

READ-ALOUD REVIVAL

Transcript Special Edition - **N.D. Wilson interviews Jeanne Birdsall**

RAR 66 – Birdsall and Wilson

Sarah: 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.

Well, hello, hello. Sarah Mackenzie here, I am delighted to be with you today for a special episode of the Read-Aloud Revival podcast. Season 11 doesn't actually begin until August 1 but I have something extra special for you right now while you wait. I can't wait to share it with you. We've got some fun announcements; for one, season 11 is going to be a weekly podcast. Yep! You heard that right. You've been asking for a long time and we're happy to make it happen. You can expect a new episode of the Read-Aloud Revival podcast every single Tuesday. That's pretty exciting. And how we're going to do it is we'll be alternating between our normal interview episodes, the kind you're used to if you're a regular listener of the Read-Aloud Revival with mini episodes. Every other week will be a regular episode anywhere from 30-60 minutes long; usually an interview conversation between me and a guest, and every other week will be a mini-episode, 10-15 minutes, a short episode where I give you some great book recommendations, some good tips, and other insights that will help you make meaningful and lasting connections with your kids through books. Sound good? I'm excited about it. It all starts August 1. You aren't going to want to miss out on our upcoming season. We've got some really awesome guests lined up; some really great things just planned – I'm excited. I don't want to reveal too much, there's some exciting things just around the corner. But to be sure you don't miss a thing make sure you're subscribed by email. We send our very best booklist, free resources; all of our

best stuff goes out by email. If you're not on the list you are missing out, so go to ReadAloudRevival.com, click the big green button there to join the list. You'll start getting those excellent resources to help you make meaningful and lasting connections with your kids right away. In the meantime, though, I have something special for you. So, today, some of my very favorite authors for children: Jeanne Birdsall, the New York Times best-selling author of *The Penderwicks* series and N.D. Wilson, the best-selling author of *The 100 Cupboards* trilogy did an exclusive interview at Anderson Bookshop in Illinois. And, because Jeanne Birdsall and N.D. Wilson are as awesome as they are they wanted you to get to hear it too. When they asked me if I wanted to air the interview on the Read-Aloud Revival podcast, yeah, I couldn't say "yes" fast enough. Now this is actually a video interview and if you'd like to watch it, go to ReadAloudRevival.com and look for the special edition podcast featuring Jennie Birdsall and N.D. Wilson. If you're listening to this episode long into the future you're going to want to look under Season 11 to find that, if you're listening to this when it's fresh you should see it right away when you visit ReadAloudRevival.com. You can watch the video there. But you don't have to watch it so if you're folding laundry, driving the car, or just otherwise hustling around town or the house you may just want to listen and nothing will be lost on you by doing so. And if that's the case get ready to be delighted that's what we're airing today in this special edition podcast. Here's the exclusive interview with the amazing and delightful duo, Jeanne Birdsall and N.D. Wilson.

4:14 The Interview Begins



Jeanne: He also writes some grownup fiction about his ardent Christian faith...

N.D.: Hopefully not fiction. But yes, I do write for grownups as well.

Jeanne: Yes, you write for grownups as well. He's also a budding film maker and is going to be making films and they're going to do extraordinary things. Yes.

N.D.: We hope so.

Jeanne: But, the personal story is that Nate and I met when we were on a panel together in Atlanta, and you say it's 2008, I don't really remember.

N.D.: I think it was 2008.

Jeanne: And it was a very boring panel and we were ...

N.D.: Incredibly boring.

Jeanne: ...incredibly boring panel and then we had lunch together and there were all these people and I remember they kept trying to give me meat and I kept saying, "Is there no non-meat food in Atlanta?" I made a big fuss over it. But you've forgotten that.

N.D.: I remember.

Jeanne: You remember. And then we were talking about C. S. Lewis and we, one or the other of us said, but have you read his grownup trilogy science fiction. And we went *That Hideous Strength* and went "POOM" to each other and that was it.

N.D.: So Jeanne and I shared a boring panel and then had a phenomenal time and I've done a lot of things since then as has she and have never quite had the same experience again.

Jeanne: No.

N.D.: Where we just had a blast talking and we ended up talking publicly as well in a way that maybe wasn't as interesting to everybody else but we had fun.

Jeanne: We had fun.

N.D.: We had a great deal of fun.

Jeanne: And Eric Rohmann who is a local guy, most of you probably know him as a picture book artist, we got him so wound up they only gave us one of these little mics, and we had to pass it back and forth and he dropped into the water glass, so that was the end of that...

N.D.: So Eric was ...

Jeanne: He was between us or something.

N.D.: Yeah, Eric was stuck in between and we had a blast.

Jeanne: Right.

N.D.: And one of the things that came out in the conversations was that we were aiming at very, very similar things and doing it in very different ways for different genres. *The Penderwicks* and *Outlaws of Time* end up shelved slightly differently.

Jeanne: Slightly.

N.D.: And handed to slightly different readers and yet the whole world picture and the aesthetic that we were pursuing was almost identical.

Jeanne: Right.

N.D.: And in many ways came back to *That Hideous Strength* ...

Jeanne: Right.

