



Qualities of Great Books for Kids, with Sarita Holzmann of Sonlight Curriculum

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. Sarita Holzmann is a veteran homeschool mom, the founder of Sonlight Curriculum (loved by many as a homeschooling curriculum that uses real books as its foundation and focuses on the parent-child relationship), she's a speaker, a writer, a curriculum developer, missions advocate, and an active grandmother to eight homeschool kids. Today, Sarita is joining us to talk about her own homeschooling experience with her kids; one of whom struggled to learn to read. She attributes reading aloud with him to his ultimate success with reading. We're going to ask her all about that plus her seven point all-star test -- this is how she chooses book and I'm going to ask her about how many books she reads because I think you're going to be floored when you find out how many books she reads and uses the seven point all-star test with to choose books with the Sonlight curriculum. Sarita, it is a true joy to talk to you today. Welcome to the Read-Aloud Revival.

Sarita: Well, thank you. It's a huge privilege to be here as well.

Sarah: So, I was hoping you'd share a little bit about your son, Luke, and his experience with reading. I have heard that he struggled initially with reading but then eventually graduated as valedictorian. So we have a lot of families in the Read-Aloud Revival community with struggling readers. I'm raising my hand here because I've had my own struggling reading and I'd love to hear your story there.

Sarita: He probably had tracking issues or something that we didn't actually know what was going on. He had a fall, about a two year old, he fell down an entire flight of steps and had to re-learn how to walk, so he had issues probably with all kinds of things that would normally not be involved with everybody else. He would just sit on the couch next to me. We would take

out our readers and I would use a phonics program because I honestly believe it works the best. I'd read a sentence then he would read a sentence, I'd read a sentence then he'd read a sentence, and he'd be just pouring off sweat but honestly, you just have to keep practicing, keep trying, keep working on different things and then we'd get to the point where he could read a paragraph and then I'd read a paragraph. You just wanted to make it doable and approachable.

2:01 Literacy vs. Reading Ability

Sarah: You wrote a wonderful post called *When Kids Struggle with Reading Even in a Print Rich Home* (and listeners, we're going to link to this in the Show Notes, so just go to ReadAloudRevival.com and look for this episode and you'll be able to find the article). That article talks about the difference between literacy and reading ability. Could we talk a little bit more about that? I think a lot of us hope that if we just fill our homes with reading and books and we're avid readers and we love books that our kids will just become voracious readers who will pick up on reading naturally, and that is just not always the case. So could we talk a little more about that?

Sarita: Having a home filled with rich with books and reading those books to your children is a huge gift you can give to your kids and what I mean by that is even if they'll never read them themselves you have put in their minds all the information and all the words and the beautiful vocabulary, all of those things you've given as a gift to your children. If they can't read them themselves they still gain the benefit you have that as you've given it as you've read them to them. I believe that reading gives our kids the cultural literacy that they need. We can teach our kids to decode and Hirsch has a marvelous passage when he talks about that he had two different tests that he gave kids and two articles. One was about love and the other was about Lee and Grant meeting at the end of the civil war and everybody could decode and understand the passage about love but only people who knew the background, the cultural literacy, the information what



that article even was about, only they could understand they were reading about, the final days of the civil war and the ending of that time period, it's important that our kids have that framework, the background, the understanding, otherwise we're just giving them data points and facts that don't necessarily hold together. So we can give our kids the gift of understanding their world as we read different titles with them. We're giving them a bridge, we're bridging that knowledge gap that they would have even if they can't read it themselves.

Sarah: My own son was 9 before he was reading fluently and I remember angst-ing, of course, for many years between wondering but he listened to so many audio books during that time and ended up gaining a whole lot of knowledge about the world and not just knowledge, like factual knowledge, but also his emotions and his empathy was stirred through the stories that he heard through audio books and through me reading aloud to him that I really feel like even though he wasn't reading on his own until he was older he was still gaining the benefits, the best benefits from books during that time because of reading aloud.

Sarita: I totally agree. And again, it's a gift that we can give to our children in a way that we couldn't give them any other, we couldn't pound that much information into their brain but we could do it so naturally and so easily just through the reading of great stories. Yeah, totally agree.

Sarah: So, you read a lot of books to vet them for the Sonlight Curriculum, right? Do you know how many books you read in an average month, let's say?

Sarita: Well, one year I actually kept a list of how many I had read. Now, not all of them do you finish because they're not all worth reading, but I was reading at least a book day...

Sarah: Wow.

Sarita: And that's not picture books and it's not war and peace, so to be fair we've gone both ends there.

