



RAR 85 – Reading ‘Messy’ Books

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.

Hey there, Sarah Mackenzie here. This is episode 85 of the Read-Aloud Revival podcast and thank you, as always, for joining me for today’s show. First things first, if you are anywhere near Greenville, South Carolina, Fort Worth, Texas, Cincinnati, Ohio, Ontario, California, or Saint Louis, Missouri, then I want you to know that I’m headed your way. I’m speaking at the Great Homeschool Conventions in all five of those cities in the upcoming months. I would just love to meet you there. Some of my very favorite authors for kids, like S.D. Smith, and Andrew Peterson— they’re going to be there, several of those conventions as well. N.D. Wilson’s coming to Cincinnati... anyway, I’ll be at all five conferences, and I’m doing four different sessions at each conference. You want to know more? Go to GreatHomeschoolConventions.com to get the details. OK, I’m really excited to share today’s episode with you. It’s one of the best conversations I think we’ve ever had on the podcast. Today’s guest is Betsy Farquhar from RedeemedReader.com and we’re talking about books that make us uncomfortable. We’re calling them messy books. You know what they are— they’re the books that tackle hard or gritty topics and, I don’t know, maybe we get a little squirmy about our kids reading them; at least I do and I know some of you do as well. I couldn’t think of anyone better than someone from the Redeemed Reader crew to come talk to us about this and the founder came to join us today. I started reading several of the books Betsy recommends in today’s show, right after our conversation. And,

if you follow me on Instagram you’ve probably seen some of them in my feed because they’re real winners. For example, *The Vanderbeekers* (which is not a messy book by the way, at all) but instantly become one of my all time favorites. It’s perfect for those who enjoy *The Penderwicks*. Anyway, you can see other books I recommend on the Instagram feed by going to [instagram.com/readaloudrevival](https://www.instagram.com/readaloudrevival) or just look for me there, I’m readaloudrevival, but her book recommendations today are just superb. So, don’t worry about taking notes, just like always, we’ve done it for you. I keep forgetting to tell you this, but, we now offer transcripts for episodes of the Read-Aloud Revival podcast, and you can get them for free by heading to the Show Notes. So, just go to ReadAloudRevival.com/85 to grab the transcript for today’s show. And then, of course, in those Show Notes you’ll also see easy to click links to everything we talk about today including the myriad book recommendations you’re about to hear. Now, I do want to say one thing before we start. There is this slight rustling sound in this podcast episode and unfortunately, we didn’t catch it during the actual recording of the interview and then it proved a little too difficult to edit out. So, I don’t think you’ll mind it too much—I sort of forgot about it when I was re-listening to the episode myself, but I did want to give you a heads up so you’re aware that we know it’s there and we’re sorry, but trust me when I say this conversation is worth listening to, for sure. Let’s just dive into it so you can decide for yourself.

3:38 Meet Betsy

When our kids are tiny it’s not terribly hard to choose good books, but as they grow older the issues that come up in books tend to get a little



more complicated, a little more messy. So, how do we, as Christian parents, navigate that? How do we navigate those waters? We're diving into that today with Betsy Farquhar from RedeemedReader.com. Betsy's the Managing Editor and Staff Writer for Redeemed Reader and it's a site many of you may be familiar with. Redeemed Reader is not just about book recommendations, although they do lots of those, they're also very interested in helping parents and teachers help the children they love to read both discerningly and redemptively. We're going to get into that. Betsy studied children's literature at Covenant College and earned a graduate degree in children's literature from Holland's University. She taught middle and high school English in several Christian schools and also earned a degree in library and information science from the University of Tennessee. She even served for a short time as a school librarian and currently serves on World Magazine's Children's Books of the Year committee. I'm so excited to talk to her today. Betsy, welcome to the Read-Aloud Revival.

Betsy: Thank you, Sarah, it's an honor.

Sarah: Do you want to tell us a little bit about Redeemed Reader?