N.D.: ... from C. S. Lewis, so talking to her, even today, she said she just re-read this, and it's fun to me, and I can immediately flag the things in

here that I know she will really, really love; particular touches and moments and I know there are these other things that she likes but she doesn't try to write. Then there are the things which I really like all of it but I don't try to write this stuff, she does, and I'm writing these other pieces. I do dark, more aggressive, fairly occasionally violent middle grade fantasy.

Jeanne: Fairly occasionally.

N.D.: Fairly occasionally violent, and I have a blast doing it. And she writes domestic drama and yet it's vested with intense tragedy and loss and bitter-sweet healing and all sorts of things in there that I really enjoy in her work. And there's a commonality of the reality of pain, the reality of tragedy, but also the reality of healing, the reality of true conquest, and the sun rising on the other side. Good triumphing ultimately because that's the way the world is made to work. So anyway, we've had a blast together. We love the same British authors but we also ...

Jeanne: Hate the same.

N.D.: Hate the same, yeah. So there are a lot of affinities.

Jeanne: I'm snorting already!

N.D.: So Jeanne and I had a great deal of fun and the one of the things we've enjoyed is how different we are to the market.

Jeanne: Right.

N.D.: And so the opportunity to do something together is very pleasant because we are in completely different market places.

Jeanne: And we're even in different publishers now and we have to negotiate ...

N.D.: I have snake arms on the cover of mine and she has these adorable silhouettes that are

phenomenal. I've always loved her covers. But if anyone put a cover like this on one of mine there would have to be something monstrous coming in from the background. So, she knows what I'm doing and I really enjoy having Jeanne as a friend and as a fellow author because there are things that I put in my work that I know people like Jeanne will catch. She'll see it and she'll know where the influences come from; she'll know where the head waters are. So when I try to write mythic Americana western American magical realism and then most recently in the superhero genre and it can be very, very different and yet, Jeanne will see it as the same. She'll see the same core, the same point and she'll see the same things that we talked about one lunch in 2008 that I've seen in her work and have seen ever since and that she's seen in mine; that we're both targeting. So it's a great deal of fun having Jeanne as a friend and even having Jeanne as a public friend here, now, instead of just as an email buddy for 8 years.

Jeanne: Yeah, we are going a little rogue with this friend thing. We're not quite sure how our publishers feel.

N.D.: Yeah, it doesn't matter.

Jeanne: Like, oh, that's a marketing weird-

N.D.: It's like, who do we talk to to get Harbor Cons and Random House to let us do something together?

Jeanne: It was...

N.D.: It ended up working just fine.

Jeanne: Yeah, that's the way to put it.



9:35 Jeanne Doesn't Pull Punches

N.D.: So, what I love in Jeanne's work, and I'm going to ask her a question here and let her talk, and then we'll have a brief conversation open it up to you all, what I love in it is she doesn't pull punches on the emotional side of what she's trying to do, what she's trying to put her characters through, and this world is a real world with real pain and real loss, and little domestic dramas have death scenes too. And I could write a big superhero story and the consequences are death and you can write a domestic drama where the consequences are death. And as I said earlier, where we were today earlier, every fat faced kid in the school classroom is going to have a death scene.

Jeanne: Right.

N.D.: And they're all going to have loss in their lives, everyone. All of us will. And the stakes are real and across genres the stakes exist. So I love the emotional reality of it. This is not, *The Penderwicks* is not saccharine, there's a depth to it that I really, really enjoy – the bones and the architecture of this, the skeletal structure of the world view on the underside of it. But prose craft. I'm going to ask you about Prose Craft...

Jeanne: Oh [groan].

N.D.: Why?

Jeanne: Why.

N.D.: Why? Why does it matter?

Jeanne: You know, we just talked about this.

N.D.: That's why I'm asking.

Jeanne: Do I have to pretend that we didn't just talk about...

N.D.: No, no you didn't full answer it.

Jeanne: OK.

N.D.: We talked about this briefly in the car that's how I knew I could ask it.

Jeanne: OK. So, first of all, every decision I make as a writer, every single one, depends on what I need as a reader. And because I cannot read bad prose, I cannot, it's like listening to music out of tune, to me. So I need to write prose that I think is at least serviceable. That's one thing. And then the boredom thing is that, we've talked about, is that writing good prose is exhilarating and it's hard and it's never ever, ever, ever boring and one of the things that we (I should have know this, but now we know specifically) have in common is in boredom is absolute intolerable to each of us. And again, it manifests itself so differently. This is what I love. It's like, "What? You two are alike?" because we really ... he was in Sri Lanka last year or something and I maybe went down the street, maybe went down the street. But the philosophy behind it is the only way that we will as humans, at the very least continue to survive, at best continue to evolve spiritually and emotionally and with grace is through communicating and if I can, more than story, if I can get into a reader's head with the richness and potency of good prose then I feel like I would have done something.

N.D.: And on this note, to use a film example, prose is really, really important to me, and prose craft matters a great deal because, especially in what I'm reading...

Jeanne: Right.