5:27 The 7-Point Test

Sarah: But you use a specific seven point test for books. Let's unpack that because I've read about this before and I'm really eager to hear you talk about each of those things that you look for in the books that you select for your curriculum.

Sarita: First off, we look for real, realistic characters. I know when I was growing up there were a series where you had the good guys were really dressed in white and they always behaved perfectly and the bad guys wore black and you could tell that they were evil. That would not be an example of a book we would choose. You want characters, while they're walking through life they maybe make mistakes, they do things that maybe aren't perfect but they learn from them and they get more great as they go along. Probably a really good example of that would be *Caddie Woodlawn* who's just a charming person but she goes, "Oh, I should probably bolster my relationship with my younger sister, I've kind of ignored her," and she learns from even that as she goes through life. She's not naughty, she's not mean, but she's a person that you'd say, "I actually would like to be friends with that girl" and that would be an example of a real or realistic character.

Sarah: Yeah, because if a real character, the hero of the story, doesn't have some flaws then we have a hard time relating to them because we all know that we have flaws, right?

Sarita: It's totally true. And honestly, we want to give our kids an example. They can learn from the mistakes that people make in the stories that they read. They don't have to make the mistakes themselves they can look at life and say, "Oh, I don't want to do [that]. I want to do [this] instead." And honestly, as you're reading with your kids you can stop and say, "Well, I didn't like how they interacted there. What do you think they could do differently?" It's a way to even teach our children how to act in an appropriate manner.

Sarah: Very good.



OK, what about the antiheroes for a story, or the villains for a lack of a better term, what do you look for in a good antihero?

Sarita: Wow, I hadn't even thought about that. A good antihero would be someone who's believable, someone who's not totally flawed, not someone who has no redemptive characters because we don't know anyone like that.

Sarah: OK, so realistic characters both protagonist and antagonist, we want people with flaws, and redemptive qualities, fantastic. What's number two?

7:45 Character Development

Sarita: We want our protagonist to change over the course of the story. Going back to the *Caddie Woodlawn* example, she learned that she needed to care for her sister and learn from that but a better example of that is *Carry On Mr. Bowditch* where you've got a boy who is really a genius and should go to the school and become a professor but due to circumstances outside of his control he ends up working in a low level job in a shop and he could get stuck there. He could have been somebody who said, "OK, this is my life," but no, he chooses on the counsel of someone who says to him, "Sail by the ash breeze" which means learn how to move even when the breeze isn't going the direction that you should. And so he does, he studies on the side, he meets up with people that he knows, he takes notes on things, he learns languages in order to learn the things that he needs to know even to do his job more effectively. Solid character development, it's important and we want to give our kids that example in the books that we read.

Sarah: So the character can't stay in the same stuck position that they are at the beginning because then we don't have a character arc there, we don't have a change for the better, right?

Sarita: Correct. And we always want to give our kids the idea that they don't have to stay stuck anywhere, that they can move forward with the things that come

their way. They can overcome, they can change, they can grow, they can mature, they can get better.

Sarah: And that doesn't mean that then that character is flawless at the end of the book, right? It just means that they have grown.

Sarita: Correct. Oh we don't ever think anybody's flawless because we all have flaws.

Sarah: Perfect. So, number one: real and realistic characters, and number two: solid character development. What's number three?

9:20 Cultural Literacy

Sarita: Number three is the content needs to add to your cultural literacy. I referred to this a little bit earlier when we talked about having a print rich home. I believe cultural literacy is something that's a key indicator of an educated person. And what I mean by that is if you have an understanding of the world and you have an understanding of the bigger picture of things, you actually can respond to the news that can come into your home, to the conversations of the people that you meet, you understand the things that are happening in the world and in history. So the books that we choose often tie to the history that the kids are reading. So, for example, when they're studying the Revolutionary War kids read *Johnny Tremain* which is a story that takes place at that particular time. But it adds value and depth and understanding and feeling and emotion to the study of history that they're actually doing. So we can add to the cultural literacy and the understanding of the world that our kids are walking in through the books that we do.

Sarah: I have found that when I'm studying a historical time period with my kids getting to slip into the shoes of one person from that particular time period is really effective in helping us understand the bigger picture of what's happening because it's different when you're reading a textbook it's easy to be detached but then when you slip into the shoes of Johnny Tremain it's impossible to remain detached. When our kids are home with us we feel like we want to give them



experiences and knowledge that they need in their adult lives and we're not really sure how we can fill all those gaps. I know as a parent I feel like, 'Oh goodness, how can I give my kids everything they need before they leave home?' It's sort of like a quote I've heard which is "a man who reads lives a thousand lives, the man who doesn't read lives only one" and I think, OK, that's what we're doing, we're giving our kids practice at a thousand different lives before they leave home by doing it through the pages of the book.

