



RAR #46 - Assigned Versus Free Reading, Mystie Winckler

Mystie: Do they get the sense that we want them to enjoy reading or do they get the sense that we aren't really happy with what they're choosing to read?

Sarah: That's Mystie Winckler on today's episode of the Read Aloud Revival podcast. You're going to love it.

You're listening to the Read Aloud Revival podcast. This is the podcast that inspires you to build your family culture around books. This is Episode 46 of the Read Aloud Revival podcast. I'm your host Sarah Mackenzie and I am so glad you're tuning in. Right now, our community is right in the middle of a 31-day read aloud challenge. Oh my gosh! I love these. Are your kids participating? Basically, what's happening is all over the world, we've got literally thousands of kids committing to read aloud everyday. It can be to their siblings, to their grandma, to their neighbor, to their pets, to their stuffed guinea pig. We've heard from so many of you that these 31-day challenges are game-changers. Not only for your child's reading ability but also for their love of books. So many kids have changed their relationship with reading just by taking our free challenge. To see what folks are doing with this challenge all over the world, search the #rar31days and to get all the details next time we run a challenge because we run one every a few months. Head to rar31days.com.

Mystie Winckler is not just an organizing and homemaking genius, she's one of my very best pals and she's also a second generation homeschooler which makes her the perfect person to talk to about today's topic. We're going to answer one of the most frequently asked

questions we get here at the Read Aloud Revival. We're going to talk about the nitty-gritty between assigning reading and free reading. How do we decide which books to assign our kids to read and how do we continue to nurture their love of reading even when we're assigning books they don't want to read. Also, how do we manage the different kinds of reading in the schedule, how much time do we allow our kids to do each during the school day. Oh gosh! There are just a million question. We've been getting them in the forum. I've gotten a ton in email. I'm so excited to dig into this and I basically can't think of someone better to chat with than Mystie. She's mom to five kids and the voice behind Simply Convivial. She's also one of my favorite people to talk to about this topic because both she and her husband were homeschooled and that gives her a perspective I value so, so highly. So Mystie, welcome to the Read Aloud Revival.

Mystie: Hey Sarah!

Sarah: It's been a while. I think you might be my first guest to have on twice. So our first episode was, gosh, you don't remember which number that was at the top of your head, do you?

Mystie: Oh, something like 9 maybe.

Sarah: Yeah, We talked about audio books. Mostly, we talked about what to do when you want to give your kids a literary childhood but you don't like reading aloud but yourself, right? Episode 14. So we called it for parents who don't like reading aloud. It's also the place we send people who write in and ask us about audio books because you have a ton of good tips in there about giving your kids tons of exposure to great books through audio. So that was an awesome episode.

Mystie: The cheater's way.



Sarah: Yeah, the cheater's way to reading aloud. Exactly. I'm so excited about this today but before we dive in, why don't you tell us a little bit more about yourself and your family.

3:30 A little more about Mystie

Mystie: Well, I have five kids. They are 12-year old boy, 10-year old boy, 8-year old girl, 6-year old boy, and 3-year old girl. And both my husband and I were homeschooled. I grew up the oldest of seven. My mom had twins when I was about the same age as your oldest when you had twins.

Sarah: Yes, Audrey, my oldest feels so much kinship to you because of that.

Mystie: So I know that from her experience more than yours.

Sarah: Exactly.

Mystie: And then my husband was also homeschooled. He's the oldest of three. And we were both homeschooled until high school. My husband went to a private school at high school and then I was homeschooled until I went to the community college at 16.

Sarah: Oh I don't know if I've realized that. I might have to ask you questions about that later. Okay so were you homeschooled in a similar way or did your parents homeschool you in a similar way or not so much?

5:00 How homeschooling is changing

Mystie: Well back then, homeschooling was, there were not so many options. Most homeschoolers went to a lot more similar than

they do now. So it was, are you A Beka or are you Bob Jones?

Sarah: Yeah, right. Exactly.

Mystie: So we were Bob Jones but my mom probably have mixed textbooks and a little bit of unschooling and then my husband's mom was just a little bit more eclectic. So both of them did their own thing but textbooks were pretty much the only thing that there was at that time.

Sarah: Right now in the homeschooling community or the homeschooling world at large, there's this big shift toward nontraditional types of schooling, making your homeschool not look like it does in the classroom. And that was just supposed not happening yet.

Mystie: Right. So we usually did our textbook-type work in the morning and then had our afternoons free. It was a bad, bad day if we had any school after lunch. That was just misery itself.

Sarah: Wow! I don't know if I totally realized that. Because my kids never get down before lunch so that's really impressive.

Mystie: That was always my personal goal. Like you have to be down before lunch and most of my friends that were homeschooled at that time felt the same way. So that was just getting your work, like the textbook work done. And then the afternoon was for the books, the reading, doing whatever.

Sarah: So you basically could read whatever you wanted or basically work on your own projects and things like that in the afternoon?

Mystie: Yup. After lunch is pretty much free.