N.D.: ... but especially in what I'm reading of my own aloud to my kids or even to myself or to send out to my editor I'm always writing to the



ear and pulling it off the page and saying it and chewing on all the words but imagine a movie with the worst acting you've ever seen and you could have the best script of the year become the worst movie of the year very, very easily. Like some screen writer could execute the blueprints for a film, and that's really all a screenplay is, 'here are your blueprints' – they get executed, the best blueprints of the year bar none, of all time, and it could be the worst movie of all time. And this is because the actors matter, the flesh matters; when you actually take the story and you make it flesh; it becomes incarnate and it goes out with the world, the execution matters. Now, with prose words are physical objects and we are physical people in a physical world and when I'm talking right now I'm plucking strings in my throat, I'm sending physical waves through the air, hitting you physically in the holes in the sides of your skulls. It's a physical thing that goes and certain shapes and rhythms will affect you physically because they're physical objects. And you can take this book that we both love, *That Hideous Strength* and you could rewrite the whole thing and have all of the same information, all of this information can be there but you could destroy the flesh, just absolutely dissect and mutilate the flesh and you could read it and say, "What the heck is going on?" I remember all these data points from the story but it's not up and living and breathing and joyful the way it is when Lewis, in fleshes it. And we both, we won't name names, we both have a lot of contact with other writers and a number of them never give a thought to trying to make sure a sentence is beautiful or trying to make sure that the rhythm and the shape of a paragraph or a page suits the mood, they're just trying to entertain. And that's not bad, it's just that's all they're trying to do. But

it is to both of us boring. So it may not be bad but it becomes painful.

Jeanne: Oh, it is bad.

N.D.: It becomes ... I'm trying not to be too judge-y.

Jeanne: OK, fine.

N.D.: So, someone who just wants to be efficient – let's say someone just wants to be efficient, they've got a potboiler of a story, a little legal thriller say, and they're just going to churn it out and they're just going to tell you the story – just tell it. The story's not going to come to life and characters are not going to be that you then know forever. And it is strange to me, and I know this is the case with *The Penderwicks*, that's the case with *The Penderwicks* for myself, and I want it to be the case, and I know it's the case for me with some of my characters, I could have a kid come tell me about already our awesome time or flashback to *Ashtown*, about the relationship they have with a character, about a scene they remember, and they remember it in a visceral way, a lack of their own experience, and I could say, "Hey, what did you do two birthdays ago? What happened in your life two birthdays ago?" and they'll say, "Ah, I don't know." Stories, action, experiences in concentrate, presented poetically can stick and imprint in the memory very, very effectively and create vicarious experiences that are incredibly potent. So the execution, the final execution – sometimes you're just trying to get out of the way but most of the time you're trying to live up to the concept or live up to the blueprint- this is the character I really want to see on the page, this is the story I really want to tell, this is the scene I want to give, or the emotion I want to give to the reader, and so you can't just do it by telling them, you have to create these

physical objects with ribbons, with their own percussion, and score, or beats, that will match the mood and tone that you're trying to achieve and so they'll get chills or they're moved or they feel joy or they've experienced the catharsis right along with the character. And a lot of that has to do with the actual rumbling of the prose, you know, as far as the words themselves go. And ...

Jeanne: You're one of the best rumblers. You are.

N.D.: Rumblers. I do like to rumble and I think rumble bumble is a very good example of the kind of rhythm I like.

16:55 Big Decisions

Jeanne: Right. I read all of Nate's books, obviously, and re-read them. And I re-read *The Sam Miracle* book on the way out because I had read it as an ARC (Advanced Reader Copy) he sent it to me which is how we ended up here together because I saw these themes that we were both working on and I thought it would be really fun to get together. Having also just re-read *That Hideous Strength* in preparation for this, an overall theme that I saw in it that I think you really come up against over and over and over again is a protagonist having to make some times a life and death decision or a decision where he or she has to put the immediate family in opposition to all of humanity.

N.D.: Yeah.

Jeanne: And I mean, that's not just here, that just felt so familiar to me. Lewis does not, he does it a little bit, but he seems to be in a general way to put the needs of the individual versus all of humanity, I mean, Edmond –

N.D.: Yeah.

Jeanne: ... he wasn't just being disloyal to his family in *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* but to good but you're literally putting your people between a rock and a hard place and I know because I read your books because of who you are and because of the joy and the hope that you will work that out but you're asking a lot of your people, of your characters.

N.D.: Yeah. So, I think in writing superhero stories which I've never done until now and is still more of a fantasy so it is superhero-esque in a classic old way but forget the tights, we're not talking about tights. I want to tap into the itch that created superhero stories in the first place which is a very Old Testament rabbinical itch that came out of eastern Europe then to New York and the old stories are wonderful but they're echoes of the book of Judges and other things where there's *Superman* and all these things came from Samson and so on, so I wanted to tap into that because also the same structure of story inspired *The Lone Wolf* westerns so that isolated outsider who's willing to lay down his life for strangers.

Jeanne: And I love it. I was so ... I love *The Purple Sage*. What is *The Purple Sage*? I can't remember.

N.D.: The Purple Sage?

Jeanne: The writers of *The Purple Sage*.

N.D.: Oh yes.

