



RAR 56 – What’s at Stake and Why Stories Matter, Jonathan Auxier

Sarah: You’re listening to the Read Aloud Revival podcast. This is the podcast that inspires you to build your family culture around books.

Hey, hey, hey, Sarah Mackenzie here. This is episode 56 of the Read Aloud Revival, the final episode of season 9, in fact. We’ll be taking a bit of a Christmas holiday and then we’ll be back with season 10 at the end of January. In the meantime, you can get caught up on episodes you’ve missed, find all of the Read Aloud Revival podcast episodes in your favorite podcast app, or at ReadAloudRevival.com. You probably really don’t want to miss episode 36 with Elizabeth Foss; that one was recorded last year and is packed to the gills with great book recommendations for Advent and Christmas reading. You’ll find it at ReadAloudRevival.com under season 6, episode 36. Speaking of ReadAloudRevival.com I hope you’ve peeked recently at our redesigned website. We’ve been working hard on making everything as easy and beautiful to navigate as possible, and one brand new something-something we have there, is a shop. In the shop you’ll find fantastic tools and resources to help you make meaningful and lasting connections with your kids through books. If you’re not a part of our Read Aloud Revival Membership Program you might still like to get your hands on one of the Master Classes Workshops or Author Access Video replays that are usually only available to our members. Well, we’ve pulled some of those and put them into the shop for sale and so you can grab those, whichever ones look most appealing or could possibly light your family on fire. We also have a

brand new line of gifts and merchandise, Revivaler gifts and merchandise. We work very hard here at the Read Aloud Revival to keep the podcast free of sponsored advertisements and one of the ways you can help us keep that going is to support the podcast by visiting the Read Aloud Revival gift shop. You’ll find custom handmade pottery mugs, made in the USA, in eight beautiful colors. You’ll find book bags and some other surprises I’m not going to tell you about quite yet you’re going to have to come and peek to find out. Head to ReadAloudRevival.com and click “Visit the Shop” to see what’s there.

Now today, I’ve got my 13 year old daughter, Alison, with me because we’re interviewing one of her very favorite authors. You ready? Let’s do it.

Jonathan Auxier has been a writer for a very long time but he says he never really felt like he had found his place until he began writing children’s literature. Well, thank goodness he did! Jonathan Auxier is the New York Times Best Selling Author of what he calls strange stories for strange children. His first book, *Peter Nimble and His Fantastic Eyes*, was an ABA New Voices pick and a Book Page magazine Best Book of 2011. His best-selling *Night Gardener* is a Junior Library Guild selection, an ABA Indy Next Pick, an Amazon-Editor’s Pick of the Month, and winner of the TD Book Prize, an ILA book award. More recently, he wrote a follow up to *Peter Nimble and His Fantastic Eyes* called *Sophie Quire and the Last StoryGuard*, which happens to be my 13 year olds favorite, so she’s here today to help me chat with our guest, Jonathan Auxier. Alison, would you like to say hello?

Alison: Hello.



Sarah: Today, Jonathan is joining us to talk about writing for children and why he's so driven to connect kids with stories. Jonathan, welcome to the Read Aloud Revival.

Jonathan: Thanks so much, Sarah. I'm excited to be here.

Sarah: Well, before we get started and talk about writing, do you want to give us a little background maybe on yourself and your family, where you live, that kind of stuff?

3:45 A little about Jonathan and his family

Jonathan: The very barebones stuff is I grew up bouncing around a little bit, but mainly spent my time in British Columbia outside of Vancouver. I have since settled down into Pittsburgh, the most wonderful city in the world, and now I live here with my wife and three little daughters.

Sarah: OK, fantastic. So, tell us a little bit about writing. I know you actually studied playwriting and you were a playwright and screenwriter but I've heard that you didn't feel like that kind of writing ever felt the way children's books feel to you. So what pulled you to writing children's literature?

Jonathan: Well, the first and most obvious answer would be that I love reading children's literature. That's always been, sort of, a through line in my life as a reader, even as I've dabbled in other kinds of story-telling, children's books have always played a huge role in my life, long after they should have in terms of me aging out of them. So even in the pre-Harry Potter days I was this gangly six-foot-four 18 year old wandering around in Barnes and Noble children's section looking at the new kid's books that were coming

out and I was into adulthood and incredibly compelled by, at least, a certain class of children's literature that I really enjoyed reading. In terms of the bouncing around in different genres, a lot of that was just casting about, figuring out, what it meant to be a professional storyteller. Certainly when I was growing up movies were sort of the way our culture told stories to itself and so it made sense to think in terms of movies when I got to university, and I guess in high school a little bit, but mainly in university I started studying theatre, and theatre was so wonderful because you could write a thing and it was so collaborative because you were going to work with a director, and a designer, and actors, and you could also do it right away. It didn't cost a lot of money to throw some actors in a room, bring in an audience, and see something up on its feet. I think this is why a lot of people in a lot of different art forms start in theatre because it's actually incredibly DIY which gives you so many opportunities to explore and fail and find your little successes and keep pushing yourself, as opposed to a novel, which takes upwards to a decade to write, or a movie which takes three years to shoot and edit and millions of dollars. Theatre can be done on a shoestring budget, it forces you to play well with others to collaborate and it also constantly forces introspective artists, especially artistically minded boys are very good at navel gazing, very good at sinking inward and getting very precious about their words and their ideas and none of that matters if you wanted a room full of people to laugh and they didn't laugh and when you get butts in seats in a theatre all you want to people to do is have strong, violent emotional reactions; you want laughter, you want tears, you want applause, and it gives you a very real sense of what it means to connect with an audience,



which I think is just an invaluable experience for any kind of storyteller.