Sarah: Did she assign you like literature to read for school? Did you have that along with your school or was that separate?



Mystie: That was pretty much separate. We never did, maybe one year, we did the Bob Jones literature where you get the big, hard back anthology type thing. I think we might have done that one year because I vaguely remember reading snippets of different books but that was... we didn't do that regularly. That didn't last long. So we mostly did math and read the Science textbook and read the History textbook and did whatever, spelling or handwriting or writing sort of thing we had to do at that time. And then the afternoon was reading and that was pretty wide open. So that's kind of the lifestyle that I came out of and my husband too for the most part.

Sarah: Okay so this reminds me a little bit.. now I don't know, did you ever hear the episode with Greta Eskridge? It's a recent one so...

Mystie: Oh, I haven't yet.

7:20 Reading—in and out of school

Sarah: Yeah, it's episode 42. I had to go look. Greta Eskridge of Ma and Pa Modern, she was homeschooled and talks about when she was pulled out of school and brought home. I'm not really sure what kind of style her mom homeschooled her in outside of just letting her have all this time to read but she realized that she can get her schoolwork done, I want to say, she said the same, similar thing. Like she would get her schoolwork done very early in the day and then she realized she had all this time to read if she could get her schoolwork done early. And that was one of her favorite parts about being pulled out of school and homeschooled, is like now she had the time to read. She really knew she wanted when she was trying to sneak reading in at school which was totally how I was,

always trying to sneak reading in whenever I could.

Mystie: And the great part about that was that I grew up not thinking of reading as school. It was like I had to get my school all checked up and marked off first. But then, I could read. And so reading was not in my head growing up. Reading was not in the category of school. And then no matter what, I was reading except the textbooks. I had to read textbooks for school. That didn't count as reading.

Sarah: Right.

Mystie: But whether I was reading "junk food" books or literature books or books on a topic I was interested in, that wasn't school. That was just life.

Sarah: Okay, so this is really interesting to me because you've mentioned to me before that the books that you read in your free reading time, the books that you chose to pick up and read because you wanted to as a child, those have had the more lasting impact on you than anything that might have been assigned to you as school work. Am I getting that right?

Mystie: Yeah, this kind of came out in a conversation my husband and I had early on before we were really officially homeschooling and we were talking about our different experiences being homeschooled and what we were hoping for for our family. And it was actually my husband that said that the knowledge that he gained as a kid, that almost exclusively came from what he picked up on his own and read in his spare time and not from the textbooks or what he was assigned to read for school. And that was something that we should keep in mind, just as that reading can be just as important or perhaps more important than what we assigned.



Sarah: Well it's just a really helpful thing to remember because even though I value my children's free reading time so much, it's one of my reasons to homeschool because I need to children to have lots of time to read, I still fall into this trap of feeling like, "What are you doing? You should be doing school work right now. Why are you sitting there reading for so long?" It's like I fall into this trap of being worried they're wasting their time because they're sitting there reading which is ridiculous. But it's because it's something they've picked up on their own and isn't on my check sheet.

10:20 Making time for free reading

Sarah: So tell me how that informs the way you approach reading in your home now with your kids? And your oldest is, remind me, your oldest is...

Mystie: My oldest is 12. So this is affected how we set up our day because going back to our experience, I really do try to make the official work be mostly done before lunch and that is more difficult during some seasons than others and some grades than others of course.

Sarah: And toddlers there are running around the house.

Mystie: Exactly. But however it ends up working out that there's plenty of time for free reading somehow in the day and so I have this mentality that my end goal is that they want to read, that they do pick up books and start reading. And with that as my goal, like that's how we're working for, than I have worked back from there. Is that already happening? Then I don't need to be doing anything really, like score! They're reading. I can go read myself.

Sarah: Yehey! Win, win, win.

11:20 Reverse engineering why kids aren't reading

Mystie: Exactly. And then if that's not happening then I can start looking at the situation and why is that not happening? Is the computer on too much? Is that what they're turning to? Have we let other activities expand? Are they out of books to read? What's going on that's making them not turn to books? Is there not time to turn to books? Are there not books they turn to, they're turning to something else? I just kind of start looking at the situation. I'm asking questions so that we can get to that end goal of them just wanting to pick up a book because the book looked interesting because they're interested in something.

Sarah: I love something you just said there. First of all, that your end goal is that they read because they want to. The goal is that they read because they love to. That they want to read. And so if your child is already picking up books and loving to read, there's a major celebration win there. We put so much pressure on ourselves I think to be like, oh yeah my child loves to read but not... well, we can talk about that in a second. Not the things I want them to or not the things... but then I think what you said that really strikes me is if they are not doing that, I start asking myself questions about why. Because I feel like so often as moms we put so much pressure to make sure our kids come out right. And so we think, okay if my child's not reading and then we just think I need to assign them reading. I need to force it on them. Or our instinct is just a little bit more.

Mystie: Let's make it happen.