Jeanne: Yeah, there we go. He's old man ... I keep finding these old boy adventure things from different times.

N.D.: So when my mom finally got me to read something else other than Tolkien then the other influences would come in.

Jeanne: Sorry, I totally interrupted you.

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N.D.: So the western taps into the same type and what you end up seeing for those heroes, for the old heroes, is always an obligation to the whole.

Jeanne: Right.

N.D.: So, Moses is sent to save his people, like the people, the world. Superheroes are always saving the world and in the superhero genre there's frequently a tension between saving the girl and saving the city. And the superhero always manages to save both.

Jeanne: Both. Right.

N.D.: And so I didn't want to do that...

Jeanne: Right.

N.D.: ... When you have that situation, *Sam Miracle* has the choice between trying to save his sister and trying to stop this villain who's going to wage horrible, he's going to totally wreak havoc on the west, the old southwest, or he can save his sister. He can stop, he can let his sister die and he can go do this ... I don't want to spoil too much but that's his choice. And I wanted it to be very clear that you can't just hustle and do both. The assumption is, "Yeah, OK, quick, grab the girl, go save the world" and I wanted to break that down. So I do want to resolve it but in the real world, I think, the trite marvel modern version of the superhero choices, the triteness that's there (and I enjoy some of it I just wanted to kick against it a little bit). But the other thing is that when you see a story where being magic, having any kind of power or ability is just fun, it just bothers me, a lot. It wouldn't be fun. It would be pretty awful and I wanted to capture the power, the nature of blessing and curse of power and ability. So if you are Sam Miracle and you get snake arms, you get rattlesnakes in your arms, it's in some ways it'd be a bummer. You know? I

don't want to point out the obvious but I also wanted it to be ... and because it's middle grade, I also tried to tell it in a way that there's humor, there's funniness- that his left hand is trying to kill him and his right is always distracted and wandering off.

Jeanne: Because it's a sidewinder.

N.D.: Yes.

Jeanne: It's a sidewinder snake.

N.D.: So yes, you have a Mojave Sidewinder in his left hand and a speckled rattlesnake in his right, and they're very fast and they can see in the dark, and so there's benefit to the old west, but there's comedy, there's dark comedy, but he has to learn to control it, too...

Jeanne: Right.

N.D.: ... his left hand's going to kill him, or kill something else, or it says to sit on it. But this is a very lighthearted downstream imitation of a Moses or a Samson or those early superheroes where someone is given some strength or some ability and it's immediately awful, like it's awful. And now because you have it everyone is looking to you to fix it, so because Sam has snakes in his arms suddenly he's the one who has to save the rest; he has to save San Francisco from the vulture because he can and because he can he must and everyone can depend on him and that will destroy the loyalties he has to just his sister. And so I try to navigate all those personal choices in a way that are real, that you can actually feel, can you feel the terror. But mostly, all the way back through *Ashtown* and back to *100 Cupboards* and before that I always hated stories when I would read them when being the hero was about shooting the game winning shot at the end of the game and getting to feel good about

yourself and being the hero would be incredibly lonely, very, very isolating, and a very interesting literary experience if you fully explore it. So I always try to have real hardship and really painful choices, like actually difficult choices. I didn't want to just wave a wand and have it be easy to do everything, to achieve everything.

So I'm finishing Book 2 right now and the consequences of Sam's choice are currently what he's navigating. He makes that choice and then he has to live with that choice and he's still working to capture the whole. But I love sending things to Jeanne because we can talk about other things that I'm not going to tell lots of people. So, in *Ashtown Burials* there's a character she mentioned earlier today where she reminded me Captain John Smith shows up in one of the *Ashtown Burials* series and she called me, "That's just Merlin in *His Hideous Strength*, isn't it?" ...

Jeanne: No, I didn't say that.

N.D.: Either way, she asked me if the inspiration came from ...

Jeanne: Are you riffing on?

N.D.: Yes.

Jeanne: Is probably what I said.

N.D.: And the answer is yes, absolutely yes, of course I am.

Jeanne: Of course.

N.D.: Of course I am. Absolutely. And she was the only one to ever ask that, so nobody else ever, ever mentioned Merlin in *His Hideous Strength* the way Lewis uses him as a character, Waking and John Smith in the *Ashtown 2* except Jeanne saw my emails.

Jeanne: That's one of the crazy parts about this friendship that we shouldn't be friends is that

we're the same kind of readers, very deep and are always going back, well, we've read so many of the same books, and it just doesn't make any ...

N.D.: It's strange. So, it's great...

Jeanne: It's great.

N.D.: It's great fun. I'm looking forward to Merlin showing up in *Penderwicks 5*. Some Merlin character.

Jeanne: Yeah, no.

N.D.: I'll still email and ask.

Jeanne: But you might show up in that grownup novel that I want to write.

N.D.: There we go. Fantastic.

Jeanne: Yeah.

N.D.: Fantastic,

Jeanne: There we go.

25:20 Author Chat/Questions

N.D.: Any questions from any of you all? Well, let's see if I can guess. We know C. S. Lewis Tolkien, P.D. James...

Jeanne: Yes.

N.D.: Chesterton...

Jeanne: Not so much.

