, I could see that working really well here, actually, with the ages my kids are now. So...

Melissa: Especially if we would go outside right after lunch and everybody would run

around and then they were kind of ready for quiet time. But I definitely would put on a video for them so that I could have that breather.

29:48 Melissa’s favorite bring-to-a-deserted island books.

Sarah: Okay. So I’m going to ask you these questions and hope you don’t keel over with anxiety about answering it. If your family was vanished to a deserted island and you could only bring three books with you, which would you bring? [laughter] As I was coming up with that question, I thought, “Do I dare ask Melissa Wiley this question?”

Melissa: Oh my goodness! Three books... Okay. I’m having palpitations. [laughter] Okay. Can I bring *The Complete Shakespeare*?

Sarah: Yeah, complete’s good.

Melissa: Okay, so *The Complete Shakespeare*, that will keep all of us happy with story and language for a very long time. Plus we can act stuff out so it will give us something to do. Okay, what else? *The Complete Mark Twain*. Third one—oh, I know! Because now I’m going to be practical. My third book choice would be...do you know the book called *Back to Basics*?

Sarah: No.

Melissa: It’s like a Reader’s Digest big giant hard cover, how to do everything. So this is our survival manual.

Sarah: Oh, very good. Yes.

Melissa: Like how to skin a squirrel and how to find water and how to build a—I don’t

know, everything that you need to build for survival. Actually would have to get my copy of the book back because a friend of mine borrowed it a few years ago. We have this joke about like what we’ll do if the grid goes down. She’s got water on her property so I always say, You know what, I’m going to show up at your house.” And she borrowed the book once and she called me and said, “I’m sorry Lissa, I have to tell you, you’re never getting it back. I’m keeping it in case the grid goes down. You’re at my house anyway.” So that’s the plan.

31:55 Reading aloud from the perspective of a writer and Melissa’s non-negotiable: does the dialogue come off your tongue naturally?

Sarah: Let’s talk a little about this perspective of reading aloud from the point of view of a writer because you’ve written some of my very favorite children’s books. *The Prairie Thief*, we read that I think in two sittings. The kids were like, every time I’d say, “Okay that’s it for today” and close it, I got this chorus of “You can’t stop there.”

Melissa: Yay!

Sarah: I’ve noticed as a reader that some books are way easier to read aloud than others. I don’t know if it’s dialogue that makes a book more readable out loud or what, but can you speak to that a bit?

Melissa: This is such a good question and it’s so true. Some books just are really hard to read aloud. I remember there was a book *Red Sails to Capri*, have you read that one?

Sarah: We have it but I have not read it yet.

Melissa: I came across it years ago in the Sonlight catalog. On the Sonlight forums, it was one that people would say it was their family's favorite read-aloud. And I have tried to read that book out loud five times in the last fifteen years. And I can't do it. I can't make it past chapter three. It just does—it doesn't work for us as a read-aloud at all. The dialogue, it's so stilted, I find. I've never actually tried to sit down and just read the book to myself, which I need to do, but I kind of got turned against it because of all of our failed attempts.

And I'd always be like. "But people love this as a read-aloud." So sometimes maybe it's just the individual book and the individual reader but I would say that there's definitely—it has to do in my mind with—the dialogue is a big part of it. Does the dialogue flow off your tongue naturally? Does it come off conversationally? Or does it sound kind of artificial when you read it out loud in a way that maybe when you're reading it alone, it wouldn't, it wouldn't sound artificial at all. But often I find, like if a book has a ton of exclamation points in it, it's harder to pull off as a read-aloud. You've really got to tone that down.

Sarah: Interesting. Okay.

Melissa: And then the amount of description. A book—I would say a good example of a book that is one of my lifetime favorite books but I have not found to be a super great read-aloud is *Anne of Green Gables*.

Sarah: Yes. I haven't actually tried to read that one out loud. But it's a very favorite of mine of course.

I think because I spend so much of my time reading out loud, the cadences of a good read-aloud are kind of really in my blood now. I think that's been really good training for me as a writer.

Melissa: I mean, my whole life is wrapped up in *Anne of Green Gables*. And I love Montgomery's writing so, so much. I've read everything she ever wrote numerous times, but I don't actually find her work to be that great for read-alouds, in part because she's really fond of long, sort of rhapsodic descriptions of nature, which are beautiful as you're reading them to yourself. But the seventh time that you're describing the ethereal, purple clouds out loud, it just doesn't—like everybody's kind of wanting you to move, get on with the story.

So I think there is something in the way that we read when we read to ourself. We may come to those passages that are very descriptive and absorb them faster than when you're reading every word of them out loud. So I do think finding a book—it has a lot to do with the pacing of it and the balance of dialogue and exposition.

