



RAR #59 – Maryrose Wood

Maryrose: There you go.

Sarah: I could listen to you read the entire thing.

Maryrose: Thank you so much.

Sarah: Oh, that is so much fun. And the accent is just perfection.

You're listening to the Read Aloud Revival podcast. This is the podcast that helps you make meaningful and lasting connections with your kids through books.

Hello friends. Oh boy, do I have a fun episode for you today. Welcome to the Read Aloud Revival, episode 59. I'm your host, Sarah Mackenzie. Now, first of all, it's the end of February. Can I get a hip-hip sound-off around here? I am always so happy to see winter come to an end here in the inland northwest. And this last winter has been an especially cold and snowy one, so hello March, in like a lion you come. Today, I've got a fabulous guest interview with Maryrose Wood, author of The Incorrigible Children of Ashton Place books. It's a whole series. Just wait till you hear her reading at the very end of today's episode. There's howling involved. It is utterly fantastic. I know you'll love it. If you love Maryrose Wood today you're in for a treat because your kids can meet her at a Read Aloud Revival Author Access Event. She'll be joining us live for a video stream in Membership where she'll take questions from your kids and answer them live on screen. You know about those Author Access events, right? Our next one is coming up here with Patricia Polacco, that will be followed by the one and only Tomie dePaola in Read Aloud Revival Membership. The good news is we'll be opening Membership at the end of March. Doors have been closed for a few months now but we're

getting ready to open them up for just 10 days of registration. When you're a member, one of the many benefits is that your kids can meet their favorite and your favorite authors and illustrators like Tomie dePaola, Marla Frazee, Grace Lin, Andrew Peterson, Jane Yolen, and today's guest, Maryrose Wood. Your kids can type their questions in on the author, who's live on the video stream, answers them. It is just really fantastic. We'll give you a little peek into what those look like pretty soon here on the podcast. If you want to be first to know when those Membership doors open you want to head to RARMembership.com and put your email into the page there so you don't miss our announcement. After this upcoming registration period we won't be opening doors again for awhile so you definitely don't want to miss it. That's RARMembership.com to get on the waiting list so you know when doors are open. Now, let's get on to today's show. I know you're going to love it.

Have you ever asked yourself, maybe in a particularly challenging parenting moment, were these children raised by wolves? That's the exact question Maryrose Wood asked herself a few years ago. And it led to a wonderful funny series of books about a governess and her charges that is filled with adventure and plenty of pluck. Maryrose Wood has been an actor, a director, a playwright, and a comedian. Her work as a playwright made her a three time winner of the prestigious Richard Rodgers Award administered by the American Academy of Arts and Letters. The Incorrigible Children of Ashton Place is her first series for middle grade readers. It's one of my favorite new finds, and the series itself has won numerous awards. In fact, book number five, The Unmapped Sea was named a best children's book of 2015 by NPR. Maryrose teaches fiction



writing at NYU and loves to speak to young readers and writers at schools. We are so excited she's here to join us today. Maryrose, welcome to the Read Aloud Revival.

Maryrose: Thank you so much, Sarah. I'm so thrilled to be here.

Sarah: Well, I have been excited (for weeks!) to talk to you because your series, *The Incurrable Children of Ashton Place* is one of my absolute favorites. I just stumbled upon it in the last several months and a completely delightful find, so I'm really excited to chat with you about the books today.

Maryrose: Oh, thank you so much. Yes, the books have been around for a few years. The most recent book that was published was book five in this series, so they've really been building a readership and people are still discovering the series, which is very exciting to me.

Sarah: Oh, I think the listeners to this podcast, in particular, are going to love them. And I think they'll find out why by the time we're done talking about them today. Do you want to tell us, before we start talking about books, do you want to tell us a little more about your family?

4:50 A little more about Maryrose's family

Maryrose: Sure. So, I have two wonderful largely grown children. It really does fly by. I'm sure everyone out there who has kids is discovering this for themselves but my "baby" is 18 years old and my firstborn is 21. So I am a really beautiful threshold in my parenting career of letting the chicks fly out of the nest and supporting them as they become young adults. So that's my family life. I am a full time writer and working on the final

book in the series right now, and starting to cook up some projects for what comes next.

Sarah: Ah, that was one of my questions. The 6th book is going to be final book in the series, then?

Maryrose: Yes. It's a series that is each book you can read them on their own but it really tells a continuous tale. So my wish was to really be able to provide a big satisfying conclusion to all the readers and so I'm calling an end to the proceedings by say, "No, book six, we're going to wrap up mysteries and have a big climatic ending." So it will be the end, I'll call it, of this narrative thread, the end of this plot. But that's not to say there might not be other books written about these characters or in this world in the future. I sort of love them too much to rule that out.

Sarah: I think when I come to the end, I have not actually come to the end of the 5th book yet, but when I come to the end of the 6th book I know I'm going to be sad to say goodbye to Penelope Lumley because she is completely delightful. So, how about for our readers who are not familiar with your books, do you want to give them the premise, sort of the overall, just lay the foundation so they know what we're talking about?