N.D.: Not so much, Chesterton?

Jeanne: No, I like him.

N.D.: Chesterton for me is not as fiction except for *Father Brown* stories I really enjoy; he's really impatient so his fiction deteriorates and so by the end he just tells you what the idea was for the



rest. And he moves on. It's always rich in concept and then he's got somewhere to be.

Jeanne: Are you as much of a Nesbitt fan as I am?

N.D.: I like Nesbitt, yeah.

Jeanne: Yeah.

N.D.: Yeah. But the Brit's have dominated children's fiction for a long time...

Jeanne: Right.

N.D.: And they dominated my own childhood imagination growing up.

Jeanne: And mine too.

N.D.: And I'm very, very grateful to them. But I really am, tremendously grateful to them, but there's a huge amount of room to work, and so specifically, because I was a kid who could, after school, chase a crop duster with a BB gun and float down a stream on a chunk of Styrofoam or climb up in a barn and almost die chasing pigeons and then go read *Narnia* and think, 'Oh, I wish I had an interesting life.'

Jeanne: And plus which while we were at dinner Heather got a text message, I guess, with a photograph of at least one of her children on the neighbor's roof in a beehive.

N.D.: We left home. So one of my children is on the roof of the neighbor's house in a bee suit trying to capture a swarm of honey bees off the neighbor's roof. So that kind of thing happens.

Jeanne: He's not one of these guys who's like, I almost died so now I can't let my kids do any of this stuff.

N.D.: So, I'm a kid that shot himself between the eyes with a BB gun.

Jeanne: Oh, did you really?

N.D.: Between the eyes. Accidentally.

Jeanne: Where is the scar?

N.D.: No scar. I was hitting the butt of the gun on the ground impatiently waiting for my friend to set up a target and then I thought to myself, 'I wonder if I should be doing this' and right when I looked down it just PFTHUM, just like that, right into the forehead. At some point it will show up in fiction. And I remember mostly...

Jeanne: And then you'll really get the letter.

N.D.: ... the relief being immediately after as it ricocheted off that not that it hadn't hit me in the eye because I would be blind but so that I wouldn't have to go talk to my mom about how this had happened. That was the fear. So I could have that life and still feel like, oh where's the magic, and really be committed to try and write magical realism starting with American kids and very mythic Americana settings and drawing out some of the bones of this continent into global fantasy and mythology because I love what the Brit's did but they did it for the Brit's and they benefitted from it. But I didn't want kids to read my books and then wish they lived somewhere else or in another time. I want them to be excited about barging out their own backdoor after they read the stories. And I think *The Penderwicks* is the same thing. *The Penderwicks* takes an old, something that was done, this is even in the legacy of Jane Austin in some ways but pulled down and made younger and far more personal on a lot of levels but again, it's in the legacy of the Brit's. It's down stream from the Brits, it's here and it's American kids and it's things that modern kids now can immediately connect to and we both had a similar agenda, so for me it's Wisconsin and then Florida, and Arizona and I'm



hopping around finding different cool, very American things, that are not middle earthy at all. And she's been doing something similar; we both have Americanized.

Jeanne: And one of the things that was odd to me was that I thought that I was so copying the Brits that the books would be popular there. I think we've sold more books in Vietnam than in England.

N.D.: I'm in the absolute same boat.

Jeanne: But the Germans...

N.D.: What's up with the Germans?

Jeanne: What's up with the Germans? Same thing, right.

N.D.: It's like...

Jeanne: But the Brit's... I've been getting these things Garden Street zero every week for five years, like what?

N.D.: C'mon English people.

Jeanne: Yeah, c'mon.

N.D.: The big thing, I think, for the Brits is kind of like them ordering America suits.

Jeanne: Yeah, why would they?

N.D.: The British tailor's ...

Jeanne: We've got

N.D.: Stop talking to us about your children's stories. So they have a certain snobbishness that they've earned.

Jeanne: Which they deserve.

N.D.: Which they've earned.

Jeanne: Yes, which they deserve.

N.D.: And we'll beat them still, eventually.

Jeanne: Where are we?

30:11 Fever Dream

N.D.: I will tell you that this book *Outlaws of Time* came from a fever dream and almost in its entirety. I was working for Dreamworks Animation trying to come up with story concepts and I really wanted a superhero story like I just described for you, I wanted one that was not a superhero story. How do I find a superhero story that isn't, and I couldn't. I just couldn't come up with anything. So I knew that I wanted that, the creativity on the hero. The hero has to have some sort of authority or power or ability and all of those were just lame, everything's been done, I couldn't have spiderwebs that come out of his feet, but not his wrists. I guess I could have. I just crossed it all off, like, nah, OK never mind. And then I had a very high fever, thank goodness, and went to bed and had this crazy dream about my arms being destroyed by this awful outlaw, this guy name the Vulture, El Buitre (the name came later) and he shattered my arms from the wrists to the shoulder, six bullets in each arm. And my arms were in tatters and I got dragged off by an old man into a cave in Arizona where he saved them by grafting rattlesnakes into my arms. The one on the left was a horned sidewinder and the one on the right was a just a speckled rattlesnake. And I woke up fully confident that I had rattlesnakes in my arms. And when I realized that I didn't, then sort of the adrenaline the racing heart dropped, because I had just watched them be sewn in and it faded and I thought, 'Fantastic!' This is yes, perfect. And the fever had broken. By that night I was able to go downstairs to the dining room table and I gathered up my focus group, my children, and I told them a story about a boy named Sam Miracle who had his arms shattered



and destroyed and they were saved by this old man in the desert who dragged him into a cave and grafted rattlesnakes in. And I was testing it because I was thinking is this too terrifying? I loved it, I was already fully in love with it but I wanted to see it. So I was telling my kids if you see the canary that used to hide in the barn, so I tell them the story and I'm telling them all the consequences so when you have snakes in your hands...