Betsy: Sure. It started, I think in 2011, and it's grown since then. And, our purpose has been the same pretty much since the beginning. We started wanting to review books from a distinctively Christian worldview and not just throw up a stop light and say, "Don't read this book" but really try to analyze what's out there right now. There's so many lists of great classics but it's really hard to find resources for what's in Barnes and Noble today, and so that's, sort of, our emphasis—is how do we navigate today's children's literature culture as Christians?

Sarah: I love this so much because, I think you're right, it's fairly easy to go figure out which classics to read. A lot of times I hear Christian parents say, "Just read the old stuff and you'll be fine!" and I think, 'Oh, but you're missing an awful lot of really good books if you stick with just the old things,' so I really love that you're committed to that—helping kids read what's coming out now. OK, so you have a team of people working at Redeemed Reader, working on the content there, is that right?

Betsy: Yes.

Sarah: OK, tell me about that.

Betsy: Collectively, we represent authors, librarians, former teachers, book reviewers. Nearly all of us have had professional careers before Redeemed Reader in some aspect of children's literature, so it's just a delight to work with likeminded women who are eager to talk about books. There's no way one person could read enough books in a year so it's great to share the load. We often read some of the same books and have these great conversations and then we try to put those in virtual format on Redeemed Reader, so you can all enjoy.

6:25 How Redeemed Reader Chooses Books

Sarah: So, how do you choose the books that you write about on the site?

Betsy: The short answer is whatever peaks our interest. The long answer is it's a combination of what's available, and what we think is a good fit for our audience. So, part of that would be books that we think a Christian audience really wants to know about. These are just great books. And on the other side of that question is, sort of, an



awareness angle: these are the books that are winning awards, these are the books that are going to be on your child's school reading list, or in your child's friend's school lockers, and you might want to know about them. So, it's kind of a two pronged approach. So, we're keeping our ears open, what's getting buzz, what are people talking about, and then also trying to find those gems that really deserve a broader audience.

7:14 'Messy' Books

Sarah: So, today we're going to talk a bit about what we're going to call messy books; a little bit complicated, a little bit messier. I love that term because it really makes a lot of sense to me as a parent. But, can you tell me more about what we're going to call messy books. What do we mean by that exactly?

Betsy: When we use the term messy books, obviously, the opposite of messy is clean, like a hotel room, but that can be a little sterile, and so often the books that are really trying to grapple with real life, real humanity, they're just not neat and tidy. They're a little frayed around the edges and there's, kind of, two camps: you've got the ones that deal with real broad, global cultural issues like poverty, or racism, or justice. And, then you have the group that, kind of, tackles things on a personal level, maybe it's a character failing, a moral issue, bad language, lying, a whole host of much more character-driven issues. And both of those are sort of messy books, although you might handle them a little bit differently when you read them.

Sarah: So, when you're reading a book and you realize this is a little messier, it's a little frayed around the edges, it's not clean and tidy, but are

you watching for particular things? What are you looking for exactly?

Betsy: So, that depends on why I'm reading the book. If I'm reading it to review it I have my post-it notes out and I'm flagging like crazy. And, then if I'm reading it with my children unprepared, which I don't recommend, but we've all done that...

Sarah: Yep.

Betsy: ... sometimes we'll just stop in the middle of a book and either talk about the issue or just maybe a quick reminder, "Remember, we don't talk like this." If I'm just reading for fun my radar is not as finely tuned. But, we do offer cautions on Redeemed Reader, not to say don't read a book, but to say, just a heads up, [this] is in the book and that's why I have my sticky notes out. I'm going to count (up to about 10) how many instances of bad language and if I get above 10 I'm just going to say, blanketly, there's some bad language in this book.

Sarah: OK.

Betsy: So, I'm flagging things so that I can help parents and educators know what's in the book that you might want to know about ahead of time.

Sarah: Right. So, you can talk about it, so that it doesn't catch you unawares.

Betsy: Right.

Sarah: Is there anything then that when you read it it automatically just "mmm—automatically I'm just going to put this book aside"?