6:30 All about *The Incurrable Children*

Maryrose: Sure. So *The Incurrable Children of Ashton Place* is the name of the series and in the first book, which is called *The Mysterious Howling* we meet Miss Penelope Lumley who is 15 years old and a recent graduate of the Swanburne Academy for poor bright females, and she's on her way to her first job interview, which will be as a governess. The entire series is



set in Victorian, England and being a governess was one of the very few jobs that a respectable, educated young lady was suitable for. So she's on her way to her first job interview at this mysterious, very grand estate, called Ashton Place and when she gets there she meets the very, very nervous and flighty lady of the house, Lady Constance, and after a brief interview is offered the job on the spot. However, nobody will answer any of her questions about the children who are the main part of being a governess, but she takes the job and only after she signs a contract, a binding contract of employment, does she, herself, discover that the three children that she has been hired to care for and educate were actually raised by wolves. And they are delightful and prove to be very adept pupils but she has to really change, as we do when we work with children, she has to really adapt her plan, her preconceived notion about what she was going to do to the children's needs. So she has to put aside, for a little bit, the lessons in French and watercolor paintings, rules of lawn tennis, and rudiments of first aid and focus on the essentials, which is eating cooked food and learning to wear clothes and most importantly of all, to stop chasing squirrels. The children are very easily distracted by small tasty rodents.

Sarah: There's something metaphorical there, I think, that all the parents listening could understand.

Maryrose: Who hasn't ever had that moment where you're looking at your own child with this sense of 'What are you?'

Sarah: Exactly.

Maryrose: What kind of creature are you and how can I bridge the gap and communicate what I really need you to know through this wild

exterior? That's sort of the fun premise, but needless to say, the children are really quite special and have very good hearts and are very adaptable, eager to be taught, and Penelope, who has herself been raised at this very special boarding school; it's not an unsavory place at all, it's not like a Dickensington, negative experience. It's almost utopian society of, where girls are really treated with respect and taught to be filled with optimism and pluck and are guided by the wise sayings of the school's founder, Agatha Swanburne. And so she leaves this very upbeat place with a wonderful, positive naiveté and the real moral center, and it's this quality, these are the resources that she has that she brings to bear in her experiences with the children, and then the larger frame, which is that these kids were left in the woods by someone for some reason and so alongside this, sort of my fair lady plot of her teaching them how to behave more like children and less like wolf cubs the mystery of who they really are and why they were left in the woods, and by whom, for what purpose, starts to come to the fore and as the series progresses she realizes that there's quite a dark little mystery and danger that she's got to address in order to make things end happily for all of them.

10:30 The original idea for The Incorrigible Children

Sarah: OK, so tell me where the idea for this series first came from? Where did it all start?

Maryrose: When I was a nerdy bookworm teenager, as I assume that many of your listeners have been as well, my favorite book that I read over and over again, and I still re-read it every year was Jane Eyre, of course, a great Victorian governess novel. There are several great Victorian governess novels but that was the one I



absolutely fell in love with and it was the kind of reading experience, for me, that I would finish Jane Eyre, I would just savor the last page, and I would close the book and I would hug it to my heart, close my eyes, take my breath, and then I would go back to the beginning and start reading it over again, because you don't want to leave that book. It's like the beloved fictional world that you don't want to leave. So I was very enamored with Victorian British literature and I was very besotted with the kind of character that Jane was, and I'm sure many of your listeners know Jane Eyre well, but if you don't, Jane, like Penelope Lumley in my own books, is an orphan who was raised with no advantages. She's got this very difficult upbringing, she's raised by a family that doesn't treat her well, and she's sent to a difficult place to go to school, and she ends up getting a job as governess. She's got no resources except what is inside her. It's her integrity, her character, her smarts, her creativity, her intuition; all of her resources are internal and she's very true to herself. She's the role model for pluck and integrity. And she's a young woman and she stands up to power fearlessly. I just thought she was "the bomb" as we say nowadays, and I thought how great it would be to write a character with those qualities, to invent someone who had that kind of substance. And yet, I'm a clown, I love comedy, and I was playing with this idea of Victorian governesses but I was simultaneously very intrigued by what you could do to turn that on its head and when my son was a very small boy his favorite book, one of his favorite books for me to read aloud to him at night was Curious George, and we all love Curious George but the process of Curious George, who's sort of a monkey, but he's sort of a little boy.

Sarah: Yeah, exactly.