Sarita: And I want to just say, this isn't related to this all, but you're never going to give your children everything they need by the age of 18 but if you can give them a love of learning they'll go out and learn what they need to learn throughout the rest of their life. So, release yourself from the fact that you need to give them everything they need. If you can cultivate a love of learning you have empowered them for life.

Sarah: So good. So good. OK, so number one: real and realistic characters, number two: solid character development, number three: content that adds to the reader's cultural literacy. What about number four?

11:48 An Intriguing, Multi-Dimensional Plot

Sarita: We look for an intriguing multi-dimensional plot. And probably the easiest one to see that whole idea from is one of the newer Newbery Medalist, *When You Reach Me*. It's a story of a girl who's going back and forth to school and meets this very odd young man that keeps stepping in and out of her life and as the story unwinds and unweaves you see how all these strange episodes occurred throughout the book eventually all link together; a beautiful picture of a plot that's been woven with pieces and parts that ultimately come together in a whole. Boy, that's my favorite kind of a story, where you just see all these threads and they all come together in the end, and you go, "Glory! That was perfect!"

Sarah: Sarita, have you read Pam Muñoz Ryan's book, *Echo*?

Sarita: I have, and isn't it wonderful?

Sarah: Yes. When you were talking about the different threads weaving together, I mean, that book was ... I listened to it on audio which was a particularly exquisite experience because the book has a lot of musical elements and they play them for you in the audio book. It's phenomenal. We'll put a link to that one in the Show Notes because it's so good. It reminds me so much of that intriguing multi-dimensional plot piece that you're talking about.

13:00 Emotionally Compelling

Sarita: It's good. So that's number four. Number five is it needs to be emotionally compelling. It has to move me. And probably an example of that story would be *Little Britches* for me. Now, years and years ago World Magazine had a contest where they said, OK, let's get the very best final passages of a book and *Little Britches* was one of the contestants in that and I'd really just love to read that last paragraph...

Sarah: Oh yeah, please do.

Sarita: ... because it's the story of a young man whose father is very involved in his life when they moved to Littleton, Colorado and they spend time trying to make their farm work and it's the interaction that they have that's so beautiful throughout the story and the final paragraph of this book is: "Father had always said grace before meals; always the same 25 words, and the ritual was always the same. Mother would look around the table to see that everything was in readiness; then she would nod to father. That night she nodded to me, and I became a man." It's one of those where you're looking for a story that says this touches who I am in my inner core because if it touches us it's going to touch the hearts of our kids as well.

Sarah: Absolutely. And then that's when a story stays with you is when your emotions have been stirred.

Sarita: That's correct. And you remember even the historical things that were happening at that time so that's why you want to couple your history and your read-alouds so that the kids remember all of those



historical events in a way that's normal and natural and super easy to do.

Sarah: Well, that's so interesting. We just spent the weekend in Seattle (my family and I) and as we were driving all these scenes from *Hotel On the Corner of Bitter and Sweet* which is not a children's book at all, it's a book I read for my book club I read a couple of years ago but they came back to me and just like you said, it was like the story was weaving together these places and that time in history in a way because my emotions had been so stirred by that book. I don't think that would have happened, I don't think I would have had that connection without the story there to hold it together for me.

15:20 Verbally Beautiful

Sarita: Well, I totally agree and that's what we want for our kids as well and that's why reading to your kids these great stories as a way to impact their life and their heart. Also, number six is needs to be verbally beautiful. And I think a good example of that one for me is *Horton Hatches the Egg*. When you just go through that cadence "and it should be, and it should be, and it should be" and it catches our sense of justice. We want this to go right, we want this not to be hurt, we want him to have something good "and it should be and it should be because he was faithful." Isn't that the kind of thing we want to give our kids in all of the things that we read? Verbally beautiful.

Sarah: Yes, absolutely.

I like to, when I'm vetting books for my kids or looking at a bookstore, if I think, 'Hm, I haven't seen this on a booklist I wonder if this is any good?' I feel like you can pretty much open the book and read a page, or less than a page depending on what kind of book it is, and get a good feel for whether the language is going to stir you or deaden your emotions and what you're looking for is language enlivens your imagination.