Sarah: Now tell me, so when you were growing up you didn't love reading naturally? You didn't love stories naturally, is that right?

6:45 Jonathan's reading habits as a child

Jonathan: That is correct. When I was growing up I came from a family that they were very serious readers and so there were always books in our home. My older sister was a voracious reader, and I knew how to read, but I didn't enjoy it very much, there were just other things that I enjoyed more. I guess I got through first grade and that was right about the time most kids who loved reading, it was clicking in by the time they were finishing, and it was very clear talking to my teachers and just seeing me, that again, even though I knew how to read, I just didn't like doing it. It was not an activity that brought me any joy. And my mother sort of panicked and she didn't know how to ensure that this would happen, and so she pulled me out of school. And I didn't know this, until only about three years ago I learned the truth of this, but when I was growing up the story my mother would always tell me was I did second grade twice; the first time I did it at home and then I went back into a public school, and the reason I was held back, which is the truth of what happened to me, my mother would always just say that "I didn't quite think I was ready to let you go" or something like that, that somehow made it about her emotional need, and I also interpreted that as I probably wasn't emotionally quite ready or something, and it was only until very recently, after I had published my first book that I was talking with my mom about literacy, and she told me that that wasn't really the reason that she had

done that, and the reason she had pulled me out of school for a year so I could be "homeschooled" was because she was panicking about my reading and she didn't know how to make me a reader but she knew it had to happen. That was not a negotiable thing in our home.

Sarah: You were capable of reading, is that right? Capable of decoding words but you just weren't reading for fun, or voraciously at all?

Jonathan: I could decode, at that stage of literacy that's part and parcel, so I'm sure it wasn't fun because it wasn't easy, and the only way it gets easy is if you expose yourself to a metric ton of very boring words which is why we get these repetitive series, like "The Hardy Boys" and "Nancy Drew" or in my case, I read a lot of Cam Jansen.

Sarah: Oh yeah.

Jonathan: These are not great stories. We don't return to them and have our minds blown by what little gems they are. We read them, we gain the skills we need for a life of reading and then we never look back, but I wasn't getting to that stage when I was getting that massive exposure and so my mother panicked, she pulled me out, we called it homeschooling, and it was basically -- my mother's a painter so she would spend her whole school day painting and I was in the other room, and there were exactly three things I remember, really, I only remember two and she reminded me of the third. The two things I remembered from my homeschooling experience is I had a very good short term memory so she made me memorize every single president and vice-president, which was very valuable when I moved to Canada and no one cared, the other thing she made me memorize is every single prepositional phrase. So at seven years old I was



able to rattle off about, above, along, around, before, behind, below, beneath, but, by. You know, all these things I can't remember them now...

Sarah: Oh my goodness, I know exactly what she used to teach you that, too.

Jonathan: I learned later there was a great song to do that, but I didn't have that, I just had all these useless prepositions, and that was all. And a little bit of art history, she would create these mnemonic devices. I remember something she wanted me to know- when Columbus sailed across the ocean blue, he had a bowl of chili, which she thought then I would interpret as Botticelli, which would teach me that Botticelli's Venus painting happened at the same time.

Sarah: I need to get to know your mother.

Jonathan: She's a wonderful woman. She was actually studying gifted education at this time, so maybe these were very advanced techniques, but even as a child I felt like, 'this doesn't feel like school, this feels way better.' And then my memory is I just mostly messed around the rest of that time. It was very low work load and it was only when I asked her about this later, she said, "No, no, no, you forgot the last thing, which is you had to read three hours a day," and she said, "As soon as you did your reading you could knock off and play with legos or do whatever." And I had no memory of this, but it made perfect sense when she explained, "I panicked, I brought you home, I just forced you to read for three hours a day because that's all I knew, I figured that was the only way to fix this problem." I do know that when I came back to my traditional school, regular public school, I was a year older, to be fair, but I was also a very strong reader, and my parents were unusually invested in the

reading competition that happens every year. They're not competitive people but I remember them being weirdly tense about the reading competition. I realize now it's because it was symbolic of the goals that they had for me.

Sarah: Right.

Jonathan: And so, that was really one of the only prizes I ever won, but I slaughtered the other kids, and that was the year I became a very serious reader, and that was a big change in my life. And, like most people growing up, I'd have a year where I kind of lost a little interest and then it would get rekindled by a certain series or a certain author, those ebbs and flows, but that certainly was the intervention that turned me into a reader. And I entirely have my mother to thank for that.

11:50 Recommendations from the year of homeschooling

Sarah: Do you remember any of those books that were part of that formative time that turned you into a reader?

Jonathan: Oh absolutely. I mentioned Cam Jansen, which again I'm not sure if those books are terribly readable as an adult, but they were valuable, they served a function and I'm grateful for them. For me, I remember very distinctly probably two big moments in my growth as a reader. The first is the first long book that I read completely on my own without adult intervention and I love this, and I really think we do kids a disservice when we give them certain authors. I don't think any grown up should give a child, for example, *The Stinky Cheese Man* because the whole point of that book is that it is so subversive and chaotic, and if a grownup is giving it to you,



it's as good as telling you that this is secretly vegetables, here, eat it.