But also—and it's funny, because this really only struck me recently. I was asked to participate in this writing process blog tour where a lot of writers are sharing—it's these four questions that you answer about your own work. And one of the questions was, "What is different about your work from other writers?" which is a question I had never really thought of before. What's

different about my writing? And the thing that I came up with was that, I think because I spend so much of my time reading out loud, the cadences of a good read-aloud are kind of really in my blood now. I think that's been really good training for me as a writer.

And I don't know that would have occurred to me before being confronted with that question. But I do think when I'm writing, I'm hearing it. I'm hearing it read aloud as well.

Sarah: Do you read it out loud to yourself?

Melissa: Yes, I do, and actually I have a really firm policy about this because [laughter] I'm sure you can relate as a mom to having to read picture books, the favorite picture book that you read over and over and over again, right?

Sarah: Yeah.

Melissa: And you get sick of it. And especially there'll be certain places where you're tempted to cut corners, but the kid knows it by heart and so they notice that if you leave off that one sentence. So having read what—hundreds, thousands maybe of picture books out loud over the years—every beginning reader or picture book manuscript that I work on, I read out loud, like dozens and dozens of times. Because I figure, if there's anything that I'm tempted to skip over as I'm reading it out loud, it can go.

Sarah: Ahh, okay.

Melissa: So it's a good way for me. And because that works for me with shorter texts, I do it as well for novel length books. I read it out loud. I also was trained by an editor who would make us do what he called Bartleby-ing, after *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, where

when we were getting our magazine ready to go to print, one of us would read everything out loud, including—like we had little words that we said for every exclamation point. And the other one would be following along on the page, so that we could—this was just a way of really carefully proofreading. But that practice as well kind of persuaded me of the benefits of reading work out loud before you submit it.

Sarah: Well that post that you mentioned, where you kind of discovered that I love that—I actually read that not too long ago—and bought [the software] Scrivener after that, and Scrivener is kind of blowing my mind. I am like, “How have I lived without this?”

Melissa: Isn't it amazing? I love it. I love it. It's such a great organizational tool.

Sarah: Yeah, it's helping me think that I can possibly organize my writing in a way that matches what I think—I don't know, how my brain thinks about it, but I've never been able to manage it before.

Melissa: That's exciting.

38:42 Visiting the library and avoiding the twaddle.

Sarah: So then library visits. I wanted to ask you about library visits. Now, I love going to the library. Now it's a little stressful because my three youngest are 2 and then twin 10-months-olds but in theory I love visiting the library. But I'm struggling. Lately my kids have finding a lot of junk on the shelves. So how do you deal with that? I know you have a twaddle radar. So how do you—do you pre-read, do you make them check it in with you

before you check out? How do you deal with that?

Melissa: A lot depends on the age of the kids. And once they are a certain age, I give them pretty much free rein, like from the time they're 13, 14 and up. When you're younger, though—I guess I would say my tolerance for twaddle has relaxed tremendously over the years. But I won't hesitate to tell them, "You can check out this book and I'll read it to you once but I'm not going to read it a hundred times." I mean I don't really say it just like that. It happens more organically in that conversation.

But I will say, "The writing in this book is not strong, so let's read something different." Because I think it's okay and good for them to know that I'm making a discernment about the quality of writing in something. But at the same time, I never, ever try to disparage or make them feel bad about a book that they like, especially if it's like a licensed tie-in, because actually those can be great. They can be great fun for a kid, and my husband writes a lot of that, and I know that he strives really hard to make well-written quality read-alouds or picture books and early chapter books when he's doing a Marvel superhero movie tie-in.

So what I know about the way kids interact with those is that they can be door-openers to imaginative play and so I don't mind when I see my kids drifting toward something that I know isn't as literary as this picture book I've got in my hand. So I just try to balance it.

Sarah: Okay, yeah. I've kind of struggled with this over time. But I think what I've come down on lately that's been working for me is I read aloud really good quality

literature and then if they want to pick some twaddle from the library to read to themselves—but I'm not going to read Dora, but if you want to... [laughter]

Melissa: Right. I'll read Dora once.

41:42 Recommendations for book lists.

Sarah: Any favorite book lists or book blogs that you can't live without?

Melissa: Yeah, that's a really good question. Well, on my own site, I have a page of book recommendations where I periodically go in and add another big chunk of books that I've written about, so it's constantly needing a new update. But there's hundreds of books there now. So those are the things that my family likes. Cybils.com. Do you know the Cybils?

Sarah: Oh yes, yes. You've sent me there before from your blog.