Betsy: So, when I'm reading a book it depends on the issue. If it's an issue of physical intimacy that's inappropriate or a gender-identity issue or some of these real hot-button, very mature



themes, depending on how the author starts out handling it, I may put the book aside and just see if it gets more media attention. If nobody else is talking about it and it's not the kind of book my audience is really going to enjoy, I'm not going to read any further. If it's language, I'll read further and lots of times, *Great-Gilly Hopkins* is a fantastic example of how language is sometimes really necessary to give you a picture of the person's character. But, if it's a very graphic description of something then I'm probably not going to keep reading.

10:14 Can Older Books Be Messy?

Sarah: So, when you're talking about messy books, do you think those are primarily books that are coming out today? Do you run into older books that are messy, that you would call messy?

Betsy: Well, frankly, Genesis is pretty messy. I decided when I did a Bible Study on it a few years ago that I would not be allowed to watch that movie, so it is important to remember that there's nothing new under the sun. And that's a comfort, we can go back to the Bible and how does the Bible handle this issue? But, the difference, I think, between a lot of older literature and a lot of the brand new stuff is that a lot of older literature, Bible included, Shakespeare, even the *Canterbury Tales*, there's an element of hope, there's the recognition are issues, and that people need to be redeemed out of that sin and misery, not that it's a normal way of life and we need to just embrace it and sort of, buck up. So, that's a significant difference but it is very true that if you read a Shakespeare play with your children or Genesis, you're going to have to talk about some hard issues. They may not be graphically described in quite the same way but

starting in Genesis [chapter] 3 idolatry, hatred, murder. It goes downhill from there.

Sarah: Right.

11:38 Why Do Messy Books Freak Us Out?

What is it about messy books that makes us so nervous? Because, I think what I hear you saying is, we need to read books that are a little frayed around the edges because life is messy and we all live a little frayed around the edges and maybe, we need to see a little bit of that and watch characters be redeemed in the stories that we read. What's wrong with being afraid of messy books?

Betsy: Oh wow, there's a lot in that question. I think, as a parent, it's natural to want to protect our children. And, when we have conversations about some hard things in life there's not often easy answers. So, it's really hard as a parent to have that kind of conversation with your child and admit that you don't know the answer, or admit that there may not be a clear line between what is right and what is wrong. Sometimes it's very clear, but sometimes there's some gray area and that's a scary thing as a parent, especially when the stakes get higher as they get older. I like to compare it to the weather and we've got rainy days and we've got forest fires and volcanoes and all kinds of tremendous natural forces at work, and some of those we would happily send our children out into but we would still prepare them; "get your raincoat on, get your umbrella," we're not going to hang out in a forest fire or near an erupting volcano but those are still necessary natural forces and still appropriate in the grand scheme of things. We're just not ready for that versus the sunshine and we want to frolic in the



sunshine without any cares. It's natural to want to stay in the sunshine.

Sarah: Sure.

Betsy: But, we do need some rain, because without it things don't grow, and so we do need to grapple with some of these issues. We are, in a sense, preparing our kids through vicarious experiences as we read, to face some of those same things down the road. An easy example here is *Old Yeller*.

Sarah: OK.

Betsy: Sad, sad, sad book. Who wants to read that with their kids and you're all crying at the end? But, it does let you try on those emotions: how do I make a decision? What is my responsibility as a human over animals? How do I care for them and how do I make these hard decisions? So, when (down the road) you're an adult, or even a high school kid, and you have to make a hard decision you've already tried that on for size.

Sarah: Yeah.

Betsy: And, I think that that's true for a lot of messy books. I don't think we need to read only messy books or even seek out the most dramatic, hard books. Just about anything will work if you're willing to really talk about it, but I do think it's important to be open to these kinds of discussions because we want to provide the answers for our children, or we want to point them to the Bible, and to the places where they can get answers. We don't want them only finding answers from their friends, from the media, and if we're too chicken to talk about it, they will find other people.

Sarah: That's such a good point. I think that, in so many ways then, that the books that we read

with our kids, messy or otherwise, are oftentimes the best gateways into some of those conversations that are uncomfortable that we don't really want to have with our kids but we know we need to have with our kids.