Sarah: Right, right.

Jonathan: Certain books are meant to be discovered, I think Roald Dahl is that way, and so I discovered Matilda which happens to be his masterpiece, I think his finest novel. Roald Dahl thought it was his finest novel.

Sarah: I agree.

Jonathan: It's my favorite book to this day. It's the first long book I read. And then shortly after that we had our first Scholastic book fair, and I have a distinct memory of bringing my money and looking through the books and the first book I bought with my own money was Lloyd Alexander's Book of Three which is the first volume in the Chronicles of Prydain, and that sent me down a long wonderful Lloyd Alexander rabbit hole that I did not emerge from for probably two years.

Sarah: Alison's face just lit up when you said that, because she just recently – how long ago was it that you discovered those books?

Alison: January or something.

Sarah: Yeah, in the last year.

Jonathan: Oh wow, so you're fresh?

Alison: Yeah.

Jonathan: Excellent. They're wonderful books and in some ways adults come to those books and they feel like a little too similar to Lord of the Rings but when you realize he was studying actual Welsh folklore and coming to these discoveries about the way dwarves worked on his own, and more importantly, the books have a humor that, I think, Tolkien most of the time lacks.

I think there's a real wonderful vein of humor and joy through that entire series.

Sarah: OK, there are so many directions I want to go. I'm trying to decide which direction to go next because you've given me so much good stuff to think about with that last little bit. Thinking through the fact that your mom pulled you home and then just gave you tons and tons of time to read, not just gave you times to read, but required you to read, and that the act of reading and reading becoming faster and easier for you very likely increased your enjoyment of it, which turned you into a reader. To me, that feels so exciting because I know for my oldest three kids, none of them were early readers, but we always put the priority on helping fall in love with stories and fall in love with books and their ability to read ended up, it came around whenever they were ready for it to, and then they had that love of reading already.

Jonathan: I have to stop you and figure out how many children you have. You've already cited four?

Sarah: Yes, we have six. We had our children in batches. Our oldest are 15, 13, and 11. And then we have another batch of small kids that are 4 and the twins are 3.

Jonathan: So, Alison, as a middle child, you have my sympathies. I understand your plight of being stuck, sandwiched between two other siblings. That's a rough lot. You have my blessing, I hope you're able to survive [****inaudible**** 15:07].

Sarah: [To Alison] Are you going to be able to survive it, do you think? I'm a middle child, too, so she does have my sympathy too.

Jonathan: There you go.

Sarah: Yeah, there you go.



Jonathan: So we quietly favor them even as we ignore them [****inaudible***]

Sarah: Well, you have three now, so you have your own middle child there too, quietly.

Jonathan: My wife is also a middle child, so we quietly favor her, while again, simultaneously realizing she's not getting the attention, so even as we're stepping into the horrible tradition of ignoring the middle child ...

Sarah: It can't be helped, can't be helped.

Jonathan: ... it at least breaks our hearts a little.

15:45 Jonathan's favorite book

Sarah: So Alison, do you want to ask a few of the questions you have?

Alison: OK. What's a favorite book of yours?

Jonathan: Oh, that's a really good question. I will tell you this, though, a lot of writers like to throw back that question and be like, 'that's like asking me my favorite child' which I think is foolish...

Alison: All the authors I've asked that question say that.

Jonathan: That's foolish for two reasons; first of all, I don't think it's true about books, second of all, I'm not sure it's necessarily true about children, because if I had a really horrible little troll of a child and then a sweet little angel, I'd, you know, love one more than the other. Luckily, my kids are OK so far, they're all just slightly above troll, but that could change at any minute. In terms of my books, I think the easiest answer is the book I'm writing right now. In order to write a book, I think you need to be stupidly head over heels in love with it, and you need to think that it is such an important and wonderful thing, which is a lie. The world will not stop if you stop writing

your story, but in order to write a story, you need to just be almost delusional like that, and so the book I'm in the middle of right now feels like the most important and special and wonderful, magical thing I will ever write. And I'm sure once I'm done with that, the one after that will feel that way. But it's always, kind of, a forward looking thing. It feels a little dangerous to look on my back books with any preference because I feel like then I would struggle moving forward.

Alison: OK, yeah. What's your favorite book of someone else's?

Jonathan: Oh, that is a very difficult question as well, and that one has a less easy answer. As you sound like a serious reader, so maybe you could identify there are so many books that it's impossible to pick a favorite one. Sometimes moment by moment I have a book I really truly and deeply love. One book that I have loved for a long time and come back to recently just because it's such a wonderful book, and I've talked a lot about it, but *Treasure Island* has always been a huge influence on me, and I teach a children's literature course and I just made the whole class read the book so we could talk about it once again, and I was once shocked at how good it is.

Alison: Yeah, I like that book.

Jonathan: It's pretty wonderful. What about you? What's your favorite book?

17:40 Alison's favorite book

Alison: I don't have a favorite book, I have favorite series, and there's about five of them because I can't narrow it down any more. I like Andrew Petersen's "*Wingfeather Saga*."



Jonathan: I don't know about that at all, tell me about it.

Alison: Oh, it's wonderful, you should read it. I don't want to spoil anything.