Maryrose: It's just great. It's got this, kind of, a surreal imaginative leap that we can, kind of, hold Curious George in our heads as both a monkey and a small child at the same time, and because he's a monkey he does these ridiculously chaotic mayhem-inducing things but because he's also a little boy he's always forgiven and loved and everything turns out well. And my son loved this. You don't have to have a PhD in psychology to understand the appeal to a small child; you could just cause a mess and yet it's all going to be OK, you'll always be forgiven. So I also had this fascination with the notion of children who inhabited this gray area between animal and child and that there was this possibility for extreme behavior but that they were so good at heart, and so that became the inspiration for the Incorrigibles themselves who were raised by wolves and so they just go wild sometimes; they bay at the moon, and climb on the furniture, and chase little animals, but they're also so sweet. And putting those two very unlike ideas together was the creative act, and once I did that then all of the possibilities (what would happen?) and all the questions that rose from the premise itself led me to the story.

14:00 Maryrose's own sweet, wild children

Sarah: So you have two children who, I think, on your website you describe them, when they were younger, as two curious and occasionally rambunctious pupils yourself.

Maryrose: Yes.

Sarah: And you homeschooled a bit, right?



Maryrose: I did. I did, when my children were quite young, we homeschooled up through the time my daughter was old enough to enter 6th grade, which was middle school in the community we were living in, so she never attended elementary school at all. And her younger brother was homeschooled and then when she went to school he wanted to go to school too, so they started in 3rd grade and 6th grade, but that gave us a nice homeschooling experience when they were young and I have to say, it is so, to me, so present in these books because my experience of being around young children was always enmeshed with finding the teachable moments, and the process of learning and noticing the world around us that was our family life, it wasn't separated at all from the idea of education. And it's exactly the relationship that Penelope has with the Incorrigibles. So I get to relive that pleasure in writing these books.

Sarah: I think that's maybe partly the reason why I fell in love with Penelope Lumley so quickly. I mean, of course, I think it's almost impossible not to when you're reading these books but especially when I'm talking to other homeschoolers, I always want to say, "No, you particularly will adore these books" and I couldn't really put my finger on it and it wasn't until our Podcast Manager, Kara, told me that you had homeschooled for a few years that I thought, 'Ah, that makes sense.'

Maryrose: Well, and the truth is, of course, Penelope is 15. Now she's a Victorian 15, which means she's got to go out and support herself but she's a child herself. So what you have here is really a group of four children who are in love with learning and the eldest among them is taking on the role of educator and, kind of, substitute mom, but it's coming from such a loving place

and she, of course, learns as much from the children as they learn from her, which is always the case when you teach.

16:30 Agatha Swanburne's academy

Sarah: OK, so Agatha Swanburne, the founder of the academy that Penelope Lumley grew up at really, right?

Maryrose: Mm hmm.

Sarah: So she's sort of known for always having just the right words at any given time and every time we come across another little saying of hers I think, 'How on earth does the author come up with these completely perfect, delightful little sayings?' so tell me about that.

Maryrose: Well, first of all that's very flattering, thank you. It's quite a challenge to set for oneself. I call this 'throwing your backpack over the fence' – if you throw your backpack over the fence, you're going to have to learn how to climb that fence and go get it, and so when you create a character who is known for her ability to come up with these memorable, pithy, wise sayings that, kind of, become the moral code of the whole community of school girls, it's like, well, now you've got to think of them.

Sarah: Exactly.

Maryrose: At school, they're often quoted. Penelope, whenever she gets herself into a pickle she's like, "Well, what would Agatha Swanburne do?" She's often really coming up with these sayings to inspire herself, to say, "What do I know? What was I taught? How can I make a good decision now?" At the Swanburne school the sayings are embroidered onto countless pillows that are scattered all over the school, I



mean, it's really embedded in the culture of the Swanburne Academy. And so, from my perspective, what I have learned to do over the course of the books is to not worry about coming up with them in the abstract, but to tell the story of what happens to these characters and to remind myself whenever they are in a tough spot they can rely on the wisdom of Agatha Swanburne and I, sort of, join them in saying, "Well, what would Agatha Swanburne say right now? What advice is most needed?" And from that question usually the right Agatha Swanburne saying will present itself, at least in its meaning in the good advice that is needed. I'll draft something that will be the advice that they need, but then the work comes in because then I have to really boil it down into something that's kind of catchy.

Sarah: Yes, exactly. The pithy.

Maryrose: People who are advertising and paid so much because to get to the pithy, you know, catchy, memorable part, takes a lot of revision, but really that's where the fun comes in.

Sarah: It almost reminds me just a little bit – have you read Alexander McCall Smith's No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency books?

Maryrose: I have not. In what ways is it similar?

Sarah: Well, Mma Ramotswe, who is the main character- the leading detective in the agency, she depends on this book, when ... I'm just beating my head against a wall over here, trying to remember the author of the book that she ... basically, read a book on being a detective and then started this whole agency based on her reading of this book. And she quotes him (and I don't know that his sayings are quite as pithy or as catchy and perfect as Agatha Swanburne's) but she relies on these little pieces of truth, I

guess, that she read in this book, and then it informs the whole way she's going to act, and sets the stage for how she's going to deal with the predicament. It kind of reminded me of that, I just love it so much, but I always think, 'Goodness, that must be so hard to ... that's really fun to hear you talk about it just has to present itself at the right time.'