Jeanne: One of the kids is a six year old.

N.D.: Yes. She was four at the time. So, I tell her the story – now, admittedly, this is a verbal story...

Jeanne: If she passes out I won't write that part.

N.D.: I'm going to get a parenting award. So I tell the story and I'm telling the story about how your hands can see in the dark. Your hands are incredibly quick, they have their own minds, their own personalities. You have to learn to control them. They can see you when you cannot see and if a villain knocks you out, smacks you on the head and you fall down unconscious, both your hands will come up and look at him, like they'll still be there, active agents and when you're nervous, you'll rattle because you have the rattles on your shoulders, and you have to find a deaf horse because every time you're nervous the horse is going to buck you because ... so I'm telling the whole story and they fell in love with it far more rapidly than anything I've ever told them before. So back to *100 Cupboards* and the other stories I've floated to them, all of the kids were just staring at their hands. Their hands are immediately moving and they're trying to think about what it would be like to see out of their hands, asking how does it work, so they're really quick, and they all left and for weeks straight I

just got drawings from my kids. Just drawings and drawings and different stories and one daughter was doing a little graphic novel things floating them past me, many different characters, and they were just inventing and they were all in, and I knew at that point, "This is what I'm doing, This is what I'm writing next." When I told my publisher, the woman I told was brand new at the publisher, at Random House where I was at the time, and was terrified of snakes, had a snake phobia. So I said, "Hey, good news! Guess what my next story is?" That conversation didn't go so well. But I was absolutely set on making this work and in conversations first were should it just be a movie concept and later should it be a graphic novel concept and I just really wanted to write it. So I wanted to do it with prose and one of the goals was, one of the attractions was, how hard is this going to be to write a character in a compelling and relatable way when that character's three; when that character has three personalities and I have to track hands, and moods of hands, and I have to track the personality of the left and the right over against the actual human in-between. And the challenge of that was very, very appealing. And I enjoyed it immensely. And I re-wrote this book more than anything that I had, I have more drafts of this – a solid 4½ probably drafts on this and I'm usually a 2½ to 3 draft writer and I just kept working on it and trying to make it more and more sticky.

Jeanne: That struggle doesn't show up at all. You did that really well.

N.D.: I had a lot of fun.

Jeanne: It didn't even occur to me that that was a struggle, that's how well it was done.

N.D.: But also the ...



Jeanne: Because it completely makes sense. That's what you always do, everything always makes sense from the bottom up. There's never any "woo, woo" so you had that so internalized that as you were writing about it, it worked.

N.D.: There we go. There's my blurb from Jeanne Birdsall. "It worked."

Jeanne: No blurb.

N.D.: There's no blurb.

Jeanne: We have a blurb issue.

N.D.: We can write blurbs...

Jeanne: ... but we're not allowed to publish them.

N.D.: Yeah.

Jeanne: Or we're allowed to write blurbs. He says...

N.D.: On behalf of each other.

Jeanne: He actually did it once.

N.D.: Specifically, she can now write herself a blurb under my name, anytime she wants.

Jeanne: I gave him a blurb that wasn't even a blurb, just took it out of an essay. I remember the whole story. I said can I use...

N.D.: Don't tell the story we're on camera.

Jeanne: I forgot. But you know, I had never, you told the story about that dream, you've written about it, and this time, it's the first time I thought I never have dreams like that. And I thought what an interesting way to think about where our stories come from and how our stories inform our dreams, too. But I would no more have a dream with my arms being shattered and snakes ... and I'm like, my dreams are "I don't have a prom dress" I mean, and I have that dream over and

over and over and then as always, I feel when we have these talks I feel like such a pale shadow of a person.

N.D.: A more stable human, is a better way to put it.

Jeanne: No, a pale shadow of a person.

N.D.: The thing I tell my kids now is ...

Jeanne: He goes to Sri Lanka and he dreams about snake arms.

N.D.: ... when my children have nightmares now one of the first questions is, "Can I sell it?" "Is it good enough to sell?" And it makes them powerless. It makes them a lot more powerless when one of my kids comes to me, a horrible dream last night, "Is it plot worthy? Do I need to get my pencil?" And so far, no. But rarely, people ask about other books, "Where did this idea come from?" and I can point to an influencing executions, a *Leepike Ridge*, yes, I floated down a creek on a chunk of Styrofoam. *Cupboards* yes, I lived in my grandparents' attic for a while and found a door in the wall and I climbed in and we wiggled through tunnels, but there's no magic. But then that didn't inspire the story that's just once the story was underway there's an influence. This is one of the only books where when kids ask, as they always do in schools, where did you get the idea for the story? I can say, "I know the answer to that question. I had a horrible nightmare. And I hope you love it as much as I do."