16:20 Re-Readable

Sarita: And then the seventh thing is that it has to be re-readable. That's one of the titles I used to have in Sonlight, *Where the Red Fern Grows*, and I'm going to get trouble on this one I'm sure, but I had it in the curriculum and I read it to my children the first time and then I came back through and did the program again and I picked it up and said, "I actually can't read this again" so then I found a replacement. So it got pulled because I thought it's not re-readable. For me, the epitome of re-readable is, of course, C. S. Lewis' *Narnia series*, *The Horse and His Boy* is one. There was a period in my life when I read through the entire series at least once a year, for years and years of time. Just the quality and the caliber and the beauty of the language and just the re-readable, boy, bring it on.

Sarah: Yes, that's where you can't wait to read them again with your kids or with your next batch of kids that are coming up the pike. That's E. B. White for me. I am almost counting down the time until I think my little kids can sit through listening to *The Trumpet of the Swan* because I cannot wait to re-read it.

Sarita: And that is so interesting because (my kids are grown, my children are older at this point, but when they were probably in high school we would go camping as a family and we always took books along to read around the campfire at night and so I asked them, "So, what would you like to read?" And they got together, they conferred, and they said, "We think we'd like to read *Charlotte's Web*" and I thought, 'Wow, they read that in first grade.'

Sarah: Another one that we like to re-read a lot is *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* which I just think is such a delightful read-aloud.

Sarita: So much fun. Yeah it is.

Sarah: So, real and realistic characters, solid character development, content that adds to the reader's cultural literacy, an intriguing, multi-dimensional plot, emotionally compelling, verbally beautiful, and re-readable. I love those seven points. Now, to have a book fall into this seven point test you have to pre-read it. Do you have any recommendations for parents who are going, "Oh gosh, I can't pre-read everything



before my kids do, how do I know if a book is going to pass a seven point test?" Do you have any tips or pointers for them?

18:30 How to Choose Good Books

Sarita: Well, I would probably get good book lists. I would get our Sonlight catalog because they're all specifically chosen. Now they'll be tied to our history theme so some of them would be a little outside what your realm might be. Get lists, get recommendations from people. And honestly, I probably wouldn't worry too much about it. Your kids will get to the point where they'll go, "I actually don't want to read *Mandy* I want to read something better than that. I don't necessarily want to read *Nancy Drew* because I like [this] more."

Sarah: Yeah.

Sarita: And experts would actually say that even reading some of the lower level books are actually good for our kids as well. Some of the series ones, *The Babysitters Club* for example, kids learn how to speed read as they read through some of those less quality books. They learn how to pick and choose the different facts that they need, "Oh, I can skip this section because I know how they set up their calls" and then you can teach them how to skim or read more loosely. So I wouldn't stress about it, I guess that's my only point there. I would just allow them to read, give them the freedom, I'd pass them things that are a little different than they're used to if they only read horse books I'd probably try some historical fiction. If they only read sci-fi I'd try maybe a biography of someone who was critical or important. So I would just take charge of this but give your kids the freedom and the willingness to try anything that's out there.

Sarah: I love that. I will also tell you that the Sonlight catalog, which we'll make sure there's a link in the Show Notes so that listeners can go grab that catalog and have it mailed to them because I love the book lists in that catalog. Sometimes if I'm in a bookstore or

in the library and one of my kids brings me a book and says, "Can I read this?" and I'm not totally sure, one of the first things I'll do is check the Sonlight website to see if you guys have it in one of your curriculum packages because I'll know, "Oh, it's in your 3rd, 4th, 5th grade curriculum" then it's totally fine for my child of this age. It's a great resource. When you're talking to homeschooling families about how many books their kids are reading on their own and prioritizing read aloud, do you have encouragement or anything for parents who want to read aloud more?

20:37 Read Aloud Every Day

Sarita: I try to read every day. I use it as a motivational tool. When my kids were home we did what we call table subjects first, we'd hit the math right away, and we'd get the spelling one while they were still fresh and still awake, and then we would take a break and then we would do what we call our couch subjects where we would sit and read our history books and our science books. Read alouds, I usually read a chapter a day, or if they're short chapters, so it's about 25-30 pages a day, it's not a set number but it's about that amount, and of course we would always keep on reading if the kids were intrigued. There was one title we were reading, *Our Seven Daughters and Our Seven Sons* and I think we probably read it in three days because they were just so captured by that and I think why in the world would we stop unless your voice gives out but it was one of those ones that they'd say, "Oh, we'll help with the dishes if you just keep reading" and I'm thinking, "This is a great motivational tool."

Sarah: Exactly! That was *By the Great Horn Spoon*. That's happened to us with a few different books but *By the Great Horn Spoon* I think we read that one in just a couple of days. It was, sort of, "Everyone go do one more thing and we'll come back and read another chapter ... OK, everybody go do one more thing, we'll come back, I promise we will."

Sarita: We all love praiseworthy, what a great story.