Melissa: Yeah. It's cybils.com. It stands for Children's and Young Adult Bloggers Literary Awards, so every year, there will be books nominated in a wide range of categories—pretty much every category of children's book all the way up to YA—and these nominations will be whittled down by a panel of judges in each category to the short list of finalists, and then another round of judging will happen when they'll pick one winner for each category for the year.

Well, the short lists are some of the best book recommendations you can find for what's being published right now, you know each year. And I think this year was something like the seventh or eighth year of Cybils, so those

go back now quite a ways. So that's a great site.

Jen Robinson's book page is a really good recommendation, especially for picture books and things for younger readers. And that's jkrbooks.typepad.com. And then if you go to KidLitosphere.org, there's a master list there of people who blog about children's books, so that's just a treasure trove. There's amazing resources there.

43:46 Melissa's favorite books for early readers.

Sarah: Awesome. Okay. Very good. Now I asked my Facebook readers if they had any questions for you. Amanda wanted to know what your favorite books were for early readers, both read-alouds and easy readers for kids starting.

Melissa: Well, that's a really good question. Well, I mean the Mo Willem's Elephant and Piggie books are just so so good and so fun especially with a fledgling reader because you can read Elephant and she can read Piggie. And there's very little text on them. So those have been huge hits with my kids.

I love—gosh, the old-school original Little Bear books are wonderful. Let's see, for read aloud, if you want something a little bit—because one of the great things about reading aloud is that you can read so much above a child's level and they comprehend so much. So I like things like *Milly-Molly-Mandy*, Beatrix Potter, obviously, so fun and such a great way to stretch vocabulary—Beatrix Potter, her words are amazing. And then you have this 2-year-old saying “perambulate.”

Sarah: Yeah, exactly.

Melissa: Oh you know one of our favorite books, really the first—when we have a little one who's ready for something beyond picture books for the first time for a read aloud, we almost always do the *My Father's Dragon* books by Ruth Stiles Gannett. The McBroom books—do you know *McBroom's Wonderful One-Acre Farm* by Sid Fleischman? Those are some super favorites of mine.

Sarah: I forgot about those. I need to go dig those off the shelf for my son. I totally forgot about those ones. And then your *Inch and Roly* books, those are...

Melissa: Yeah those are early readers—and you know what, I find that early readers, books that are written for beginning readers to read by themselves—I think those make really great read-alouds for toddlers because the text is very simple and they're full of illustrations so they're like picture books but they're stretching out into a sort of chaptery format. So my younger kids have always liked early readers as read-aloud when they're two.

Sarah: Well then it's like—when they learn how to read that book themselves, it's probably like “Hey, that's one of my favorite books and I can it all by myself now,” instead of it being a whole new...

Melissa: Yes, exactly. And then my list of picture books that we all love is just enormous. I didn't say *Just So Stories*, though, and I should say that because that has been another one of just the huge successes with every single one of my kids. They love the *Just So Stories* by Kipling. They're so fun to read aloud. You have so much fun with the language and the stories are deeply, deeply engaging to little ones

because it's all these "How did animals get like that?" stories. So I think that's one of the things that people tend to have on their shelf because everybody knows it, but you don't always remember to pull it off the shelf. You know what? I could pick that as a desert island book, too, because it just never stops being fun.

Sarah: Yeah, okay. And then voices—do you use character voices when you read aloud?

Melissa: I do.

Sarah: So do I. That's really fun. And I just actually interviewed Jim Weiss for the...

Melissa: He's so lovely. We used to live near Jim and his wife Randy when we lived in Virginia. And we got to go to their house once and see his studio and it was just amazing. They're lovely.

Sarah: Oh, very good. Yes, I actually just aired that first podcast. He was talking about character voices and what not. That's in Episode 4, and then the next one is going to be the rest of our conversation. We had this great, epically long conversation so I've split it up. But he was so inspiring and he was giving some great tips for different character voices and stuff. But I had a feeling that Scott did great voices. I think maybe you've said that on your blog before—somehow I knew that—but do you have any tricks for remembering what voices go with which character or anything like that?

48:20 Handling character voices when reading aloud, using YouTube, and the importance of coming up with a “hook word” to get you in character.

Melissa: Well, I've probably fall into a couple of stock voices for certain types of characters, so like my old man voice is probably my same old man voice. I was a drama major in college before I switched my major to English, but I wound up with enough credits in drama that I could have had a major in that, too, and so we learned dialects and I'm not great at anything, but I find that that class has come in so handy.

Sarah: I bet. It's probably the most useful college class that you ever took.

Melissa: I know. I laugh about it all the time because who would have thought? I use it every single day.

Sarah: Well, I always sound like I'm from England when I'm doing an accent of any kind and my husband will look over at me and be like, "Wrong part of the world." [laughter] And I'm like, "I don't know."