Maryrose: They rise out of the story. They just rise out of the story then I just have to real boil them down and it is actually a lot of fun, and what you're describing in this other book it's such a treat for an author of this temperament, of my temperament, who likes to, sort of, play with literary ideas, like playing with the idea of a Victorian governess and then mushing it together, like the Jungle Book, you're constantly playing with literary ideas that you're fond of. The idea of inventing a fictional work of fiction and embedding it in the novel that you're writing, to me, is just like dessert.

Sarah: Yeah.

Maryrose: It's so fun. And so to invent Agatha Swanburne and her entire body of sayings, and I've had many people send me emails or fan mail saying, "Where can I get the book of Agatha Swanburne's sayings?" as if she's a real person that one of the little known European philosophers, you know? And that's great fun, but I also invented a series of books called, Giddyup Rainbow that was to amuse myself invention of the kind of horse books that I loved as a kid, and so there's a fictional series within the Incorrigible Children books that's Penelope's favorite series to read. Nothing makes me happier than inventing a new title. It's great fun, it like Russian nesting dolls to put your fictional creations within fictional creations.



21:30 Favorite childhood books

Sarah: It's almost like you're tucking little secrets, your own little inside jokes into your book. I love it, so fun! I was actually going to ask you about Giddyup Rainbow because I think so many of us as kids and so many of our young listeners and readers in our families go through series like that, they keep with them forever, that really shape or that inform them throughout their life. What did you like to read most as a child? What were your favorites growing up?

Maryrose: I'll tell you, though, Giddyup Rainbow is a kind of classic girl and horse friendship series and those books are still popular, and I absolutely adored Black Beauty, another great Victorian novel and I read all of the horse books, The Black Stallion books, My Friend Flicka. I read a lot of them. I was a suburban kid growing up out on Long Island, which is a suburb of New York City, I've never even been near a horse. The idea of me and a horse ever being in the same proximity to each other was just ludicrous. Somehow I was obsessed with horses and my daughter went through a similar phase and she was a New York City kid. I just thought it was really fascinating. So that was the Giddyup Rainbow inspiration. But when I was kid I'd have to say I recently found (this is a little digression but I'm going to answer your question) I moved recently so there was a lot of packing and unpacking, going through things, and I found a book that I read, that was my constant companion as a kid, and it's just one of those Golden Collections of Children's Literature, I think it's Louie Untermeyer collection, Golden Treasury of Children's Literature, and the spine was cracked. It was this big thick book and I realized, "Oh my God, I just read this book constantly, and I opened it up to remind myself what was in it and it was filled with British

children's literature. It had stories from Just So Stories by Rudyard Kipling, it had Beatrix Potter stories, it had Louis Carroll in it, and it had lots of stalwart, epic poetry about shipwrecks and things like that and I really had to laugh because so much of the sensibility and even the ear for language that I now employ is just between the hard covers of this particular anthology. So I have to laugh, I don't even know where that book came from, I think my mom got it for me, or someone gave it to us as a gift, but how one book could have such a firm thumbprint on your sensibilities.

Sarah: Without you even knowing, right, because it's, kind of, subconscious?

Maryrose: I just loved it, I just loved reading all this old-timey stuff, and it really made an impression on me. So that was that. Jane Eyre was the book of my adolescence. I went through a serious obsession with A Wrinkle in Time which is a fine, enduring middle-grade classic.

Sarah: Yes.

Maryrose: And in fact, when I taught writing children's fiction to my college-age students I always make them read A Wrinkle in Time because I think it gets a very interesting work; very individualistic, quirky, vision and how enduring it is. How a book is so of its time, it's written in the early 60's and it has all this stuff in it related to the politics of the time; the Cold War, the fear of the Soviet Union, and all this stuff. But it how it just manages to be an enduringly compelling but still powerful and people still love it and it's still read by kids today.

Sarah: That's right.

My daughter, my 13 year old especially just adored, I think she read A Wrinkle in Time maybe



a year or two ago (the whole series, I've only read the first) but she just adored them. And I know that was one of my mom's favorite when she was a kid, too. OK, so I'm really curious about writing a series like this that's packed with puzzles and clues and mystery really, how do you keep track of things? Do you outline ahead of time? Do you know where the story's going or where it's going to end? Do you know how it's going to wrap up? Or how do that?

25:15 Maryrose's writing process

Maryrose: It's such a good question! I laugh, ruthfully, pulling out my hair. It's very hard to do. It would be great, you know, I'm a fan of Game of Thrones, I read the first couple of books and then became exhausted, I've been watching it on HBO, and I understand that George Martin has such a core group of devoted fans that they do all of the cataloguing of the plot and world building for him that he can always go to his readers and say, "Hey, wait a minute, what did I say 3,000 pages ago..."

