

Chapter 1

HOW READING ALOUD CAN CHANGE THE WORLD

(Or, at least, how it's changing mine)



No one will ever say, no matter how good a parent he or she was, “I think I spent too much time with my children when they were young.”

Alice Ozma, The Reading Promise

It was just an ordinary Tuesday, really, but it turned out to be so much more than that.

I was twenty years old; it had been a long, rainy spring; and the 450-square-foot apartment my husband and I shared was feeling even more cramped than usual. I packed up our one-year-old daughter, an overstuffed diaper bag, and a cantaloupe in danger of turning too soft, and headed out the door.

When we arrived at my friend's house twenty-five minutes later, Christina opened the front door, threw her arm around my neck, and ushered us into her large, cheery home. I breathed a small sigh of relief and dropped the diaper bag by the stairs—another

boring afternoon in our tiny apartment had been successfully averted.

Audrey, my daughter, immediately set off, eager to find the toy box. I trailed her, unzipping her coat as she toddled away. Christina's own toddler, not too keen on me yet, returned my smile with a scowl.

Christina went into the kitchen to dig through the fridge, and I followed her. We had bonded months earlier over birth stories and coffee at a local playgroup, and I was grateful that even though there was at least a decade between my age and Christina's, we could swap fears and feelings as first-time moms.

"Wanna keep an eye on the little ones?" she asked. "I'll just whip up a little something for our lunch."

I wandered to the family room, keeping watch as the toddlers ransacked the toy bins. Just as I was about to drop onto the deep leather sofa, I saw it—a book resting precariously on the edge of the fireplace mantle, Post-its jutting out every which way from the pages. I snatched it up and noted the title: *The Read-Aloud Handbook* by Jim Trelease.

If this had been happening in a movie, I'm certain there would have been music. In fact, it would have been the tension-building part of the soundtrack. The part that helps the movie-watcher realize that something of great importance is happening, that the rest of the story hinges on this seemingly insignificant moment.

At the time, however, all I heard was the babbling of toddlers and the sizzling of the bratwurst Christina was sautéing for lunch. I flipped through the book, noting how many pages were dog-eared, how many were marked up with penciled comments.

"What do you think of this book?" I asked Christina over my shoulder.

She turned from the stove and leaned forward, squinting slightly, to see what I was holding, “Oh, that one? It’s great!”

Turning back to her task, she added, “You can borrow it, if you like.”

(This is your cue to raise the volume on the soundtrack.)

BEYOND COMPARE

I took Christina’s copy of *The Read-Aloud Handbook* home, but I didn’t so much read it as inhale it. This alone wasn’t terribly unusual—I read voraciously as a new parent. I had big, idealistic dreams for Audrey and for myself—for the kind of mother I wanted to be. I knew just enough to realize I had no clue how to do this well, so I did what I had always done when I was shooting for an A+: I read.

In those early days of parenting, I rarely made decisions without consulting a book. I read books about what to feed my baby, how to encourage her to nap, what to do for her brain development. The stakes were high, and I was determined to rise to meet them.

One dark evening during her first year, Audrey just would *not* fall asleep. It had become a recurring problem and, fearful that I was to blame for her poor sleeping habits, I gathered up every parenting book I could find. Spreading them out around me, I sat cross-legged on the apartment floor and searched desperately for a solution to our bedtime struggles. Audrey crawled around me as I sobbed, flipping from one book to the next, wondering why they all gave such conflicting advice and unsure which one to trust. (Fifteen years and five babies later, I wish I could tell my younger self to relax and trust my instincts! Alas, some lessons must be learned through time and experience.)

But even my desire to end the bedtime struggles paled in comparison to the desire I felt to form a meaningful relationship with Audrey. Jim Trelease’s idea that reading with my child could be one of the most important building blocks to a lasting and healthy relationship between the two of us intrigued me. Of all things, I wanted to get *this* right.

The Read-Aloud Handbook has sold well over a million copies to date, so I think it’s safe to say that I was just one of many whose attention was captured by its message. It presented a new idea for me: the primary goal of reading to children—and of teaching them to read—is not so they can eventually learn to read on their own.

Trelease’s book is chock-full of statistics and data that prove reading aloud connects and bonds families and helps kids grow to be successful in just about every area of life, especially in school. In the book, he asserts that read-alouds are the foundation for the close bonds between parents and kids, between teachers and students.