Sarah: Yeah, let's make it happen instead of let me ask some questions to find out why. Like let's figure out the symptoms why like almost like a physician should really do. What's happening here? What's the really root problem of what's causing these symptoms that you're not choosing to pick up a book to read. Instead of blaming the child for it or blaming ourselves for it, just asking some questions to figure out some minor shifts we can make in our schedule or the way we approach school or our day or making sure there's enough books on the shelves, things like that that may actually solve the problem without us having to get all forceful about it.

13:30 The ritual trip to the library

Mystie: And one experience as a kid that I had drawn is my dad took us to the library every week and he didn't make us check out books. He just took us along which is great. We were homeschooled. We didn't get out much so that was exciting. I think it was a strategy. Let's make the library the most exciting place they go.

Sarah: Oh my gosh that's so funny. That is actually fairly true in my house. I must be doing something right.

Mystie: You're doing something right. Yeah. So I just kind of grew up with... it was never taught explicitly or anything but it was just this pattern and this habit of, we go to the library and get books. You want to know something? Go to the library and check out five books on the topic. You want to do something? You want to know how? Check out five books. That's what my dad did. That's what my mom did. That's what we did. I didn't know that there was any other, you know there was no internet at that time. So you couldn't just ask Google. But you check out five

books from the library. That's just what you did. So just those ways where I saw that it was just the pattern of our family and the habits that we learned that just became a way of life and a way of doing things. And so I think those rhythms and those patterns and habits make more difference than how many books are being read or what books are being read and kind of more of those curriculum goals for the year type goals. I'm looking more for rhythms and habits.

Sarah: Yeah, I like that. And so when you're asking yourself that question of why might my child might not be picking up books, you mentioned a few things. Do they have enough books to read? Sometimes my kids even, like we have a gazillion books in this house but that is not always helpful to a child who kind of looks at the bookshelf and knows they want to pick up something they'll like. And so I thought I take it on as my personal mission in life to help my child find the next book. I love it.

Mystie: Yeah, yeah.

Sarah: Things like, I know that when I'm not reading much especially in front of my children, that's setting a different kind of a bar and we get really busy. We're like super crazy busy. And so it's really easy for me to slide out of the habit of reading to myself in front of the kids during the day, making that a priority in my own schedule. And so I know that if my kids are seeing me read, a lot of times, they'll just go grab a book. Oh that's what we're doing now. We're reading. So they go pick up a book and get the next. So things like that. What else do you think might be a good indicator that you can ask themselves as they're thinking through this if they have kids that aren't really picking up books and reading very often right now?



16:00 Troubleshooting why kids aren't reading

Mystie: Yeah, are there books to read and that can be enough. They've already read something and they want something new or they want a new topic. You can kind of talk to them about that one. But then there might be, are they comfortable reading yet? Is there some kind of barrier in their minds to them reading? And then there's just, if they're bored or they want something to do, what do they turn to? And the kids go through phases so sometimes it might be books all the time and sometimes it might be Legos or they have some other... they're digging a hole out back and that's what they really want to do. And so they're reading less and that's stuff ebbs and flows and that's okay. I don't really sweat that but then if it's something like computer or something like I guess computer games and movies and stuff like that, I think that sort of thing is often filling the same hole that a book does, that desire for stories and for action and for doing something vicariously. And it's easier than reading. And so I really try to balance my kids' screen time for that reason because I find that the more they turn to screens, the less they turn to books because we all want to do whatever is easier. And I think that's why that's a lot more important to limit than other things. We are a computer gaming family. My husband does. My kids do. But it's just something I try to watch. And I prefer to watch it and try to direct it rather than like set rules because I really dislike saying, you have to read an hour before you can play computer. Because to me, that puts reading back into the chore and textbook category.

Sarah: Exactly. Like pairing a [distorted] with vegetables instead of... yeah.

Mystie: Right, that's what I'm trying to avoid. I'm looking for that same feeling that I grew up with. Okay, there's school. And then I'm going to read. In my mind, the two just didn't go together. And I don't want reading to be associated with the things you check off so that you can go do what you want to do. I want reading to be in the category of what you want to do.

18:30 Reading and human nature

Sarah: Okay, I love this. This reminds me of Episode 43, I talked to Dr. Daniel Willingham who's the writer of *Raising Kids Who Read* and we talked a little bit about how it's human nature to want to choose to do the easiest thing. So I, as a 34-year old woman who loves reading, who wants to be a reader, who wants to see myself as a reader, will go to bed at night and bring my book and I also bring my phone because I think I'm just going to set my alarm. And then, this is going to be my alarm. And then about 30 minutes after I'm in bed, I realize I'm cruising Facebook and I still have not opened my book. And so even as an adult, I have this, it's so much easier for me to pick up my book and start scanning the inner webs than it is for me to pick up a book even though I have so much desire to be a reader. So how much more for our kids who may be don't have quite as much of that desire, self-motivation to identify themselves as readers. Maybe some of them do but some of them don't. And how much easier is that for them to do almost anything else in our human nature is to pick up something or to do something that's easy, right. So I like that you're talking about subtle shifts in the environment and in the way that the mindset around reading because I think that's huge if our kids grow up and see reading as something that you do for school. It is so unlikely that they're



going to become people who just read because they love doing it.