Betsy: Oh, absolutely. Even *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* (we just re-read that, again), the conversations we have with that book are, "Are you more like the Pharisees, the people who are judging? Or are you more like the Herdmans and sinning in all kinds of obvious ways?" Both are wrong. And both need the Gospel but are you so jaded by your lifetime of church attendance that you forget what Christmas is really about. So, you can have those conversations with any book, it doesn't have to be a hugely messy book.

Sarah: I love that, Jonathan Rogers, when he came on the podcast, talked about *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* because we had received some emails at Read-Aloud Revival from parents who were concerned about characters in books not being good role models for their kids, and he brought up that book as a great example of a story that has zero good role models in it. There is nobody...

Betsy: So true.

Sarah: ... you don't want to be like any of the characters, and you don't want to be like the narrator, either. So, however, the story itself, just like you just said, it makes you stop and ask yourself, "Who am I more like anyway and where am I slipping into habits that I didn't even recognize?" You don't even recognize them in yourself until you see them in a character exaggerated to the point of ridiculousness, right?

Betsy: Right.



Sarah: And then you see it. So, we're not looking for role models for our kids to exemplify so much as we're looking to be moved by the story itself.

Betsy: And, I think too, a lot depends on how an author handles the issues. I like to ask my kids, "Why is that in there? Would the story be the same if it wasn't there? Would *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* be the same book if the Herdman's weren't swearing?" And that's a great question to ask kids, because they have to think, 'Well, the author has control over the story. Why did they put that in there?' And sometimes it's to point to our own need of redemption, and sometimes it's to point to a character's complete depravity. We are reading the *Harry Potter* books as a family and we've had some really interesting conversations about Voldemort, the bad guy, along these lines. Why does he kill people? And, it's really gotten them to think. This is exemplifying his complete lack of concern for human life and that's a conversation to have because it opens the door for all kinds of other society issues that demonstrate a similar lack of concern for human life, but we've already tried that discussion on in a fantasy environment so when we get to the real world we've already laid a little bit of a framework.

Sarah: Yeah, you've got a little practice under your belt there. So, that question: why is that in there? That's a great question to ask.

17:15 When your Child Reads or Hears Something ...

So, that maybe the answer to the next question I had for you, which is, what do you do when your kids read a book, either you're reading it with them or say, they're reading it on their own, and it comes to your attention that there's something in

there you are uncomfortable with or you're uncomfortable with the way the author handled it, and so you sort of wish that book hadn't been a part of your child's reading life. What's your next step when that happens?

Betsy: A lot of that depends on the child. If you lay a foundation from the very beginning, with *Frog and Toad*, *Bedtime for Frances*, that books are open to discussion then it's a little bit easier, you're not suddenly becoming the sensor and saying, "What did you think about this book?" So a lot of that depends on your family culture and the child, but I think I would still approach it similarly and say, "You know what? I don't really like the way this author is treating X issue, or this particular character, what do you think?" and get them talking about it. Open-ended questions are the way to go. You don't want to say, "Is the character wrong?" because then they'll try to figure out what answer you want them to say.

Sarah: Exactly.

Betsy: But, if you keep asking open-ended questions, "How would you write the story? If you were writing the story of the Herdmans, do you think you would have them smoking in church?" And, just let them wrestle with it. If it's really egregious I've been known to not finish a book. There have been a couple of times—it's not happened very often. There have been times when I've simply closed the book or turned off the audio player and said, "You know what? I think we will enjoy this book a little bit more in another year or two. We're just not quite ready yet."

Sarah: Oh.

Betsy: But, you better have a backup. Whenever I start a book with my kids I'm already thinking about the next one we're going to read.



Sarah: Yeah, so am I.