The 1985 Commission on Reading declared, “The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children.”¹ Trelease unpacks this, then tells about the astonishing power reading aloud has to build a child’s vocabulary, sow the seeds of reading desire, and help kids continue to love books well into their adolescence and beyond.

He proposes read-alouds as the antidote to academic struggle—and not just read-alouds for kids who can’t read yet. Read-alouds for babies in the womb, for newborns who don’t yet hold up their heads, for toddlers and preschoolers and grade-schoolers and even for teens who are quite capable of reading on their own. Trelease advocates reading aloud to kids *especially* when they can read for themselves. He goes so far as to say that if teachers and parents

experience a shortage of time and can't fit in reading aloud, they should "steal [time] from other subjects that are not as essential as reading, which includes pretty much everything else."²

The idea that reading aloud should take priority over other things—that even teachers in schools should shuttle other subjects off the schedule to make more room for it—was new to me. As a child, of course, I loved being read to. My favorite part of elementary school was in the first grade, during the fifteen-minute period after lunch recess when the teacher would read to us from Beverly Cleary's *The Mouse and the Motorcycle*. I looked forward to that read-aloud session every single day.

Now, as a brand-new parent, reading board books with Audrey was one of my favorite ways to spend time with her. Of all the tasks and responsibilities associated with parenting, reading was the easiest and most enjoyable. That it could be as profoundly important as Jim Trelease asserted both astonished and delighted me.

That night, I snuggled in next to Audrey and watched her breathe in and out, little puffs of air catching a wisp of her hair as she slept. I turned the pages of *The Read-Aloud Handbook*, and something deep inside me rumbled.

Then, in that moment, I realized my relationship with this child was the most important thing in my life. Nothing else could compare to the bond between this tiny human being and myself. If reading aloud was going to be the best way to nurture that bond, then by golly, I knew what I was going to do.

NO GUARANTEES

I had high hopes for Audrey right out of the gate. I knew that I wanted her to grow up to love God with all of her heart, mind,

and soul. I wanted her to do well in school. I wanted a warm relationship with her, always. I wanted her to be kind and compassionate, to do what was right even when no one was looking.

I also knew that with parenting, there are no guarantees. Kids are not recipes, and just because we prepare them or raise them in a particular way doesn't mean they'll turn out how we hope they will. I've known plenty of loving, all-in parents whose grown children always seem to be running a gamut of mistakes and missteps. Kids are human, and humanity is messy. I knew right there at the beginning that my own mothering prowess wouldn't ensure my children would embrace my Christian beliefs,

get into good colleges, or make life choices I would be proud of.



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In parenting, we aren't guaranteed any of that, but I still felt keenly the desire and drive to give Audrey my very best. To stack the odds in favor of her becoming the

kind, capable, and loving person I hoped she would be.

All the time and effort it would take to raise her would be worth it—not because it guaranteed good results, but because loving and connecting with her would *always* be worth my time and effort. Because she was mine. Because she was made by God. Because this was the great task I'd been called to.

What I didn't know as I stroked her cheek and considered the trajectory my life had taken at such a young age was that five siblings would join her in the next dozen years. Loving and connecting with my kids would become both the greatest challenge and the most thrilling privilege of my life. Parenting would be so very much harder than I could have possibly imagined in those first years, and so much more rewarding.

I did know this one thing, even back then: there was a lot I could get wrong. And oh, how I desperately wanted to get it right.

MY GREATEST FEAR

The possibility that one day my children will be grown and gone and I might regret the choices I made while raising them terrifies me. We only have a certain amount of time available to us, after all. How we choose to spend that time has significant consequences in that it affects how our children live out the rest of their lives. That's daunting.

I'm in the thick of things, and if you're reading this book, I bet you are too. As this book goes to press, my six (yep, six) kids span ages from preschool to high school.

Audrey, that toddling girl who accompanied me, a ripe cantaloupe, and a diaper bag on a visit to Christina's house so many years ago, is entering her final years at home. I'm acutely aware of how easy it is to slip into the habit of just surviving the day, focusing on getting through. I want to make a meaningful and lasting bond with each of my kids before it's too late.

As a busy mother, I struggle to truly connect with each of my kids in a way that will stand the test of time. There's a whole household to tend to, dinner to make, a pile of laundry always spilling into the hallway. Life feels constantly hurried and over-full. School, work, church, extracurricular activities, sports, family affairs, housework, errands. So many things to do. Emails, phone calls, text messages. So much noise.

So. much. noise.