38:25 Writing for Our Kids/ Ourselves

Jeanne: Do I have time to ask him another thing? Everybody OK? So you keep making these jokes about your kids as a focus group, which is sort of

a joke but also very true. Somehow I can only assume that you're writing for them and for yourself at the same time. I can only be writing for myself as a child but then I don't have children, I have step-children, but that's an interesting balance that you're going through while you're doing that. Do you actually make Glory a strong character thinking my daughters need balance?

N.D.: Absolutely.

Jeanne: Do you have this conscious...

N.D.: So as Glory Spalding, a female character in this book she moves a lot more to the front in the second book and I like her a lot ...

Jeanne: She's very, very, very rich in this first book.

N.D.: ... yeah, so I really love her as a character but when I'm writing, I am writing for an audience first of five, and as a creator I'm writing for myself and I'm writing for myself in the 5th and 6th grade, that daydreaming kid who wasn't doing his math. And I'm targeting that imagination. And my own right now. I'm chasing the kinds of stories that I love but I'm immediately, as I build characters and plot, I'm thinking of my kids, I'm thinking of specific kids, and I'm thinking, 'Oh yeah, she will love this. This is going to be great.' Because they all have unique personalities, different tastes, and things that are going to jump out to them. My sons and my daughters and Glory especially, a lot of girls in fiction bother me, but more girls in film bother me than girls in fiction, so I think about role models for my daughters or friends even more than role models; friends and allies in their own quest to live good lives. And I want them for my daughters. So Glory's very much, I was very much, I was very conscious especially with Glory, the whole time

about my own girls and shaping this friend for them. Same thing is true of *Ashtown*, so *Ashtown* Antigone Smith was there but the one that I was really shaping as the big sister, the big inspiring sister was a character named Diana Boone and I knew how my daughters would respond to her and they did. They think of themselves as Antigone but they really admire and look up to a friend, Diana Boone.

Jeanne: But none of this seems to, or you don't talk about it at all, it doesn't seem like you live with the fear of disappointing your children. There is still a very personal ...

N.D.: Yeah.

Jeanne: ... It's like you're inviting them to come along with you but if they say, "I'm going to skip this trip, Dad" is that OK with you?

N.D.: Yeah, no, it's not a problem at all.

Jeanne: OK.

N.D.: Some of my kids will want to read every draft. And I will let them.

Jeanne: Which kids? Rory?

N.D.: My daughters.

Jeanne: Oh your daughters?

N.D.: Rory, my oldest, he wants to read it finished.

Jeanne: OK.

N.D.: So he'll listen to it if I'm reading it aloud but he wants to read it when it's all the way done. And I don't blame him. But my daughters are far more interested in, "Can I read it now and can I read it again? Have you changed anything? Can I read it again?"

Jeanne: They want to understand the process.

READ-ALLOUD REVIVAL

Transcript Special Edition - **N.D. Wilson interviews Jeanne Birdsall**

N.D.: Yeah, the whole thing. And as a side note, if you've done a ton of drafts of something it can be easier to remember a book I've read than a book I've written because I'm thinking, like, 'Wait a second, did I put that in or did I take that out?' And, 'I know it was in two of the drafts and I thought about taking it out and did it...'

Jeanne: Or, 'Did I move it?'

N.D.: Yeah, and 'Did I move it?' There's so many iterations of the story starting with when you're lying on your back staring at the ceiling imagining the story, and then you outline the story and as you're writing the first chapters you're thinking about what the ending is going to be and you can see it but then you get there you change your mind.

Jeanne: Right.

N.D.: And then you send it to the editor and they have edits and so you think about changing it again, and my son hates going through that with me. He just wants "Give it to me when it's over." Like, I'll read it when it's over. He read *Outlaws of Time*, I read it to them in the very first draft and he didn't want to read any interim drafts until it was done and my daughters were begging for printouts every step of the way and getting them occasionally.

Question: Are any of your children on the same path as writers?

N.D.: You know, in different ways they all are but totally differently. And my oldest daughter is the most conscious about it and she's really actively in pursuit in some ways; she's always creating stories, she's always making books for her little sister and stapling them together and doing cover pages and she's very invested in the creation of the artifact of the book, not just the

story. She loves the story and she loves to illustrate as well but then as far as my sons go, right now my youngest son if he wrote stories it would all be (in fact, he did this for he had to write a story in 2nd grade) and he wrote a basketball game and he just detailed every play. He did the play by play of ...

Heather (Nate's wife): It was supposed to be an animal report.

N.D.: Actually, it's even better and makes it even funnier. 2nd grade animal report and so he wrote about a cougar basketball game and it was just a play by play; so he wrote a play by play of a cougar basketball game.

Heather: He didn't even get a good grade.

N.D.: In that way he was very much like me because he didn't get a good grade and he didn't mind because he still enjoyed the process.