Betsy: And, so some of that is my own safety net, if we get into it. And sometimes I've said, "You know, kids, this is making me uncomfortable. We're just not ready." And sometimes we really talk about it. *Shiloh*, we listened to the book *Shiloh* when my kids were younger than they should have been. There's a lot of language in that book and they're mistreating the dog and there's some hard things in that book for a child. We had some really good discussions, though, on lying and integrity. We moved on. It wasn't a lengthy conversation but I still had to ask because it made me uncomfortable enough to say, "What are you getting out of this story? What do you think?"

19:31 Why Are Controversial Books Often So Popular?

Sarah: OK, so I noticed on your website that you said, "Sometimes controversial books are the hugely popular books and we can feel a little intimidated by that." Can we talk a little bit about why that is? Why are controversial books often hugely popular?

Betsy: Oh, goodness. I think it's similar to movies, sometimes. I would like to think better of all authors but I do feel there is sometimes pandering to the teen audience or tackling too much and it still, sort of, reaffirming that teen angst instead of encouraging them to mature. An easy example is *Catcher in the Rye*, full of teen angst, he ends in counseling. There's nothing really redemptive about that book. *Thirteen Reasons Why*, hugely popular—would not recommend it. And, again, so many issues are being tackled in that book—it's too much. It's hard to really ... it's important to talk about things

like suicide, it's important to talk about romantic relationships, and friend relationships, and how we handle those, but you can't do justice to all of those in one book. And, when you're not offering hope then the book becomes really depressing. But, I think kids gravitate towards books like that because it feels like the author gets them. 'Oh, this person understands.' And, there may be some truth to that but if there's no encouragement to mature then there's really no benefit to keep wallowing in your own mire.

Sarah: So, good. What you said just there is the word 'hope' which I just want to backtrack on a second because that is really, I feel like the mark of an excellent book—is a book that can get into the gritty, hard stuff, but still, when you close that book at the end of the day, when you finish it up, you are left with this sort of overall feeling of hope. There has to be some kind of redemption, it doesn't mean there's always the happy ending, but it does mean there has to be an overall sense of hope and ability to help the reader see the world with fresh eyes, kind of, see things new. And, unfortunately, sometimes I think the gritty or popular books, especially in the YA genre, tend to forget that piece.

Sarah: We'll get back to today's episode in just a moment. But, I wanted to take a quick minute to make sure you know about *The Read-Aloud Family*. This is a new book I wrote just for you. Here's what I know: you will never, ever regret the time you spend reading to your kids. Connecting deeply with our families can be, kind of, difficult, right, in our really busy, technology-driven world? But reading aloud is one of the best ways to be fully present with our kids even after they can read to themselves. In the new book, *The Read-Aloud Family* you'll find the inspiration you need to start a read-aloud movement in your own



home. You'll discover how to prepare your kids for academic success, how to develop their empathy and compassion, all through reading aloud. You're going to learn how to find time to read-aloud in the midst of your really busy day; school, sports, dinner dishes, all those pressures on your time and attention. And, you'll learn how to choose books across a variety of sibling interests and ages. The best part is that you'll discover how to make reading aloud the very best part of your family's day. *The Read-Aloud Family* also offers age-appropriate book lists from infancy all the way through adolescence. So, from a toddler's wonder to your teenager's resistance, you're going to discover practical strategies to make reading aloud a meaningful family ritual. The book releases wherever books are sold, March 27, 2018, but if you order the book before March 27 you're going to get some extra gifts and I'm so excited Zondervan let me do this, because I made you a brand new video Master Class to show you how to choose books for your kids. So, you know that feeling when you walk into a library or a bookstore or maybe you're cruising around online or something, and you don't know if a book is worth your time and attention or your child's time and attention? In this video Master Class you're going to find out exactly which two characteristics make a book worth reading and you'll find out the three question test I use to decide if a book deserves a place on my family's reading stack. So order *The Read-Aloud Family* before March 27, 2018 to get a promo code to access that Master Class for free. I am thrilled Zondervan is letting me do that. Go to TheReadAloudFamily.com to grab your copy. I can't wait to get it in your hands.

24:06 Ongoing Conversations ...