It's just too easy to let these precious childhood years scream by. They *are* screaming by, and I can hardly stop them.

N. D. Wilson words it perfectly in his book *Death by Living*: “Watching one’s small humans age and grow up packs a serious punch. It’s like being stuck in a dream unable to speak, like being a ghost that can see but not touch, like standing on a huge grate while a storm rains oiled diamonds, like collecting feathers in a storm. Parents in love with their children are all amnesiacs, trying to remember, trying to cherish moments, ghosts trying to hold the world.”³

That’s me—trying to hold the world, trying desperately to catch the oiled diamonds as they fall. Beyond wanting to do a good job at this parenting thing, I want to *enjoy* raising my children. I don’t want to look back twenty years from now and realize that those active parenting years went by so fast I didn’t relish them. I’m terrified I’ll wish I had been less distracted and more attentive. I’m afraid I’ll come to the realization, when it’s too late, that I should have been more present. I’m afraid I’ll wish I had enjoyed it more.

The days I have to raise my children while they are still under my roof, and the days you have to raise yours, are finite. When you picked up this book, you may have thought you were getting



I want to make sure you know what this book is really about: it’s about you and me going all-in for our kids.

a manifesto on reading aloud. By the end of it, you might decide that’s exactly what it is.

But right here at the beginning, I want to make sure you know what this book is really about: it’s about

you and me going all-in for our kids. It’s about doing what matters most with our time and energy today. Right now. Right when it matters most—as diamonds rain down and fall through the grate beneath our feet.

THE BIRTH OF A REVIVAL

Some years after that day at Christina's, I stood on a stool in my kitchen wearing yoga pants, earbuds inserted, scrub brush in hand. Determined to clean out all the kitchen cupboards, I shooed the three kids out to the yard to play with friends while I tackled the silverware drawers and pantry shelves.

I was listening to Andrew Pudewa, president of the Institute for Excellence in Writing, give a talk called "Nurturing Competent Communicators." A friend who heard Pudewa speak at a homeschooling conference was inspired, motivated, and filled with fresh enthusiasm and confidence. I had barely begun my own homeschooling journey, but I was already feeling overwhelmed and in over my head. I thought I could certainly use some of that fresh enthusiasm.

I listened and scrubbed as Pudewa told a crowd of homeschooling parents that the best way to help children grow to be good communicators was to read aloud to them as much as possible and to have them memorize poetry. I wiped crumbs into my hand and remembered *The Read-Aloud Handbook*, inhaled all those years ago. Maybe Pudewa was on to something.

I already read aloud bedtime stories and school books to my kids—especially to my youngest two, who couldn't yet read anything by themselves. But something about Pudewa's talk that day sparked an ember that had lain dormant, buried deep within me. I got to the end of the lecture and started it all over again, vacuuming out corners of drawers and scrubbing honey splatters as I listened once more.

This, I thought to myself, *there's something about this*.

Have you ever seen a campfire that has burned down but not been completely tamped out? It looks like nothing is happening,

but all you have to do is add a small bit of the right fuel—a scrap of paper, a dry piece of kindling, a tiny blast of oxygen—and that fire roars right back to life.

That’s exactly what happened when I listened to Andrew Pudewa. I began to read aloud to my three children (then ages eight, six, and four) more than ever. So startling were the results—so completely transformative were the changes in our family—that five years and three more babies later, I could barely keep myself from bubbling over with the thrill of it.

I had an active blog and had begun to play with the idea of starting a podcast. I loved listening to podcasts myself, and thought it might be fun to launch one. In a moment of pure impulse in March of 2014, I shot an email off to the Institute for Excellence in Writing: *Would Mr. Pudewa like to come talk with me on a podcast about the importance of reading aloud?*

Within hours I had received a response from his marketing director—yes, Mr. Pudewa would be delighted to be featured on my podcast.

Hmm, I thought, eyeing my nine-month-old twins as they scooted themselves across the floor, *I guess I’d better figure out how to start a podcast.*

It turns out that “how to start a podcast” is, in fact, a valid Google search. I ordered a microphone and headset, created a Skype account, and watched an online tutorial about how to edit voice recordings. I marked the day of the scheduled interview with Andrew Pudewa in bright yellow highlighter on my wall calendar, but as the day drew closer, I became more and more uneasy.