Mystie: Yup.

Sarah: Okay, so let's tackle the elephant in the room here before we move on, which is what do you do when your kids are reading a lot of fluff or as some call it twaddle? Basically, we want our kids to be readers but I hear this a lot. Parents say, "Well, my child loves reading but they never pick up the kind of things that I want them to pick up. They never read good stuff." So tell me about what you think about that. How do you that in your home?

20:00 Reading fluff—the elephant in the room

Mystie: So I kind of see two different categories of twaddle. There's twaddle that I'm like well that's just fun, fluffy, junk food reading that's definitely never anything that would make any book list-type reading. And then there's twaddle that contains content that I wouldn't necessarily want my kids to be thinking about all the time or mimicking. So there's Boxcar Children and Hardy Boys and that's just good wholesome twaddle.

Sarah: Yeah, light reading but there's nothing wrong with it.

Mystie: Yeah, it's light reading. And then there's anything that has Captain Underpants or Wimpy Kid or... I haven't even looked at them. But those never come to our house because I think our kids are very open. When they're reading a story, in their mind, they're vicariously living that. And so if they're vicariously living Boxcar Children and Hardy Boys or fairy... I don't know what all the categories are but that's not a huge problem. But if they're mimicking kind of

disrespectful behaviors and just obnoxious things that they don't need, that stuff doesn't have a place.

Sarah: Okay, so I like that because I know that for my kids, for all three of my bigger kids who are now 14, 12, and 10, in their journey toward becoming fluent readers and kids who like to read because it's easy for them to do which I think is important place to get, they read a ton of what you'd call light reading to get there. And I know Susan Wise Bauer talks about this as well. We have this tendency as homeschooling moms to want to or just as intentional parents whether or not homeschooling to want to have our kids just read the best stuff. But there is an important place for light reading. So for my kids, reading things like The Boxcar Children and let's see, my daughter read The Cupcake Diaries and another one loved these Disney fairy books which are totally like not excellent books at all. But they were really important along the way to be able to read a ton of books that are really easy to help them gain fluency and become good readers so that the skill of reading becomes second nature. So now they're not avoiding books because it's hard. Now they've become good readers where reading is easy and that kind of opens up a whole new world. So I think there's a really important place for that light reading especially when kids are, well kind of always, there's always a place for light reading. But especially when our kids are in that fluency stage where they're trying to get good at reading.

Mystie: Yes, I completely agree with that and we are a bookish family and my older two boys were fluent readers early on and I'm very happy with their book choices, they read classics and hard books and they love them. They eat them up. But



they still read a lot of light reading and I think that there's definitely a place for that.

23:30 Choosing to read the hard books

Sarah: Yeah, I do too. I love to say in the Read Aloud Revival forum, not too long ago, someone had mentioned being concerned because her 11-year old wasn't ever picking up a classic. They never chose *The Jungle Book* or *Just So Stories* or *Pollyanna* or *Heidi* just for fun. They're reading things like *Cupcake Diaries* and I think she said *Magic Tree House* and things like that. Well, I wanted to point out to her, my 14-year old has very cultivated literary taste. She reads probably more hard books than I do. It's a little embarrassing to say. She's often picking up the work of the Brontës or the Austens or something really difficult or big that you wouldn't normally think something like *Don Quixote* or *The Count of Monte Cristo*. It's impressive. But she also reads a tremendous amount of light reading. And because she's a voracious reader, because reading is a part of her lifestyle, I don't have to worry too much about the fact that she fills it with a lot of light reading because it helps her cultivate a love of reading and then she approaches those harder books with a different mindset than she would if that's all she got. So when I told that person in the forum my 14-year old lived on books like *The Cupcake Diaries* and *The Boxcar Children* and *Magic Tree House*, those kinds of books as she was gaining fluency. So I think it's important to remember that really good literary taste is acquired over time. And so our kids aren't going to be 10-year olds who just cannot wait to read *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. It just doesn't really happen that way.

Mystie: And too, when you watch your kids to grow the habit of just picking up books, that's where you start and then it grows from there. You have to start somewhere and you start with what you can read and to have that habit of turning to books. There also have to be a lot of them and the light category is very full. You can check out a stack from the library that's like 10 books and actually read them in a week and that's kind of satisfying. I remember loving that feeling as a kid. Going to the library and seeing the biggest stack that I could check out and like I'm going to read all of these. But they were all easy. But it felt really good. And I think that's what built that identity in me like I'm a reader, see this?

Sarah: It still is like that and I think it's like that for a lot of us because you'll see on social media people like I'm going to read these many books and they're putting them in their Goodreads account or I'm trying to read 50 books or a hundred books or whatever. Because it does feel really good. It helps you identify yourself as a reader to read a lot of books.