Sarah: So, I know you have a good tip for having ongoing conversations about these issues, and particularly, for using messy books as conversation starters or discussion starters. Do you have anything else you want to share with us about that?

Betsy: One thing I've thought a lot about this past year is, in the Bible we're called to love God and to love our neighbor, and I think messy books can really open the door to those kinds of conversations. It's really easy to talk, in general, about somebody who's homeless or somebody's who's a different cultural background than me or who looks funny or [fill in the blank] issue that they may be struggling with, but when you read a book about somebody who's genuinely struggling with something you're building empathy in the reader and you're just humanizing this issue a little bit more, and I think those kinds of conversations can be very productive. You know, we just read a book about so-and-so at the homeless shelter, well, what do you think about the people we see on the street corner? And, you're just connecting what they're reading to real life. And, it's giving you a little bit of a hook to start talking about that. So, I think that's a way to continue the conversation. A quick example from my own family, we were having a conversation about creating a safe place in our family for our family members. Like any siblings, my children argue and bicker and they're not angelically behaved, this is happening with their friends against each other. So, we were just saying as a family we are for our family, and we were able to use the Weasleys from *Harry Potter* as an example, because we've just read that. So, I think the things that you're reading are forming a collective pool of information and so when you



have these conversations about loving your neighbor you can draw from those examples because it's a very specific, sort of, an emotional example in the right sense.

Sarah: It helps you remember, too, that the people around—I mean, it helps me remember, I should say—that the people around me, that I walk by on the street that maybe are homeless sitting on the street corner, that I see across the shopping center or at the library, they all have their own stories and it helps us remember that when you read *The Family Under the Bridge* by Natalie Savage Carlson and you meet the characters in that book; a curmudgeonly old man and a family that's newly homeless, it gives you a story and maybe the next time you see someone who'd you otherwise walk right by you can, like you said, it gives you a hook and I think that's exactly the right language. It gives you something to go, “Oh wait” and open your eyes to love others the way we've been called to love.

Betsy: I really think there's a lot to that. One of the books we've talked a lot about this year is called *Every Falling Star*, a very hard book to read.

Sarah: OK, I've not read it.

Betsy: It's a memoir of a young boy's escape from North Korea and it's a picture of the Bible, really. But, it's also a picture of human depravity and how desperately we need to be rescued out of that. He is abandoned. He sinks from a place of high position, he sinks to abject poverty and just the domino effect; starts stealing, using drugs, gangs, all these things that get connected to that as he spirals down, and he gets rescued out of that—tremendous book to talk about how we all need to be rescued. But, it's not an easy book to read and it would be one, for sure, that

you would want to read with people to talk about it. So, I think books can really provide some concrete examples of some of these big, sort of, spiritual or social concepts that we talk about, justice is so abstract until you read a book about maybe a cop who killed somebody or somebody who is wrongly imprisoned or somebody who's homeless through no fault of their own. Suddenly, you start understanding justice a little bit differently.

27:55 Best Books for Handling 'Messy' Topics

Sarah: Yeah, yeah. That's absolutely right. Alright, so let's talk about some specific books. Can you share some of the best books you've come across for handling those big messy topics?

Betsy: One of my new favorites, hot off the press, is called *The Watcher* and it's by Nikki Grimes. She's an amazing poet, it's illustrated by Bryan Collier, who's work I love, and it's Psalm 121 turned into a golden shovel poem, and it's about bullying, and it's a black kid and a white kid, profound story—highly recommended. And, bullying, of course, is a big issue for elementary kids—it's one of the big requests we get for issue-related books. I think *Nana Upstairs and Nana Downstairs* is one of the best books for talking about death with young children. Of course, you have books like *Charlotte's Web* which gets into sacrifice and death, and these are big issues for kids, very big issues. So, those are three right out of the gate that I would highly recommend. If you move on up, I'm going to recommend one of my co-worker's books, *Somebody on This Bus is Going to Be Famous* and this is by Janey Cheaney and it's a school bus setting, nine kids, and they're each telling



part of the story. It's a really great book for just realizing there's more than meets the eye—every person has a back story and they're not always neat and tidy. It's not a difficult book to read in the sense of big, heavy issues, but it really alludes to a lot of deeper concepts.