Sarah: Right.

Maryrose: "... remind me." It would be great if I had a little team of astute 5th graders living with me.

Sarah: Exactly.

Maryrose: But since I don't and my dog and my two cats are useless on this account, I just keep a lot of files on my computer and it's very primitive system of organization. There's a lot of software tools that are designed to help writers do stuff like this but I don't know how to use any of them so I just use Microsoft Word and whenever I do some research, which is all the

time because I'm not a historian and I always have to look things up about what kind of trains and sailing ships and how far cities were from each other and clothing people would wear, all the details that you need to know to create a plausible, historical environment (I've got to look it up all the time), so when I look stuff up I copy and paste and I grab images and I just create a document and I'll name it whatever it is, whether it's what kind of food was served at a fancy dinner, or what was the fanciest hotel in a particular city in a particular year, or what was playing on the West End in London during a particular time, so I just have lots and lots of Microsoft Word files that have labels on them and that's where a lot of my research is. And I use a lot of the comment feature in Microsoft Word as well. And unfortunately as I write I can really get bogged down with going back and looking things up all the time so instead of actually doing that I just put a little comment {check this} or {check this against book three} {what did you say in book four} I berate myself in the margins...

Sarah: So it doesn't slow down your storytelling basically?

Maryrose: Sometimes I have to go back because I can't remember who found out what, when, and I have to go back and look, but then I'll grab it and stick it in the margin. I just have this constant dialog with myself and use files and the margin comments to keep track, either what I've already looked up or what I haven't yet looked up. But you're absolutely right, to write a single plot with multiple characters, and a central mystery arc that's the length six fairly chunky novels, there's way more stuff than I could hold in my head.



28:30 Knowing where the writing is going

Sarah: Do you know when you're starting on a new one where it's going to end and where you're going – kind of the big points along the way – or do those come arise when you're writing?

Maryrose: It's a combination of knowing and not knowing; and that to me is a pretty good description of the creative process. You have to know enough, as Tolkien wisely wrote in *The Hobbit*, "enough to get on with" – you have to know enough to get on with and I've been a writer for many, many years and I'm a firm believer in story structure. My first training as a writer was not as a novelist but as a playwright so I sort of started with the basics. Aristotle's *Poetics* – beginning / middle / end – this is how you write a story. And it's very good advice, it never hurts to follow it. So I feel by with beginning / middle / end I sort of know what the initial problem is and I usually have had a sense of where the world of adventure is going to be because most stories, the Hero or the protagonist moves from where they are in the beginning to some large arena of adventure which is maybe they've gone off to a different location like Dorothy leaving Kansas and going to Oz, or maybe they've entered a different state of being. Maybe it's, and even a contemporary story, could just be a kid that goes to a new school and has experiences. I'm thinking of the wonderful book *Wonder* which is about a kid who has to go and face this. So you start in one place and then you have this long adventure in some other place and then you've hopefully learned and grown and changed and had to confront some real transformation in yourself and then the ending is the payoff of all of that, the testing and the

resolution. So if you believe in story structure, as I do, that is often enough to organize my various wild creative impulses into a, kind of, shape and that shape is usually enough for me, usually it's enough for me to get going. I spent a few years studying and performing comedy improv and I know from long experience that the ideas that you squeeze out laboriously and really fret over are not nearly as good as the ideas that pop up and take you by surprise and make you feel like the characters are writing a book. And I always like to leave space for that to happen, and if you over plan you're not giving them enough free reign. You sort of have to trust your characters and the work that you've done, in my opinion, to do that. So that's how I've approached it. Having said that, there is a mystery at the heart of these books and to begin a mystery without knowing pretty clearly what the resolution of that mystery is is dangerous.

Sarah: Right. So just the winding path that you're going to take to get there may surprise you but you kind of know where you're going.

Maryrose: Right. But the fundamental questions of *The Incorrigible Children* series, who are the Incorrigible's parents? Who put them in the woods? Why were they left there? And also, what happened to Penelope's parents because her parents dropped her off at her boarding school, *The Swanburne Academy* when she was a little tiny girl and never came back to get her and she never heard from them since. And so she has a wound as well, a not-knowing even if her parents are still alive and if they are why have they gone silent? So she too has this mystery. So I had to know the fundamental answers to those questions and also leave room for those answers to be refined. But I'll tell you, Sarah, I'm such a believer in just riding the creative wave as



opposed to trying to do some top-down engineering of a story that's not yet written that in order to trick myself into knowing the answers to those questions I wrote a story. When I was first planning the series before I sold it to Harper Collins, I said, "What if there was a scholar who was an expert on the strange case of the wolf children of Ashton Place? And what if he or she was giving a talk to an auditorium full of experts?" And so I actually sat down with that little trick in my head and wrote the speech that this scholar gave and it was through the writing of that speech that I was able to work out all of these answers; I wasn't thinking, I was just riffing. I was improvising.