Mystie: Exactly. Yes, yes. So there's definitely a place for that and my experience for my own reading growing up as I read mostly twaddle, that light reading category. I was actually a late reader myself.

26:20 A later reader grows up

Sarah: Okay, I did not notice about you. I'm so excited to talk about this. Because you are, I mean truly, this is going to embarrass you but I'm going to say it because all our listeners need to hear it. Mystie is truly one of the smartest people that I know, like very intellectual. When I don't understand something I'm reading, she's one of the first people between you and Brandy Vencel, I



will go to you and say help me understand. I don't know why I can't understand this. And so to hear you say that you were a late reader and that you read a ton of light reading, I'm just really excited to talk about that.

Mystie: I remember being 7 years old and sitting at the kitchen counter and going, "C-A-T... I don't get it."

Sarah: Isn't that so painful too as a mother who's taught kids to read? I just get goosebumps like, oh my gosh. It just occurred to me that I have three more toddlers that I have to teach how to read. Like oh my goodness.

Mystie: So I was not like even reading a whole sentence at all until I was almost 8 or 8. I don't exactly remember but not just having a difficult time and reading slowly but like not putting words together yet. And then at some point when I was 8, I started reading. It just clicked and then I could read. And within the next year, I was reading at grade level and then above grade level so I was doing it not at all and then suddenly sometime when I was 8, it just clicked. And partly because of that, I skipped a lot of those early reader. The things that kids normally gain fluency on were then, I didn't want to read those were baby books.

Sarah: So I have to just interject here, all three of my big kids, none of them were early readers, which I think some people find a little bit surprising because they can see that...with this daughter on social media and all the books she post, but I'm talking about the books that they're reading now and they're all voracious readers now. But none of them read early. And my son was the latest reader of all three and really didn't start reading fluently and how he was close to 10 and he also skipped most of those books that

you would gain like Little Bear and Mr. Putter & Tabby and those kinds of early reader books, we just skipped that entire genre because he went from having a really hard time sounding out very simple words to being able to read something the caliber of like Harry Potter, almost overnight. And I think this is not a unique story. I think this happens a lot with kids who are later readers is that they're struggling with the phonetic, just the skill of learning how to read and then something happens once they've been given enough time and some that they reach a certain level of maturity where they're just ready to read. And we put so much pressure on ourselves to get our kids to read in 2nd grade or 1st grade, 2nd grade, 3rd grade, a certain grade level which I think is really unnecessary because as I've been talking to all of these parents and then homeschooling experts like Andrew Pudewa at these conventions, the truth is that's just not how it works for most children. So I feel like we should free ourselves from that pressure. You do not need to have a 2nd grader that can read at the 2nd grade reading level. I have never had a 2nd grader that read it the 2nd grade reading level. But by the time my kids have become 5th or 6th graders, they're always reading well above that reading level.

Mystie: Yes, I think it's very similar to babies learning to walk or potty training but by the time the kid is 6 or 7, there is absolutely no difference when they were potty trained. In the same thing with learning to walk. Some 9-month old's can walk and some are well over a year before they walk. By the time they're 4, 5, it makes no difference.

Sarah: Yeah, yup. Okay so before we move on from that, if you're listening to this and you're thinking, I have a late reader. I'm struggling with



feeling peaceful about it because it is very anxiety-producing. I understand. I've been there. To have an 8 or 9-year old child who still cannot read, and also, there is a stigma as well with their friends and realizing that they're struggling with something other kids can do, so I want to give you a couple of resources. If your child is a late reader, struggling to read listen to Episode 13 with Marie Ripple. She is the creator of All About Reading and we talked about what parents should do if their child is struggling to read. I think you'll be really encouraged by that episode. Some very simple things to do that will make a huge impact and then also in the show notes of this podcast, we'll put a link to that in the show notes. So all you have to do is go to readaloudrevival.com and look for Episode 46 and we'll have links to all these. We'll have links to that episode with Marie Ripple. We'll also have a link to a post I wrote recently on series books that help struggling readers and so in that post, I articulate a technique I used with all three of my children and very low pressure, delightful way to use the kind of series books that your kids don't want to put down like Nate the Great, Encyclopedia Brown, Boxcar Children, things like that. In a read aloud way, at the beginning, I didn't even want to get into right now because we kind of usurp our conversation here but basically, using series books to help your kids get over that hump of struggling to read to becoming kids who cannot get enough books. So we'll put links to all those in the show notes.

Mystie: Yeah, and I think something that helped when I was growing up is I wasn't reading yet but we still went to the library every week and it was still just you can get whatever books you want. It doesn't matter if they're above your reading level or below them. You can look at the pictures. It

was still just as, well you're going to read at some point and we're just still going to get books and we're going to the library because dad wants to get books. That's not really about you. It's just this is what we do. So there wasn't pressure and when it clicked, it clicked and then I was reading up a storm. So I read all The Boxcar Children, all the Nancy Drew. I went through a Choose Your Own Adventures spurt. I checked out every kid cookbook the library had. I can remember certain sections of the library and I would go there hoping that someone had returned a book I'd never seen before. The new book would appear. Their collection didn't change very often so it really never happened. And then I got a little bit older like 9 or 10 or so and then it had to be civil war. If the ladies weren't wearing big puffy dresses, I was not interested.