Melissa: Well, I find I do love to read books that are set in England or Scotland or something, because then I get to do all the voices. And I remember one time, I was writing about reading *The Railway Children* and how much fun it was because of all the accents, and my friend Catherine who lives in England wrote and she was like, "I had to think a minute, what accents are you talking about?"

Sarah: Oh, funny. [laughter]

Melissa: For trying to get into a dialect like that, my trick is that I think of a word in the dialect that's my hook—or a sentence—that I can just say to myself kind of to, “Okay, now I can do it. Now I can read the new stuff in it.” And I'm reading it for my kids, so it's not very good, and it doesn't have to be good but...

But I learned this trick when—I didn't realize when I started writing the Martha books, *The Little House* books about Martha Morse—you know, those are set in Scotland. And as I'm writing them, it hadn't really occurred to me that I would at some point be called upon to read those books out loud to audiences. And the first time I was going to have to do this, I was panicky, like, “Oh, I can't do a Scots at all, a Scots dialect.” So I ordered an actor's dialect tape and listened to it and actually I've found it helpful to me during the writing to listen to that, just to kind of get their rhythms, the lilt, the cadence right. Now you can just go to YouTube and get the same thing. You type in “Yorkshire accent” and look at that.

Sarah: Yes, it's great. I tried to read the Martha books out loud. Oh, gosh, it had it been at least five years, maybe more than that actually, ago, and as soon as I started I realized, “I do not have any idea how to do a Scottish accent.” But the way you wrote it actually helps because the words are actually written in such a way that it kind of helps you as you're reading aloud.

Melissa: Well that was a tough call, how much dialect to write. You really have to weigh that heavily, especially for middle grade, because you don't want it to be distracting or off-putting to readers. I remember I got one letter from a little boy who was 9 years old, and he said, “I really

liked it, even though I had very hard words like ye and ken.” It's just so dear. But there were lots of kind of standard Scots words that I didn't use, like “gang” for “going” because that would have been—while more correct, it would have been really, really hard for an American kid to understand what was being said in that sentence, so it sort of would cross the line into the stumbling block point.

Sarah: Right. Well that's where audiobooks, I think, come in handy. And that's why we're doing *Tom Sawyer* on audio, is because I thought, “Well, we'll just get that dialect just right.” and it will be more fun for someone who knows what he's doing to read it aloud.

Melissa: Right, and that's a good way to go with stuff that has heavy dialects. My husband stumbled upon a very important lesson for read-alouds with character voices because—I think I want to say it's the *Lord of the Rings*. so he was really reading that for months, and I don't remember if it was his Gandalf voice or it might have been his Gimli voice—whatever it was, it was really throaty. He would come out and he'd be like “Ah, I'm dying.” And so you have to make sure that you can sustain it.

Sarah: Yeah, I'm reading *The Hobbit*. And my voice for Gollum is... Yeah. As soon as I started I thought, “Wow, I'm going to really do this for this entire chapter?”

Melissa: Yeah. Sometimes it's good to take a minute before you start and try to figure out for at least for the big speaking parts what it's going to sound like, because it's so easy to commit to something that's going to be hard to pull off. Coming up with my hook word has really helped me. So my word for Scottish is “invisible,” if I go, “en-**ve**ss-uh-ble”...

Sarah: Ohh, okay, and so then in your mind, if you just kind of do that over and over...

Melissa: Like [Scottish dialect] “We’re meant to be invisible.” Then I can get into it a little bit more.

Sarah: Ah, oh, that’s great. So you do that with just a word or a phrase?

Melissa: Yeah, like a little sentence or a couple of words that sound like that accent to me, and then I can get it. So if I’m going to pick up a book, and it’s got somebody speaking in a certain accent, I’m just going to take a second before I start and kind of hear that in my head.

Sarah: Yeah, and if you go to YouTube and you look up the accent, and then you have that hook, that could be really useful. I think that’s going to be my new trick because that’s really useful, actually.

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 Elsa and I am 6 years old. And my favorite story is *Cinderella*. I like all the versions. Cinderella is beautiful and my favorite part is when that prince finds her because she lost her slipper.”

“Hello, my name is Jaeger and I am 9. My favorite book is *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien and I like this book because Dad who reads it aloud to me has great voices for the characters. The book is long and I like long books. The characters are funny, too. In conclusion, I love *The Hobbit*.”

I would love to hear from your child about what their favorite read-aloud book is, so go ahead and head to ReadAloudRevival.com. Scroll to the bottom of the page and help your child leave me a message there. Maybe we’ll hear them on an upcoming podcast.

That’s the end of Episode 7. I hope to join you again very soon. Go build your family culture around books!