Sarah: Interesting.

Maryrose: And when I teach writing I often encourage students; they get block, they don't know what happens. It's like, lighten up, unclench your hands, unclench your mind, and invent a game that you can play that is going to give you what you're looking for. There are many ways to skin a cat, no offense to my cats. You're a creative person, if you're a writer you're a creative person, so come up with the writing prompt that tricks you into solving your problem.

Sarah: So good. So interesting. I think it takes a lot of the weight, too, off kids. We have a lot of kids in the Read Aloud Revival community who are aspiring writers and illustrators and I think it takes the pressure off them feeling like they have to have all the answers and all the skills and everything worked out before they just sit down to play with the words or play with the illustrations.

Maryrose: That's such a great point, and I think that it's very easy to mistake finished books, which we have all seen, right? Our homes are all

filled with finished books, the book stores are filled with finished books. We see completed published books in a hard cover all the time, and we think that that's what it is to write, but we don't see is all the mess. And I always encourage people who are stuck in feeling that you have to know what you're going to say and write it perfectly starting at the beginning and ending at the end, the actual writing process is nothing like that. It's much more like the painter who fills dozens and dozens of sketch books playing with every little element that's going to end up in the finished painting and then only after you've got all of these sketch books do you get to say, "Oh, I like the dog facing this way rather than this way," and "I've done all of these color studies and I think I'm going to go in this direction," you do a lot of playing, you have to make a lot of mud pies before you come up with anything that remotely looks like a finished book but we as writers we don't get to share that process as easily because a lot of it is in our heads or our notebooks or in, nowadays, so many of us work on computers, a lot of that playing gets absorbed in just the continual playing and revising on the screen. We don't have, some of us do still write long hand (I don't) but we don't have rooms full of notebooks of all of our various sketches because a lot of it's just happening digitally.

35:00 Jon Klassens's process

Sarah: This reminds me- so last week I talked to Jon Klassen because he actually, by the time this podcast airs, he will have just been on the Read Aloud Revival in Author Access (which we'll talk about in a little bit, because you're going to be joining us there too, which is fantastic).

Maryrose: Oh wonderful, I can't wait.



Sarah: Yes. And Jon showed me while we're doing a tech check to make sure everything is going to work for the Author Event, he pulled up what he's working on now in PhotoShop and all his layers and all his files and he had, I don't remember how many dozens of versions of the same of the picture, he was showing me how much he plays with it. What he was going to show us and what he will have shown us by the time this episode airs, on the Author Access Event he's going to share his screen and how the kids how many different ways he plays with a single drawing and how it doesn't need to be perfect. He was talking to me about how we probably have this view of illustrators as they sit down and maybe it takes them a couple of tries but they actually create one picture in its entirety on a single page when actually that's not at all how it works. They take a little piece from this and a little layer from that and they mesh everything together, just like you said- it's a mud pie, a whole bunch of different mud pies and then you get to take the best parts out and put them together and it's a lot of playing around and a lot of fiddling. And then I didn't even realize that Jon is the one who had illustrated your books until very recently and I was completely thrown. I thought, 'Oh my goodness, how did I not realize this.' It's completely his style.

Maryrose: That's so great. And it's exactly right. I'm so glad that Jon's going to share that work with your listeners because it's just so true -- it's all process, as we say. And if you haven't had a lot of experience doing it you don't know how much process is involved, you only see the finished product and you think, 'Well, my job is to sit here in front of a blank page or a blank screen or a blank drawing pad and create a finished product' and that is the absolute worst thing you

can tell yourself. The finished product will come so much later, right? You'll have to play. Now, Jon created the initial illustrations for the first few books in the series and the initial covers and was such an instrumental part of creating this cool vibe about the way the books came out and so there is a huge debt of gratitude to Jon. He's such a terrific illustrator. He is now so busy and the series has gone on to six books but I'm very happy to be working with a different illustrator (the later books in the series) and her name is Eliza Wheeler ...

Sarah: OK.

Maryrose: ... and she is amazing as well. I feel like I hit the jackpot twice because they are two different artists who have two different sensibilities but they have both captured something so special and right for The Incurable Children books. But if you look at the original hard covers of the first few books you'll see that Jon did the covers and the interior illustrations of the books are Jon's, and they're just delicious.

Sarah: I'm flipping through now as you're talking (sorry!).

38:20 Working with an illustrator

Tell me a little bit about working with an illustrator. A lot of times at our Author Events the kids will ask the authors or illustrators (depending on who we have on) what their relationship is. Do you have an insight, or input I guess is the word I'm looking for, into what the illustrations look like or is that completely separate from you?