Sarah: Oh interesting. I went through a civil war spurt when I was like 7th grade or so.

Mystie: So almost all the novels that I read were historical fiction civil war era. But then that made me just identify with that period and so then whenever it was the history book or I would like the causes of the civil war, suddenly that was my issue. That was one of my favorite things because I loved the civil war even though really that interest was mostly only seen in what I was reading in my spare time. It still cultivated that interest in me even though it wasn't very schoolish and didn't look very serious, it was still good. It was immature but I was 10 and so it was okay. I could be immature, but I was 10.

34:00 Light reading

Sarah: So when your kids are picking up a lot of light reading, do you try and steer them in a



different direction, you just let it go? How do you approach that?

Mystie: I just let it go. And I make sure that there are plenty of options in the house on all kind of levels so there is light reading for them to just pick up but there are also plenty of very interesting, solid books. I've scoured book lists since my oldest was a baby and so at this point, at used book sales or whatever, my eye is very attuned to picking. Okay that one's going to be the one. So our house is just full of books and there's a mix of the light things like Sugar Creek Gang and Hardy Boys and then some things like Henty, which are historical fiction. They're not literature but they're not super light. So I try to fill up where most of the stuff where they have to choose from is kind of in that category, kind of bringing them a little bit further. And then when they're interested in a certain topic, I try to find books on that. I got my older two Kindle a year ago, a year and a half ago because I just couldn't keep them in books. That's so much easier to keep them in Kindle books. Both my older two were early readers. They were reading by 5. And so that poses kind of a different challenge. Keeping them in books, oh my goodness.

Sarah: Especially in books that are appropriate content-wise for their age.

Mystie: Yes, that has been a struggle for them. Now my third is a girl so it's my girl that's my later reader and she is 8 and not fluent. She can read but it still takes her a long time and it's a struggle. So she'll pick up a book and read a page and then put it down. She's not even reading like starting at the beginning and finishing a book unless maybe it's Mr. Putter. She can read Mr. Putter aloud to her little sister. But anything else, like she wants to read Secret Garden and so she picks it up and she reads a paragraph,

maybe a page, and then puts it down and she'll pick it up and read a middle book page. She's not reading from beginning to end.

Sarah: I love that though because you know she's like identifying herself as somebody who reads The Secret Garden.

Mystie: Exactly. It's so nice. So I also then don't say oh you have to start at the beginning or you can't pick up another book until you've read. You started this one, you need to finish it. Or anything like that. I really want them to develop their own relationships with the books and she is identifying herself as a person who reads The Secret Garden even though that's really a little bit beyond her right now. So I just let her do that and have that experience. And the thing is she's listened to it on audio before. So it's not like she doesn't know who the characters are or what's happening. We have the one that's illustrated by Tasha Tudor.

Sarah: I love that one.

Mystie: So she just pages through and looks at the pictures.

37:10 Assigned vs. free reading

Sarah: So do you assign books for your children to read in addition to what they read on their own?

Mystie: When I was pregnant and sleep-deprived and going through those kind of phases, I did none at all. So my older two would have been in early to mid elementary and they were fluent readers. At that stage, I just strew books and turned on the audio books and I saw they were reading and that was good enough. We called it good. Now, I am actually sleeping through the nights, most nights and kind of getting my brain back. That's a totally different thing. And so what



I've done this year is for my 10-year old. He has a weekly school checklist and at the bottom is just a "what I'm reading right now" section and it says, history, science, or natural world and story. And so we have a Monday meeting and he fills that in himself. I say, so what are you reading right now? And he tells me and so that kind of encourages him to pick a broad range.

Sarah: So he's supposed to be reading something in each of those three categories?

Mystie: So he always has a book going in one of those categories.

Sarah: Got it.

Mystie: Yeah, but he picks them. So I put that list there just kind of categories and he's the kind that would be reading multiple books at once anyway. So that's not a pressure thing. That's just so you're not reading three novels at once. I'm kind of teaching him to choose a broad range of interests and history is actually one of his favorites. And then the next Monday, I'll look at his list from last week and say, did you finish that one? What did you think of it? And if he's still reading it then we'll just put it on the list for that week too. So it's not like he has to finish them in a week or anything. It's just a way to have a place where I know it's like a prompt for me to say, "So what are you reading?" "I'm reading this." "So how's it going? What was your favorite part?"

Sarah: So you make space and room in the schedule and the expectations basically that reading is happening? But you're not necessarily assigning actual books for him to read as part of his... like for literature, do you assign any particular books to be read for that? Or that just depends on the season?

Mystie: Well the story category is kind of literature but it's any fiction. So the level that he chooses varies but it's his choice. In school, we do Shakespeare. If there's a literature book that I really want them to experience, that something is probably going to become a read aloud or an audio book in the car or something like that and not, here you'll have to read this.