Jonathan: Well, you have to tell me something otherwise I'll just think it's about wings and feathers.

Alison: It's not really about wings or feathers.

Jonathan: Well, then, I'd be very disappointed.

Sarah: [To Alison] what do they have to do?

Alison: Well, there's the Igiby children that would be Janner, Leeli, and Tink Igiby, and I think that's the one where they get kidnapped.

Sarah: Right.

Alison: They get kidnapped by the mysterious things of Dang which rule the place where they live Skree, the Things of Dang came across the dark sea of darkness and they attacked Skree and conquered it and so now the Things monitor everything, and the Igiby children get caught and they get put into the jail.

Jonathan: OK, let me narrow some stuff down that will help me figure out. So, are they riding horses or driving cars?

Alison: Technically, they don't do either, but I think riding horses would be closer.

Jonathan: OK, so it's old-timey but there's magic in it?

Alison: Yes, this is an alternate ...

Jonathan: Does everyone have access to magic or only a couple of people?

Alison: There isn't really magic but the creatures are mythical. They have this thing called the Toothy Cow, which is a menacing cow that lives

in the forest and you don't want to get near Toothy Cow, ever.

Jonathan: OK, are all the things a little bit silly in the same way that Dark Sea of Darkness is there?

Alison: Yeah.

Jonathan: Really? This sounds fantastic.

Alison: There is supposedly the Worst Creature Ever; it's a bird with a belly button. That's the problem. It's a problem, so that's why it's the worst. I think it was the Snick Buzzard, I don't remember what it was called.

Jonathan: Well, this sounds like a wonderful series, I will have to check it out, it's called Feather Wing?

Alison: Wingfeather Saga.

Jonathan: Wingfeather. I'm sorry, OK, Wingfeather, I'll be looking that up because I'm always interested to fall in love with new series, and that sounds wonderful, thanks Alison.

20:00 Where did Peter Nimble come from?

Alison: Where did you get the idea to have a character like Peter Nimble?

Jonathan: Oh, that's a great question. The character Peter Nimble probably came from a number of different places, but one of the more direct links to that character actually came from Treasure Island which I mentioned before. My father used to read aloud to me every single night and he would read his favorite books, including Treasure Island which I feel like he read to me a number of times because I kind of got sick of it by the time I was about your age, but I've come back to falling back in love with it, but if you



recall, Jim Hawkins, he finds a treasure map, he goes on this big adventure, all the pirates are trying to trick him and try to get the map or kill him or do whatever but before all of that happens when he's just at the end and we're getting him at the beginning of the story, the first beyond Billy Bones, the old sea dog that showed up and I guess, maybe you get Black Dog too, so maybe it's the third bad guy we show up really, he's this unassuming character who's name is Blind Old Pew, he's this old withered beggar whose got a bandage around his eyes, and he stumbles around with a cane and when Jim first sees this old man he feels really bad for him; the old guy's kind of weird and creepy but he brings him inside to help him because he's so helpless, and then we get this lightening fast transformation that the second the guy's inside he starts grabbing this kid Jim's arm squeezing and twisting and Jim actually thinks he's going to rip it right off and we get this flash of discovery that this helpless old man is actually incredibly dangerous and deadly, and pirates are terrified just by the name Blind Old Pew. And I was also terrified when my dad read this to me the first time and I was really traumatized by the character Pew, and I would have these horrible nightmares, I was afraid he was going to come and get me. This is true: my father would sometimes, after that, he would stumble down the hallway pretending to be Blind Pew and calling out my name, and I'd be like "Shut up, Dad, I know it's you."

Sarah: Again, I really want to meet your parents!

Jonathan: They're good people. But I was really compelled by that idea. I was fascinated by the idea of a character who would be perceived as so weak and feeble and helpless, and actually he did have to struggle because he couldn't see, but beneath that incredibly dangerous and incredibly

capable and people are always underestimating him. And that was something I carried with me for a long time and when I started Peter Nimble I knew I wanted to write this book about this boy who's the greatest thief who ever lived but I was trying to add a something little extra to it and I realized what if like Old Pew, Peter Nimble was blind. How much more amazing would his thievery be if he's doing it all on top of overcoming his inability to see. And that sort of clicked the character into place, and that was the number one influence and inspiration for him.

22:50 What happens when we turn our back on a story

Sarah: OK, so I would love to talk a little bit about Sophie Quire and the Last StoryGuard, which is, of course, the sequel to Peter Nimble and His Fantastic Eyes. I know I heard on another interview you gave where you talked about wanting to explore this idea of what happens when we turn our backs on story. So tell me a little bit about that and the development of that book.