Maryrose: Well, I will answer for myself. This is not everyone's experience but it has been my experience, largely thanks to my very groovy editor at Harper Collins, Donna Bray of the Balzer



Bray inprint. It's been my experience that my opinion and ideas about what would make good illustrations and my feedback on the sketches, the many sketches that are created before the illustrations go to final, has always been welcomed and is always solicited and I've had the great pleasure of being able to give very specific ideas about what I think would work and catching sometimes even a little detail in an illustration that doesn't quite match what was in the draft or maybe I've changed something since the illustration was sketched, "Oh, they're supposed to be in sailor suits" or "that's not the right kind of carriage that I was thinking of" so those kind of technical things are great to be able to catch and also creatively. So I have had plenty of input; that's not always the case when you're writing for one of the big publishers- the editor and the design staff in-house at the publisher run that part of it, and different editors and writers have different kinds of relationships about this stuff, so it's not always the case that authors get to meddle in that but I'm very grateful that I have been able to.

40:00 Reading with her own children

Sarah: So what kinds of stories were your favorites to read with your own kids when they were younger?

Maryrose: Let's see. My kids are now 18 and 21 so if you do the math they were in that, my daughter particularly, my older child, was in the enchanted generation that was in the same age group as the Harry Potter characters...

Sarah: I knew you were going to say that.

Maryrose: ...and I have to say, I really wonder, with great hope and curiosity, how that age

cohort is going to carry that experience into their adult lives because when Harry Potter was 11, they were 11, and when he was 13, they were 13, and they had to wait a year or two years or three years for each new Harry Potter book to come out. And read the series. It was as if it were about them. It was such a personal experience and anybody who raised a kid during those years knows what I'm talking about. Go to the midnight launch party, wait for the next book to come out, it was just thrilling. So that was a really big part of our literary culture in my household, so the Harry Potter books were huge. And I'm pretty sure my daughter taught herself to read in order to be able to finish the first Harry Potter book, so I guess she's a little younger than the actual Harry kids, but I remember reading aloud to her and she just couldn't wait for me to do it so she plunged into a book that was a bit advanced for her at the time and got herself through. I mentioned that my son was a big Curious George fan, also a big Calvin and Hobbs fan- another great relationship between a boy and an animal; this time the animal is externalized, right, so he boy has got his little pal. We read a lot together. I was always a big fan of sharing the classics. I felt like from the time they were infants one of the great advantages of being a mother was that someday in the not too distant future I would be able to read *The Phantom Tollbooth* aloud to somebody who had never heard it before.

Sarah: That's so great. My daughter and I read that together last year and that was pretty delightful. There are a lot of classics that I think as a parent it's so much fun to say, I hadn't read *The Phantom Tollbooth* on my own before and there are several classics that that's the case where I hadn't read them and I feel like it's a



unique treat to be able to share that with my kids, to have that first experience with them.

Maryrose: And I'm a huge fan of *The Hobbit*. I would consider *Charlotte's Web* and *The Hobbit* my two perfect books, my list of perfect books, books that you wouldn't change a word of, and that just get better the more times you read them and the older you get the better these books get. And to me that's the mark of a true classic. So these are the books that were kicking around my house and whatever the kids were interested in.

Sarah: Have you seen Melissa Sweet's biography of E. B. White that just came out this last year, *Some Writer*?

Maryrose: No, I haven't. I did hear about it. I'm going to have to add that to my 'to read' list.

Sarah: Yes. She came on the podcast [in the bonus episode in October 2016] and talked about what it was like to write a biography of such a huge influential person in the history that has shaped children's literature and fiction, and I fell in love with the book. It's completely delightful. It's called *Some Writer: The Story of E. B. White* and if you're listening and you haven't seen the book yet, we'll put that link in the Show Notes as well.

Maryrose: Oh fantastic. I want to read it, too.

43:20 Storytime with Maryrose

Sarah: OK, so I didn't ask you this ahead of time but do you have a copy of one of your books that you could read a little bit for us from? Would that be OK?

Maryrose: It would be OK but you'd have to let me get a book close at hand.

Sarah: Oh yeah, I have time.

Maryrose: Let's see. I'll grab one. Alrighty, I have located the copy of *The Mysterious Howling*.

Sarah: Perfect.

Maryrose: The first book in the series and why don't I read a little bit from the scene where Penelope meets the Incorrigible children for the first time?

Sarah: Wonderful.

Maryrose: By way of setting up the scene I will say that she's been offered and accepted the job as governess at Ashton Place. She doesn't know anything about the children just yet and she's been shown to her beautiful new room that will be her home. And remember that she grew up in a dormitory sleeping two girls to a cot at The Swanburne Academy, so it's quite luxurious, and she's unpacking her things- it's mostly books and very few dresses. She's unpacking her things when she hears this howling sound coming in the windows and it really tugs at her heart because she's very tender-hearted about animals and she runs outside to see what it is. She assumes it must be some wounded dogs. It sounds like it's coming from the barn. And so she dashes out and Mrs. Clarke, the housekeeper, chases after her, tries in several ways to prevent her from arriving at the barn, but fails and they get to the barn door and they hear this sound:

"Ahwoooooooooooooooooo! Ahwoooooooooooooooooo! Ahwoooooooooooooooooo! Without further discussion, Penelope shoved the distraught housekeeper aside, leaned her full weight against the great wooden doors, and pushed them open. As the sunlight flooded the dark interior, the howling abruptly stopped. Penelope looked around. The barn smelled strongly of leather and hay, but the stalls, at least, those she could see – were empty. The sudden silence was broken only



by the panting of Mrs. Clarke, who stood silhouetted in the doorway, clutching her voluminous bosom. “Hello?” Penelope said in a soft, soothing tone. “Oh, you unfortunate creatures, are you all right?” Slowly, noiselessly, something moved inside the barn. Three sets of eyes glinted from the dark corners of the rearmost stalls, where the sun did not reach. “Come here.” Penelope wished she had thought to bring some scraps of meat with her to lure the poor frightened things. “Come out where I can see you.” The creatures obeyed. They were not dogs, or ponies, or any other kind of four-legged animal. They were three children and they stared at Penelope with the shining watchful eyes of wild things. All three were wrapped in coarse saddle blankets but wore no other clothing, not even shoes. Their hair was long and tangled and of the same distinctive auburn color, which marked them unmistakably as siblings. They were a boy, whom Penelope guessed to be in the vicinity of ten; another boy, of a size and age approximately three years younger than the first; and a little girl, no more than four or five. “Well, hello,” Penelope said again, even more gently to hide her astonishment. One of the children (it was impossible to tell which one) let out a low growl. Mrs. Clarke gasped, but Penelope paid her no mind. “It is a pleasure to meet you,” she said to the children, with all the professionalism she could muster. “I am Miss Lumley, your new governess.” There you go.

Sarah: I could listen to you read the entire thing.

Maryrose: Thank you so much.

Sarah: Oh, that is so much fun. And the accent is just perfection. Now you all want to go and grab the book, right? And you should because the whole series is fantastic. Books one through five

are available now and book six comes out in August, is that right?

Maryrose: That is correct. It’s called, The Long Lost Home.

Sarah: The Long Lost Home, the final installment in this series about The Incurable Children of Ashton Place. I cannot wait to get my hands on it. Maryrose, thank you so much for joining us, this has been a complete treat.

Maryrose: For me too, thank you so much for having me. I really have enjoyed our conversation.

Sarah: Now, for our listeners who would like to connect with you further, where should they go to do that best?

Maryrose: They can find me on my website which is www.MaryroseWood.com.

48:10 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.

Child1: My name is Francis and I’m 9 years old. I live in Minnesota and my favorite book is Ember Falls because it’s fun to listen and they have a lot of epic battles.

Child2: My name is Kate. I am 13 years old. I live in Anoka, Minnesota and my favorite book is Anne of Green Gables because it tells how people used to live a long time ago.

Child3: Hi, my name is Isaac. I live in Anoka, Minnesota. I’m 10 years old and my favorite book is Red Wall. I like how funny **[**inaudible** 49:14]** I like all the action and the stories that the abbey tells him.



Child4: My name is Gregory and I'm 6 years old and I live in Minnesota, and my favorite book is Green Eggs and Ham. I like it because there's a train.

Child5: My name is Joseph and my age is 4 and my favorite book is Fox in Socks books because there's a fox in it and I live in Minnesota.

Child6: My name is Thomas and I'm 8 years old and I live in Minnesota and my favorite book is Green Eggs and Ham and my favorite part about it is rhyming funny things.

Child7: My name is Casey and I'm from Maryland. My favorite book is The Baking **[**inaudible** 50:16]** and my favorite part of it is when **[**inaudible** 50:20]** has a great idea

Child 8: [Mom: what's your name?] H-E-N-R-Y. [Mom: Henry. How old are you?] 4. [Mom: And what's your favorite book?] The Blue Truck [Mom: The Little Blue Truck. What do you like about that?] Stinky and dirty. [Mom: You also like stinky and dirty, that's right, yes you do.]

Child9: Hi, my name is Penny, and I am 5 years old and I live in Indiana and I'm going to tell you about Peter Pan. I like the part when Peter Pan showed Wendy how to fly.

Child10: Hi, my name is Nora, and I am 7 years old and I live in Indiana and my favorite book is Heidi because she has a friend named Clara and she has a broken leg and she goes to the mountain to see Heidi and then she feels better.

Sarah: Wonderful. I love hearing those so very much. Wasn't that episode fun? Thanks so much for joining me today. Hey, remember that your kids can meet Maryrose Wood live on video in Read Aloud Revival Membership later this year along with other amazing authors and illustrators, like Tomie dePaola, Grace Lin, Andrew Peterson,

Jane Yolen. You want to join Read Aloud Revival Membership when we open up the doors for registration next month. Head to RARMembership.com to be the first to know when those doors open. And we'll be back in two weeks here on the podcast with another great episode for you. Until then friends, go build your family culture around books.