Sarah: Okay this is so good. I didn't know that but that's actually how we do it too basically. Somebody just asked me about that. How do you get your kids to read classics? And I said, I just read them to them so they have no choice. They listen to *The Wind and the Willows* in the car or you sit down and you read *Heidi* with them altogether and then that's where they get their classics in. So the way we do it at our house is somewhat similar a little bit different. I like what you said in the beginning about how it depended on... like if you are getting less sleep or if you have a new baby or you're pregnant, because I think we have this idea, a lot of us homeschooling moms, we have this idea that our homeschool schedule is supposed to be consistent but we always do these things every year, year in and year out. But life is never like that. So I'm just like you in that when we're having a rough year like when we had the twins and actually the next year and then the next year. I put a lot less pressure on myself and on my kids to be getting certain particular benchmarks as far as like we're reading this many great pieces of literature each year but I love the idea of making time and space in the schedule. I'm making it something that happens in your school day no matter what.

What we've done this year and this is the first year we've done this is that I knew that... I have two kids, my 10 and 12-year old who read a ton



of fantasy, love fantasy. But they just don't generally choose anything that's not fantasy. And so I want them to read other things that are not just fantasy even though I love they read lots of that too. And so what I've done is chosen, I chose six, which is just a completely random number I'd pick that I figured would be reasonable. And I chose six books for each of them that I thought would be good reads but I knew we were going to get to as read alouds this year and I put them in their school bin and I put them on the list. And I told them I don't care if you read these all in a month. I don't care if you read them all in September, if you read them all in May, I don't care if you read it, one a month all year long. But basically by the end of the school year, you need to have read these books. And they're not hard. They're not necessarily classic. Okay, so for example, this year, my 12-year old, I assigned *The Family Under the Bridge*. Have you read that?

Mystie: Haven't.

Sarah: Okay. It's just this lovely tale. It's like a light read but it's about it takes place in France and it's about some children and their experience with homelessness in France. And it's doesn't sound like a light read. It's actually easy to read and it's enjoyable to read. And when my daughter picked up. She started reading it and finished it in like two days because it was so good. But I think the difference between saying you have to read a chapter of this a week in October or a day or whatever in October. And the difference between saying I'd like you to read this at some point this year, kind of changes their relationship with it so it doesn't feel like so much of a slog. They can choose to read them in any order or maybe when they're having a hard time finding something they want to read. I'd say, go within your school shelf

and see if there's one of those assigned reading titles that you haven't picked yet. And I try to choose things outside of the genres they normally choose. So for my 10 and 12-year old, I'm almost always choosing historic fiction or other fiction that's not fantasy. For my 14-year old, I'm almost always choosing fantasy because she never picks it up and reads it on her own.

Mystie: Yes. I think that's great. And I can remember my mom. It never went on our school list or anything but I can remember my mom saying, you should really try reading this, I think you would like it. Or have you seen this book? And so then, it's more like this conversation. Like we're just both readers and I read this book and I think you would like it too. That's something that normal adults do.

Sarah: Yes.

Mystie: That's normal behavior.

Sarah: Exactly. Yup.

Mystie: And so we can have that kind of just normal behavior between each other. It doesn't have to be this official sort of thing. It's more like, "Oh, have you seen this book because I think you would like it."

44:00 Creating a book club atmosphere

Sarah: Okay, I love that you brought that up because one of the things we talked about a lo inside of Read Aloud Revival membership is making your home more like a book club atmosphere than like a literature class. So instead of drilling your kids, asking them comprehension questions to find out if they read the book, you don't do that to your friend when she says she finished *All the Light We Cannot See*. You don't



say, okay and you start asking them reading comprehension questions to make sure they've read it. You start asking questions because you're curious about their response to the book. And I think if we approached our kids the same way, it would totally change the dynamic that our kids use when they approach books or their understanding of what a reading life looks like. So I get asked this a lot and I tell people that we're doing this thing where I put out six books on the shelf and say you have to read this by the end of the year and that's the end of the conversation more or less. What actually happens is I don't make them write anything on the book. I don't turn it into a book report, definitely no book reports. No book reports. But what I do is say, when you finished each book, they're supposed to come tell me hey I finished *The Family Under the Bridge* or I've finished *My Side of the Mountain* or whatever it is that I've assigned them. Then I take it on myself to ask them a few book club type questions that I would ask a friend who just told me they finished a book. And ask them those. So for our listeners, I will put the questions that I use. I use five questions that you can ask with any book, very open-ended so that I don't even have to have read what they're reading in order to have this good conversation with them. And I'll put a link to the guide that I put together that helps with those five questions. But basically, all I do is say, ask them a question like, so who was the most wicked in that book? Or who was the most courageous? Or if you could be friends with anybody in that book, who would you like to get to know? Or something like that where they kind of they have to stop and think through, maybe even a question that makes them go back to the text like what was the most intense moment in that book and they come start flipping through the pages and trying to

remember. And then especially if I haven't read the book myself, it's totally more like a conversation between friends or people who are just readers. Really, a conversation between readers rather than a teacher saying get the right answer. Tell me all the right answers.