Jeanne: He didn't get a good grade?

N.D.: It was an animal report. He was supposed to report on ...

Heather: I think he thought cougar was the animal. He wasn't bothered by it.

N.D.: Yeah, he was fine. But anyway, the answer to the question is yes. I have my oldest, even when he was five, I was working and he came in and said, "Hey can I tell you a story?" and sat in my office while I was writing. "Absolutely, you can tell me a story" and I stopped and he said, "OK, it's called Harold the Adventurer," and it's a story I'm still going to steal from this, but we have it documented because he said, it's about a kid who is so good at hiding and he knew every secret doorway and path in the city that everybody quit playing hide and seek with him because he would be gone for three days. They

just couldn't find him. Harold the Adventurer could go anywhere. And so then he has this whole thing where he finds when he's hiding in this game finally someone challenges him with hide and seek and he disappears and he finds this old dry well and he falls into it and there's a broken shield and there's this werewolf den that he finds and he's like, "Wow." This is from my five year old. So, he ran out of gas around all the broken armour and the werewolf but the concept, like Harold the Adventurer, the concept of the kid who can just disappear, the kid who can just hide and vanish and nobody else would play with him as a result...

Jeanne: And I love that he chose such an old fashioned name like a 13th century Harold

N.D.: So I sat there and took notes when he pitched this to me and I wrote them down and I pinned them to my wall over my computer and they're still there, sitting there. And he's 14 now. So I still have the piece of paper and he comes in and he laughs and he looks at Harold the Adventurer and I tell him, "If you don't write it, I will, sometime." So we'll see. We'll see if any of them...

Jeanne: Pay for his college education.

N.D.: Get on it, kid.

45:42 Let The Kids Speak

Sarah: Pretty awesome, right? I am so grateful they shared that interview with us. Thank you Jeanne Birdsall and N.D. Wilson. Thank you, also, to Heather Wilson who did a lot of the behind-the-scenes legwork to make it available to us here at the Read-Aloud Revival.

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: Hi, my name's Taylor. I'm 11 years old and I live in California. My favorite book that I've read is *Sophie Quire and the Last Storyguard* which at one point you can be jumping over rooftops fighting monsters with a blind pole or you can stop and wait and wonder and think about what just happened, and it's an amazing book to read.

Child2: Hi everyone, my name is George Caros, I am 10 years old. I live in Winston Salem, North Carolina. My favorite book is *Dear Mr. Henshaw* because it is about a boy who is having trouble with his life. He has a very rough time in school and he likes writing to his favorite author for advice.

Child3: Hi my name is Annie and I'm 5 years old and I live in Winston Salem. My favorite book is *Winnie the Pooh* because he always falls down and climbs up

Child4: My name is Clara. I live in Toronto. I'm 6 years old. My favorite book is *Swallows and Amazons*. I like it because children go to live on an island and I like how they figure things out on their own.

Child5: [Mom: What is your name?] Eleanor. [Mom: How old are you?] 3. [Mom: And where are you from?] Toronto. [Mom: Toronto. What's your favorite book?] Owls. [Mom: Owls. *Owl Babies*. Why do you like *Owl Babies*?] Because we read it. [Mom: Because we read it?] Yeah. [Mom: What do you like about the story?] All of it. [Mom: All of it?] I like it reading it because the mama comes back. [Mom: The mama comes back.] And then she brings them food.

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Child6: My name is Josh. I'm 9 years old. I live in Clarksville, Tennessee. My favorite book is *Sam the Minuteman*. It's about the Revolutionary War and the father takes his son out to stand up against the British and they're terribly outnumbered and it's so exciting and I'm probably going to read it again.

Child7: Hello, my name is Emma Hart. And I live in Wheatfield, Indiana and my favorite book is *The Hobbit* by Tolkien and my favorite part is when the Hobbitt saves his friends and kills the spiders.

Child8: Hello, my name is Anna Hart. I am 9 years old. I live in Wheatfield, Indiana. My favorite book is *The Sign of the Cat* by Lynn Jonell. My favorite part is when Duncan is at the island with a tiger.

Child9: My name is Ellie Hart. I am 4 years old and my very favorite book is **[**inaudible 49:14**]**

Child10: Hi, my name is Lily. I live in Michigan. I'm 5 years old. My favorite book is *The Quiltmakers Gift*. I like how when the king started out he was greedy but then when he started to get nicer he shared his gift with everyone. Thank you.

Sarah: OK, so August 1, season 11 begins. We're kicking off the season in a conversation with a youth services librarian. If you're wondering how you can make the best use of your public library and how you can support your local library this episode is for you. No need to feel intimidated what could possibly be one of your most powerful family resources. Amy Comers and I are going to hash out tips to help you use your library well. That's August 1. In the meantime, make sure you join the email list, that's at ReadAloudRevival.com, it takes two seconds to do that and then you won't miss a thing. Our

August Picture Booklist goes up next week and the email subscribers see it first. So join that email list, ReadAloudRevival.com so you don't miss out. I hope you have a wonderful week and thank you so much for listening. Until next time, go make meaningful and lasting connections with your kids through books. Thanks for listening.