Jonathan: Oh, that's a great question. That was, exactly, one of the things that happens, it happened a little bit in Peter Nimble, Peter Nimble's a little edgier but it still has that nice fairy tale quality and there's a little bit about the act of telling stories and what that means, and then my second book, "The Night Gardener" which is unrelated, it's this stand-alone, kind of Victorian haunted house story. The idea of story-telling is very central to the book and one of the main questions that the whole book is wrestling with is: what is the difference between a story and a lie? I kind of dove very deep into the ideas of stories with that book, but after writing that, and as a children's author you spend a lot of time



talking to educators, teachers, librarians, and it's very easy to say flattering things about the importance of reading and books that everyone nods their heads and jots down and "oh yes, absolutely" but sometimes when I hear these things or I say them myself I realize they feel hollow platitudes. I feel like you're saying what people want to hear and if you actually dive deeper into the question, the question becomes more tricky; what is the point of a story, really, because they're these insubstantial things and they don't feed an empty belly, they don't suture a wound, a story serves no real functional purpose in the world that you can point to, and yet, I know and I suspect you guys know, that when the right reader finds the right story something almost mystical transpires and it can actually transform who they are and their perception of the whole world. And so, I wanted to write a book that takes very seriously the question: what is the point of stories? And so I started writing this story Sophie Quire. It's the story of a 12-year-old book mender who's trapped in a city that doesn't read and this girl, Sophie Quire, what she discovers is that the characters and creatures and magical wonders she reads inside her storybooks are actually real, they're not make believe and they exist just on the edges of the world she knows, and she also discovers that the only thing standing between her world and complete destruction are these stories, and that she has been selected when she finds a magic book that is actually alive and can answer questions she asks it, she learns that she has been selected as the Story Guard when the lone protector of these stories. And it was really a way to take basically it's a companion book to Peter Nimble (you don't need to read them in order) but I wanted to dive much more deeply into the question of what the point of stories is.

And the way I got there eventually is by standing it on its head. So, instead of attacking it by saying 'here's why stories are important' it became the easier way to look at it was to say, 'well, here's what's at stake when stories go away.' And I think when a community and culture loses its sense of wonder and its sense of curiosity and it's sense of – again, like a childlike sense of wonder and the belief in these stories and rituals and these mysteries of their past – they completely lose their sense of who they are, and I think there's a tremendous amount at stake. And so that book is really about illustrating that idea.

Sarah: OK, that reminded me so much. I thought it was a Chesterton quote, but it turns out it was a C. S. Lewis quote, and you probably already know it, but it's the 'friendship is unnecessary, like philosophy, like art, it has no survival value, rather it is one of those things which give value to survival.' To me, when you were talking I thought 'that's exactly what that is,' when you said stories are inconsequential, they don't feed your belly or suture your wounds, but they give value to this life that we live.

Jonathan: What a wonderful quote! Absolutely, that's a perfect example. And no one would ever question the importance and value of friendship and yet when we're forced to articulate it, it can become very difficult.

Sarah: Yeah, exactly. Exactly. It's hard even sometimes for somebody who loves stories so much or who has been so formed by stories, maybe to articulate how formational or critical those stories have been. Just like when you have a friendship that means so much to you it's hard to put into words exactly what it means to you, right?



Jonathan: Absolutely.

27:00 Connecting kids with the joy of stories

Sarah: OK, Jonathan. What advice could you give to parents to help them connect their kids with the joy of good stories? I know that a lot of parents, like me, have worried over time our kids might not be reading as early as we want them to, but then at some point we get over that fear because they're reading and now our biggest, our strongest desire is that our kids will love stories the way we want them to, and I know that obviously was a desire of your mother's as she made that a priority for you when you were a child, what do you think you could tell parents who really want that for their children as well?

Jonathan: Well, in some ways I would feel like a fraud answering that, and I say that because I have very young children, which means I have not really entered the phase of the dreaded iPhone and iPad screen, which I think is an enormous competitor. When I was growing up there were Nintendos and such but we weren't allowed to have those, we also didn't have TV. which was helpful. We watched a lot of old movies. But the main thing I do think and the thing that my wife and I talk about this with raising our daughters, again, it's very easy and important to encourage parents reading aloud to their children, I think that's a wonderful form of bonding, but there's something I feel like we don't talk about quite as much that I think is equally important which is, I think it is essential for our children to see us reading, and reading aloud with your kid is great and I think this happens a lot with dads. The dads will read aloud to the kids but the kids can smell that it's sort of vitamins, vegetables, it's good for them, 'I'm doing this

because it's good for you, kid' but I would rather be watching a football game, because that's where the vast majority of fathers in this country consume their stories is on ESPN, and I think one of the best gifts my father gave me, he was an avid reader who was also a comic book reader, so every single week (I've never seen him throw a ball) we walked to the comic shop and would pick up new comic books to read and we would talk about those, and beyond that he read all sorts of non-fiction, fiction, everything he could get his hands on. I constantly saw him reading. I constantly saw my mother reading. And so I was taught that those were adult activities. When I was projecting into my future what it would be like when I'm grown up and have my own home and my own life and can make my own choices, I just assumed that one of those choices I would make is what I'll be reading next, and when you talk to parents, specifically again, dads (not to harp on them, but I harp on them because I am one of them so I see the traps, and I was a boy once and I know how important that relationship and that modeling can be) but I think the number one thing we can do to help our kids is show them that reading is an activity not just worth their time but worth our time.

Sarah: Oh, that's so good. I feel that, too, as a parent where I feel so pulled. I mean, even as a grownup who values reading and wants to be a reader and wants to make a lot of space and time for reading I can feel myself so pulled by the culture and my phone and all the pings and dings of everything I'm supposed to be doing, and forget to read on my own outside of reading to my kids, so that is a really beautiful reminder that that modeling does so much more than we could do with chiding our children, giving them a



certain amount of reading time a day, we just need to be modeling it as well.

Jonathan: Absolutely.