Mystie: Yes. That's what we're trying to do also is foster like this is just between readers. I'm a reader, you're a reader and our conversation and dealing with books is just between readers.

Sarah: Exactly. Exactly.

Mystie: That's not forced or check the boxes and make sure all the right answers are done. Or you've read it in the exact right way or anything like that. I did forget, this year, I did assign a literature book for my two older ones and this was a first. I assigned *The Pilgrim's Progress* to my 10-year old because I didn't think he would. And he's been a fluent reader for 5 years already but still actually, I gave him the Kindle version and the audio version and I think he's only listening now but for a while, while I was on top of it, he was following along on his Kindle while listening. But that's the one book and so he listens to it. It's on his checklist like 10 minutes or so. He's going through it very slowly and then he drawing something after he listens to it. He likes to draw. So this was completely an assignment to help him enjoy it more.

Sarah: But this is something that I think happens when you've sort of cultivated this book club atmosphere in your home or when you've approached your child as a fellow reader and instead of following the model that we may have been used to from our childhood when we were answering comprehension questions but we're just talking about books, is that I think it becomes easier for mom and dad to be able to recommend



books to their kids. Because I've heard people say, well my child would not read anything that I recommend. But really, I think if we move away from assigning a whole bunch of hard books and letting our kids do a lot of light reading, talking to our kids about books as friendly comrades on the journey instead of dictator parents that are trying to make sure our children got all the important parts out. Then what happens is when they finish something... I'm trying to think of an example here. When my daughter finishes something like Anne of Green Gables and tells me it's the best book she's ever read, I can then hand her Emily of New Moon or something completely different like Little Women, and say I bet if you liked that, you'll probably like this. And she'll listen to that and go, okay because I feel like a friendly comrade on the journey instead of somebody who's trying to assign or better her through her next reading...

Mystie: What we're trying to do is always push them and instead of just letting them enjoy reading, did they get the sense that we want them to enjoy reading or do they get the sense that we aren't really happy with what they're choosing to read.

Sarah: Yeah, and it seems like the most important thing to help our children do as children is to see themselves as readers. And identify themselves as people who love books and who are readers and then the rest falls naturally after that. Well, this has been so wonderful. Mystie, thank you. It's always fun chatting with you. I know we chat all the time but it's especially fun chatting anew here. So I appreciate you coming on to the show.

Mystie: Yeah, that was fun. Thank you.

49:10 Let the kids speak

Sarah: 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.

Child 1: My name is Isabel. I'm 10 years old and I live in Minnesota. My favorite book is The King's Shadow by Elizabeth Adler. Something scary happened to the main character in the first chapter so I didn't want to read anymore. But mommy told me that you can't judge a book from the first chapter and she was right. We kept reading and I loved seeing how the main character's early tragedy was turned into a beautiful gift.

Child 2: Hi Sarah! This is Abby. My favorite book is The Secret Eggs. By the way, I live in Texas. My favorite book was The Secret Eggs. My favorite part was.. baby bird. I like the cat. I can't really remember most of the story, but I liked it.

Child 3: My name is Garrett. I'm 12 years old and I live in Kent, Texas. My favorite books to read is Encyclopedia Brown because you get to try to solve the case at the end of every chapter for yourself.

Child 4: Hi! My name is Elsa Mitchell. I'm 9 years old and I live in Maryland. My favorite read aloud book was Travels with Pooh. It's about Pooh bear and all of his friends going to different places and having adventures. I really like the book because the pictures can fold out so you can see a lot of the pictures. It was read by my dad which actually met the author.

Child 5: My name is Oliver and I'm going to tell you what my favorite read aloud book and it's called Jungle Breakout...



Child 6: My name is Arnold. I'm 3 years old. I live in El Salvador.

Mom: And my favorite book...

Child 6: Is...

Child 7: My name is Riza Cortes and I live in Apaneca, El Salvador. I'm 10 years old and my favorite book is Number the Stars. It has tons of action.

Child 8: Hello. My name is Noah. I live in Apaneca, El Salvador. I'm 8 years old and my favorite book is Kingdom's Reign. I like the part when Leinad is fighting Pharaohs on the bridge.

Sarah: That's it for today. Thank you kids for your book recommendations. I love hearing what you're reading. Don't forget that you can get the show notes for this episode of the podcast at readaloudrevival.com. Just look for episode 46. While you're there, make sure you grab our brand new book list. I think you'll love it. It's a book list we carefully curated all of the best read alouds that we could into various categories that should be super helpful for you. It's free. We're hearing people love it. You can grab it there at readaloudrevival.com. Also, if you want to be notified next time we're doing a 31-day read aloud challenge and you do, head to rar31days.com. Alrighty friends, until next time. Go build your family culture around books.