On the day of the interview, my stomach churned. I fired a text to my friend, Pam: *What was I thinking when I asked ANDREW PUDEWA to be on my show? I don’t even have a show! I’m going to be sick. This is a bad idea. It was ALWAYS*

a bad idea. Whose idea was this anyway? See, this is where my rash and impulsive enthusiasm gets me. In too deep.

Pam responded with just three words: *You'll be fine.*

(She's heartless. Or I suppose she's used to receiving such texts from me. I'll let you decide for yourself.)

The interview went better than I could have hoped (so I guess, in the end, Pam was right), and Mr. Pudewa was a delightful and talkative guest. To this day, I doubt he realizes how terrified I was.

A week later, in between diaper changes and never-ending loads of laundry, I released the *Read-Aloud Revival* podcast. I was certain the internet radio show would last for only a few episodes and provide a very small circle of my blog readers with some encouragement to read more with their kids

I could never have imagined in those first days of the podcast that the show would grow to become what it is today—never dreamed it would see millions of downloads in the first few years and be heard by tens of thousands of families all over the world. As the podcast grew and responses from listeners rolled in, I realized something beautiful: I wasn't alone. Other families had taken to heart this idea that reading aloud could transform their homes, and they had amazing stories to tell about it. Finding other families who were prioritizing books and read-aloud sessions in the way my own family was made my heart sing.

Emails began to fill my inbox. Listeners wrote in to tell me that they were reading aloud with their kids, and that it had become everyone's favorite time of day. They would say that ever since they started listening to the podcast, they had begun reading together before bed, or at lunchtime, or by listening to audiobooks in the car. Their families suddenly had their own inside jokes, their own shared experiences. It was knitting them together in new ways. They told of their non-reading kids who were begging

for “one more chapter,” of an energy and enthusiasm in their homes the likes of which they had never seen before. Something big was happening in homes all over the world. A revival was taking shape.

In all the conversations I’ve had on the Read-Aloud Revival podcast with experts, authors, moms, dads, and reading enthusiasts, I’ve come to understand something that both delights and relieves me: reading aloud with our kids is indeed the best use



of our time and energy as parents. It’s more important than just about anything else we can do.

Reading aloud may seem too simple to make that big of an impact. But the stories I’ve heard over the years from families all over

the world, the data collected by experts, and the personal experience I’ve had sharing stories with my own six kids has convinced me beyond a shadow of a doubt.

WHO KNEW? (WELL, BESIDES JIM TRELEASE)

It turns out I was right all those years ago when I lay, curled up with Audrey, wondering about the mystery of parenthood, about the magnitude of the significant work before me: there are no guarantees. But that doesn’t matter—not really. We aren’t going all-in for our kids because we are promised excellent results. We’re doing it because they mean more to us than anything in the world. When it comes right down to it, we want our children to live out the fullness of God’s vision for their lives, and we’re willing to do just about anything it takes to stack the odds in favor of that happening.

I wish I could go back and whisper a little something into the

ear of twenty-year-old Sarah—back to that fateful day when I stumbled across *The Read-Aloud Handbook* in Christina’s living room. I would sidle up next to my new-mom self, offering her a latte and a break from the baby for a few hours.

Then I would tell her, with a sparkle in my eye and a fire in my belly, “Pick up a book. Pull her onto your lap. Read aloud. You will never, ever regret the time you spend reading with your daughter.”

I finished that first reading of *The Read-Aloud Handbook* late at night—long past when I should have been asleep. I turned the last page, put the book down next to me on the bed, and pulled the covers



up a little tighter around my chin. Gazing at the ceiling of our postage-stamp apartment, I wondered if he was right, this Jim Trelease.

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Could reading aloud change Audrey’s life? Could it truly make such an enormous difference in her future? Was it possible that reading books together could bond us with a shared experience to last a lifetime?

My twenty-year-old self didn’t know the answer yet. I envisioned myself reading to Audrey at two years old, at eight, at twelve. I pictured myself reading to her at sixteen. And you know what? I liked what I saw. Two people embarking on a journey, hand in hand—seeking adventure, going new places, setting out for the unknown—doing it all together, and all through the pages of a book. Mother and child cuddled up on a sofa or sprawled out on the floor, setting out to see what they could experience by reading stories together. I thought about how having such encounters alongside my child could impact both of us forever.

I wanted that for Audrey. I wanted that for me. I wanted that for *us*.

As I lay huddled under the covers that night, it seemed to me that Jim Trelease was saying that reading aloud had the power to change the world. What I never could have predicted was how it was about to transform mine.