29:50 Jonathan's mission at book signings

Sarah: That's so good. OK, so I've heard this little rumor that at book signings you actually try to get the kids to take home books not yours, like other books besides yours, so tell me more about that, is that true?

Jonathan: That is absolutely true. So, of course I want them to get my book, maybe several of my books, but once that mission has been accomplished I tend to, and this is (I also have very long, slow signing lines because I tend to get very chatty and I like getting book recommendations) ...

Sarah: We're shocked over here.

Jonathan: Yeah. In the same way that I liked hearing Alison talked about her new series Wing Feather? Feather Wing? Wingfeather. Wingfeather.

Alison: Yeah, it's Wingfeather.

Jonathan: I'm always looking for recommendations. I love hearing what kids are talking about, what they enjoy, and no sooner do you do that, when a kid describes something they're enjoying, because I read a lot and I get excited about stories, it often pings my head something else they would enjoy, and I find it's a lot easier to get really braggy and aggressive about books I didn't write, you know, I'll try to tell you "my book's good, you should read it" you put Origami Yoda in my hands and you can't shut me up about how great I actually think it is. And I always have, it's tricky because new bookstores

don't stock very many old cannon books, or classic books, a handful do and that's always wonderful so I have to really keep up with what's on the shelves over the last two years, but there's so many great stories happening all the time that no matter what kid I talk to, no matter how much they say they hate reading altogether, I see it as personal challenge to make sure they're walking out of the store with a book they've never heard of that I absolutely know I they would love.

Sarah: I love that so much. I used to work at the library and it would be the highlight of my day if a kid came up to me and said, "Oh I just finished this book and I don't know what to read next," I thought, 'Oh my goodness, I thought you'd never ask!' so now I selfishly will ask my kid's friends when they're over, "So, what are you reading?" because I'll be able to tap into what do they like and maybe I could give you another recommendation for your next book or maybe I'll find something new to read that we haven't discovered yet, so ...

Jonathan: Absolutely.

Sarah: ... that's so fun. Do you find yourself recommending the same things over and over and over again, and if so, what are some of those?

Jonathan: Yeah, there is a handful. You know, there are some books that you just know every kid is going to love, and some of them don't need my help. When Wonder first come out I read it pretty early on, I think I may have read it in ARC form [advance reading copy] and so for a brief six month window I was very aggressively telling kids about Wonder and then the whole universe learned about Wonder and I didn't need to do that anymore.

Sarah: Yep.



Jonathan: I find that when I talk to kids I mentioned Origami Yoda the Tom Angleberger series, that's a great series to hand to kids who have read Wimpy Kid but don't know something next. I'm also a huge fan of, you know you get a lot of kids who like graphic novels, and I'm a huge fan of Nathan Hales' Hazardous Tales series which are these non-fiction graphic novels.

Sarah: I haven't seen those, I don't think.

33:00 Dark characters in children's stories

Jonathan: They're phenomenal and they're hilarious and they're dark and they're wonderful: Nathan Hales' Hazardous Tales. Those are some of my go to, but a lot of kids really like scary books like, The Night Gardener so one of the books Tracie Baptiste has that book The Jumbies that came out last year which was just a wonderful, chilling tale. There's always something I've read that I'm really excited about.

Sarah: I'm glad you brought that up about scary books because I meant to ask you that and I forgot. So you said that when you were talking about – was it Pew?

Jonathan: Yeah, Blind Old Pew.

Sarah: So, OK, you were frightened by characters and stories as a child, I'm assuming, in books, sounds like anyway, and The Night Gardener is really a scary story, so tell me more about that.

Jonathan: As a child I was very sensitive. I knew I did not like being frightened. I have a distinct memory of my third grade teacher was reading aloud some slightly creepy book, I feel like it's someone got trapped inside a doll house or something, and the whole class loved it, and my

parents never knew about this but I went up to her and I said, "Look, I'm not trying to get out of doing work but I would like to sit in the hallway with nothing to do while you read that for half an hour a day because I'd rather be sitting on the hallway floor by myself than hearing that story, and not because it's bad but because I'm not ready for it" ...

Sarah: Oh my goodness, what did she do?

Jonathan: She let me. She was actually a very mean teacher but she left that out, she was nice to me then. But I was always extremely sensitive specifically to, oddly enough, I'm very comfortable with sort of realistic depictions of evil, of blood and violence in the world, but very sensitive to metaphysical depictions of evil, from a very young age, and that still holds into adulthood. So it's a very strange thing that I wrote The Night Gardener. I was trying quite hard to actually keep the book light even though the ideas and the story and the world were sort of driving the story darker and darker, I worked quite hard to keep touches of light in it, but the thing that I ran into was basically that book was a way to teach myself courage in the face of my own fears which sort of overwhelmed me. You mentioned C. S. Lewis earlier and one of my favorite pieces of writing about children's literature of all time is his essay on Three Ways of Writing for Children, and he talks at great length about basically what it means to be afraid as a child and, sort of, how the terror that children feel is inevitable and certain stories that maybe they obsess about and maybe get scared about, they might be the occasion for the fear, but if they hadn't have read that story they would have been afraid of something else, and he talks about how when he was a kid he was terrified of bugs. He didn't need a story to teach him to be afraid



because that's just natural to childhood. And in that same essay he also quotes Chesterton to bring it back to our old pal Gilbert, and cites that wonderful phrase that I think was also paraphrased in the beginning of *Coraline*, which is a children don't ...