Sarah: So is there anything else you'd like to leave our listeners with today, Sarita, before we wrap up?

22:00 A Recommendation to Read Aloud

Sarita: Well, if I could just do a recommendation for all the families who are out there. I know it's something Sarah preaches regularly, but if you're not reading aloud to your children, please do so. And I would say that for both moms and for dads. I have a beautiful memory of my son who was 17 at the time, all of his older siblings were out of the house and there was a summer that they sat shoulder to shoulder next to each other on the couch reading through *The Little Britches* series. And that is a precious memory that I think how many parents have that as a memory in their family's lifehood where they're sitting pressed next to each other? And he, of course, could have read them on his own but read even to your older children because it's a chance to link up and to have connection and have all those memories together. You all gain. The dad had a wonderful time because it was a series he adored and the son had a wonderful time because he got to connect with his dad. So, moms read to your children. Dads, read to your children. This is a gift you can give them that will last them a lifetime.

Sarah: So wonderful. Sarita, thank you so much for joining us on the Read-Aloud Revival. It's been wonderful to chat with you.

Sarita: Oh, thank you so much. I appreciate it so much and I appreciate what you do. Carry on.

23:16 Let the Kids Speak

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

Child1: [Mom: what is your name?] William Bentley [Mom: William Bentley Muirs. How old are you?] 2. [Mom: where do you live?] Hawaii. [Mom: Hawaii.

What is your favorite book?] *Bear Snores On* [Mom: written by Karma Wilson and] Jane Chapman. [Mom: good job. What happens in *Bear Snores On*?] ****inaudible 23:46**** he wakes up. [Mom: he wakes up?] Yes.

Child2: My name is Amery and I'm 5 years old and I live in Colorado Springs. My favorite book is *Owie* because Owie can paint, she likes to paint and she can paint all by her whole self.

Child3: Hi, my name is Kendy. I'm 8 ½ years old. I'm from Colorado Springs and my favorite book is *Because of Winn-Dixie* and it is my favorite book because it's really cute and it describes really well.

Child4: My name is Selah and I'm 9 years old. I live in Calgary, Canada, and my favorite book is *Because of Winn-Dixie* by Kate Dicamillo. I like it because it is funny and about a dog and I love dogs. One of the funny parts it that whenever the dog smiles it sneezes.

Child5: Hi, my name is Ellie and I'm 6 years old. I live in Calgary, Canada. My favorite book is *A Bear Called Paddington* because it is funny and he goes on a lot of adventures.

Child6: Hi, I'm Abigail and I'm 10 years old. I live in Calgary, Canada. My favorite book is *Thank You Mr. Falker* by Patricia Polacco. I like it because the girl in the story struggles with reading and I struggle too. I also like it because she has a teacher who helps her and I also do, my mom.

Child7: Hi, my name is ****** I'm 4 years old and then there was a ******. My story is *Ginger and Pickles* and my favorite part of the book is the cat one who "cannot bear, said he, to see them going out the door carrying their little parcels."

Child8: Hello, my name is Charlotte. I'm 10 years old and I live in Illinois. One of my favorite books is *The Penderwicks*. It introduces you to a normal family of five who go on a summer vacation and meet one interesting boy. It's a really good book and I think it's good for any age. There are three other books in the series that are just as good but I think my favorite one in the whole series is the first one.

Child9: My name is Ailey Grace Hanes. I'm 4 ½ and live in Weatherford, Texas. My favorite audio book is *Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle* because it has a lot of ****** that teaches



kids and that teaches me. My favorite book that mommy read me is *Where the Sidewalk Ends* because there are lots of silly poems and they're really silly and they make me laugh. Bye.

Child10: I'm Summer Diane. [Mom: Summer Diane, where do you live?] I live in Weatherford. [Mom: how old are you?] I'm 2. [Mom: and what's your favorite book that mommy reads you?] *Emma and Julia Like Ballet*. Thank you.

Sarah: Thank you kids. And that's it for this episode of the Read-Aloud Revival podcast. Thank you so much for joining me. Hey, if you haven't yet, would you mind hopping onto iTunes and leaving us a rating review and hitting the subscribe button there? That way you won't miss any episode of the Read-Aloud Revival and also you make it easier for other families to get the encouragement that they need to make meaningful and lasting connections with their kids through books. All you need to do is go to iTunes on your mobile device, your phone, your ipad, whatever you're using to listen and give us a star rating from 1 to 5 stars and a review. I read every single one. I love them, thank you so much for being a part of our listening community. We'll be back next week with another episode of the Read-Aloud Revival. Until then, go make meaningful and lasting connections with your kids through books.