Sarah: I just pulled it up, I think. You were saying and I was pulling it up so Alison started giggling, "Fairy tales do not tell children that dragons exist, children already know that dragons exist. Fairytales tell children that dragons can be killed."

Jonathan: Absolutely, and that is what I thought about writing *The Night Gardener* is that I wanted to teach myself how to stare my fears directly in the eye.

Sarah: So good. Well, I asked Alison (because she's read *The Night Gardener*) "Was it scary? How scary was it?" because she's read a lot of scary books. N.D. Wilson writes some scary books and she had this delicious smile on her face and said, "Yes!" So that was that kind of scary. OK, we're good.

Jonathan: A couple of people read *The Night Gardener* before it came out and told me I was going to get a ton of angry mail from parents, and I have never heard a thing, not a single ...

Sarah: Interesting.

Jonathan: ... word of complaint. That's not an invitation!

Sarah: So your email is ... uh ... !

Jonathan: Exactly. But it's true, I worked pretty hard to make sure any reader, the youngest heroine in that book is 10 years old, this boy named Kip, and I worked pretty hard to have Kip give a younger reader cues on how to handle what was happening because I feel like we can

handle very scary stuff so long as we have a good guide.

Sarah: OK, so as you're talking I'm hearing so much of these deep resounding truths that you, kind of, weave into your stories without being didactic or heavy-handed, I really can't abide children's stories that are just poorly veiled moral stories, but I what I love so much about Peter Nimble and His Fantastic Eyes is that I kept taking out quotes that I felt like were probably tapping into some deeper truth or meaning but were so well woven into the story, and I just pulled open my little commonplace notebook so I could see which ones I'd been writing out and this is a couple of them: one from page 70 in Peter Nimble it was "And last, Peter Nimble, I have called you forth, not because of what you may become but because of what you already are. If you ever find yourself in serious trouble, remember your nature above all things." I remember when I read that and I thought, 'Oh, this is not going to be an ordinary book, this is going to be amazing.' And it has been, and as I've been talking with Alison, I've read Peter Nimble and she's read all of your books and we've been talking through some of the things that make us laugh and the some of the things that make us stop and think. There's just so much to your stories that doesn't meet the eye and that is the best kind of children's story of all.

Jonathan: Ah, that's immensely gratifying thing to hear, thank you very much.

Sarah: Now, I copy out quotes from books all the time, but so do my kids, and Alison copied out this one from Sophie Quire, the *StoryGuard* ... wait, did I get the title ...

Alison: *The Last of the Story Guard*.



Sarah: Sophie Quire, and The Last Story Guard. “She had, in fact, never met an author in her life, as you can imagine it was a singularly thrilling experience, should you ever be so lucky as to encounter an author in your life, you should shower him or her with gifts and praise.” Alison came into the kitchen the day she read that and was laughing because at the Read Aloud Revival we do these monthly Author Access events where kids can meet authors on these live webinars and I thought that is too funny. We should start every single Author Access event lathering these authors with gifts and praise, surely!

Jonathan: You should!

Sarah: And we should begin with you.

Jonathan: [****inaudible**** 38:26] I wrote that as a joke, and it made me laugh. It turns out it made a lot of other people laugh. I have not got any gifts so far, so apparently wasn’t clear enough that I want actual chocolate bars and things like that, balloon animals, whatever people can muster, they didn’t take the hint quite literally. No, but that was honestly one of my favorite things about my job getting to be a children’s author is I go to these events that are filled with other authors, many of whom are my favorite authors, and it sort of mind blowing to hang out with these people and have them – because kid’s authors are all pretty nice even if they don’t know who I am to have to be polite, so getting to meet authors is honestly been one of the most exciting things about this job, and so it is both self-serving but also a true reflection of how I feel.

Sarah: That is too funny. Well, I know there were several times when she was reading that book when she told me, “Oh my gosh, mom, you’re going to love this one.” And I haven’t got a

chance to read it yet, it’s on my night stand though, I can’t wait to dive in because I have a feeling Sophie Quire is going to be a book I’ll love, so I can hardly wait.

Jonathan: I hope so.

39:30 Jonathan’s favorite author

Alison: Who’s your favorite author?

Jonathan: oh, that’s a great question, Alison. I have a lot of favorite authors, that something that does fluctuate. Over time though I would say I have two authors who I just adore and I come back to again and again. The first is a children’s author and that would be Roald Dahl who I just can’t get enough of. It started all the way a million years ago when I was eight years old and read Matilda, my first real long book that I read on my own, and that’s really never abated. And in terms of adult authors I’m an enormous (apparently, I like the initials R. D. because my favorite adult author is the Canadian fiction writer, Robertson Davies, whose books, specifically his first novel which is called Fifth Business was just a revelation to me when I came out of university and he’s another one of these writers when I’m feeling overwhelmed by the world I just love dipping into his stories and every time I read a book I feel like I’ve had a good long chat with him, which is a pretty wonderful feeling.

Sarah: It’s funny you say that Matilda was the first long book you read that turned you into a reader because, that I would say, is the first long book that I read as well, that I remember feeling like my world had just changed. I had just discovered something that I didn’t really realize existed which were these stories that nobody else read to me but I was going to find on my



own. And it was Matilda that did that for me as well.

Jonathan: Wow.

Sarah: Well, for those listening who would love to connect with you, I can't wait to share a direct link actually to your website, where kids can dress you up as Sherlock Holmes or Wolverine or a total dork. Alison and I had fun with that before we got on the call today. So we will include a link to your website, which is TheScop.com. Actually, tell me about that, why is it called TheScop.

Jonathan: Scop is an old English word, I think it was first identified in Beowulf, and it means basically story-teller, or bard might be the closer translation. It's a word I always loved, I loved that there was this word for storyteller that you can't find in a dictionary, and so years and years before I started writing I would obsessively doodle the word and think about the word over and over again and in every book I write I try to find a way to sneak the word in, purely for my own pleasure, but I ended up naming the website after that as well.

Sarah: Great. So that's at TheScop.com and if you're listening and want to head there we'll have links to it, of course, in the Show Notes, so if you go to ReadAloudRevival.com you'll be able to find a link there. Jonathan, where else can people connect with you, or is that the best place?

Jonathan: I have a weird name which means I'm incredibly googlable, so I'm always happy to connect with readers on Facebook or on Twitter, and you can certainly visit my website if you have specific questions, there's always an email link on there, but I'm not too hard to track down.

Sarah: Fantastic. And we'll have links to your Facebook page and your Twitter handle and all

that on the page as well. Well, thank you so much, this has been a treat, and we are really grateful that you took some time out to chat with us today.

Jonathan: Thanks so much, Sarah.

Alison: Bye.

Jonathan: Bye, bye.

42:30 Let the Kids Speak

Now it's time for Let the Kids Speak. This is my favorite part of the podcast, where kids tell us about their favorite stories that have been read aloud to them.

Child1: My name is Gabriella, I'm eight years old and I live in California. My favorite book is Baker's Magic. It's about a girl named Bea who bakes. But she's just not an ordinary baker. If she's annoyed when she's baking and you take a bite of her pastry then you get annoyed. If she's sad when she's baking and you take a bite of her pastry, then you burst into tears. Eventually, she made some friends and they go on an adventure full of magic and danger.

Child2: Hello, my name is Thomas. I am five years old. I live in England. My favorite book is Charlie and the Chocolate Factory by Roald Dahl. My favorite part is when Charlie unwraps the chocolate bar and finds the gold ticket and everyone gets excited.

Child3: Hi, I'm Jojo I live in Illinois. I like Jack. [Mom: Jack, from what book?] From The Little House on the Prairie.

Child4: Hi, my name is Saya, I'm six years old. I live in Illinois. My favorite book is Little Bear. My favorite part is when he goes to the city and he meets this man on the road to the place and he



lets him come see the city with him where he lives, and Little Bear has never seen the city before, and he was going to say “I love this place” but instead he said, “I’m so hungry.”

Child5: My name is Adelaide and I’m five years old. I live in Illinois and my favorite book is Little Bear. My favorite part is when Little Bear was going to say “I love this place” but instead he said, “Oh, I’m so hungry.”

Child6: Hi, my name is Elias and I’m eight years old and I live in Seattle, Washington. And my favorite series is Hank the Cow Dog and my favorite book of Hank the Cow Dog is The Case of the Most Ancient Bone and something that I like about it is that Hank, the main character, makes so many bad decisions to make the story funny.

Child7: My name is Fie, and I’m almost three [Mom: And I live in Seattle, Washington]. And I live in Seattle, Washington. [Mom: My favorite book is the Big Red Barn.] The Big Red Barn. [Mom: By Margaret Wise Brown] By Margaret Wise Brown. [Mom: And I like to see all the animals.] And I like to see all the animals. [Mom: Thank you.] Thank you. [Mom: Bye bye]

Child8: Hello, my name is Ataxia and I live in Seattle, Washington. I’m five and a half years old. And my favorite book is McBroom’s Wonderful One-Acre Farm. I really like it because there was a really big wind that blows the children out of the chimney, that’s why I like it, and it’s really funny.

Child9: My name is Suzy and I live in California. And my favorite book is Richard Scarry’s and when they deliver some bread to a bakery and then a little baker Charlie he made tiny loaves and he put too much yeast in them and so they puffed up. [Mom: And how old are you?] Four.

Child10: Hi, I’m Heidi, I’m Quincy’s mom. Quincy is four years old from southern California, and she has autism. She is non-verbal and even though she can’t physically tell you, she is passionate about books and reading. Quincy never leaves home without a book. Some of her favorite books are Oh, No! by Candace Fleming, The Going to Bed Book by Sandra Boynton, and she loves to listen to The Jesus Storybook Bible by Sally Lloyd-Jones before bedtime.

Sarah: Oh my goodness, so beautiful, I have goose bumps. Hey, thanks to all of our callers. I love those messages. If your kids would like to leave a message to be aired on the Read Aloud Revival podcast, or if you would like to leave a message, we love them all. Head to ReadAloudRevival.com, scroll to the bottom of the page, and you’ll see how easy it is to leave a message. Don’t forget to head to the website and check out our brand new Read Aloud Revival shop where you can find fantastic tools and resources that will help you make meaningful and lasting connections with your kids through books as well as a new, brand new Read Aloud Revival gift shop. I hope you visit, and hey, you know what? I appreciate you so much. Have a wonderful, happy Christmas and we’ll see you in the New Year. Until then, go build your family culture around books.