Sarah: OK.

Betsy: So, a good book for those kinds of discussions. I think *The Giver* should be required reading for every 8th grader. That's, of course, a classic. Katherine Paterson's books (you've mentioned them on your Show before) they're fantastic examples of books that offer hope in the midst of some grit. So, those would be things to start with. I think you can find, even in funny books, some really poignant moment. So, *The Penderwicks* ...

Sarah: Yes.

Betsy: ... one of my favorite series, the fourth book, deals with depression, and it's a really touching book but it handles that issue in a very gentle way, so it could be potentially a really good talking point. A little bit older would be *Goodbye Stranger* by Rebecca Stead.

Sarah: You are literally filling up my cart. I am not even kidding. Some of these I've read, *Goodbye Stranger* and *Somebody on This Bus is Going To Be Famous*, those are both going in my cart. OK, keep going!

Betsy: So, *Goodbye Stranger* is essentially a cautionary tale about sending inappropriate pictures over text.

Sarah: Aha.

Betsy: So well done. And I think so important for these 11, 12, 13 year olds, getting their first phones, some of them, and they think my friend

wants me to take a picture of them, I don't like that picture, I think it's wrong, but I want my friend to so like me so I'm going to take it anyway, and then, just what can happen when things don't go as planned. Really well done and very much a 12 year old level, which is not real graphic. I would encourage people to read reviews and that may not be a book they want to read out loud to their family but definitely worth reading.

31:05 Read-Alones Versus Read-Alouds

Sarah: You just said maybe not something to read-aloud with your family, and I think that's a really good point to make, because I'm a fan of Rebecca Stead, but I actually tend to think her books are better read-alones than read-alouds. There's something, I'm just thinking of *When You Reach Me* for example, which I just think that there is something gained by reading that quietly to yourself.

Betsy: I think there's tremendous value in a parent and a child reading a book at the same time but not out loud. So, for instance, we're both—it's almost like a parent/child book club.

Sarah: Yes.

Betsy: And, maybe one of them reads the book before the other but it's done in close proximity and so then you can have these moments, "Did you like the part when such-and-such happened?" And, "Oh, I know, it was so sad," it's a very different kind of conversation. And, I think Gary Schmidt's books are kind of like that, too.

Sarah: Yes.

Betsy: There's just a lot to ponder as you read and you almost want to think it through on your



own. Even funny books. My kids and I all read, *Tuesdays at the Castle*, that whole series last summer. And, it was hilarious because we're all in different books at the same time, and "Oh, you're going to love it when you get to book three." It's just a very different kind of experience than all listening to it at the exact same time, but it's a lot of fun.

32:14 YA Recommendations

Sarah: OK, what about some more YA books. YA, I would say, is the hardest kind of book for me to find books that I love in that. And I love your guy's website, I love Redeemed Reader for this, and by the way listeners, we'll have links to Redeemed Reader, they have fabulous book reviews separated by age that you're going to find really helpful. And, a lot of times when I'm looking for YA titles that's one of my first stops, because I have a really hard time finding YA that I love, so I'm eager to hear you give us some recommendations there.

Betsy: Well, you're in luck because Janey just posted a list of the best YA of 2017.

Sarah: I have that up on my computer as we speak!

Betsy: So, a couple of highlights from that list: *You Bring the Distant Near* by Mitali Perkins. I mentioned earlier, or I've talked before about handling too much in a book. I think Mitali Perkins does a good job of picking a few things to target. So, in that book you're going to have immigration and you're going to have culture clash and religion but you're not also going to be dealing with a whole host of other issues. It's really about this family and reckoning with things that are going on in our society right now that are big. Immigration is a huge issue. So this is a way

to, sort of, flesh that out a little bit. *Disappeared*, a hard book to read, but a book about learning to do what is right and how hard that is sometimes, even when you know what the right thing to do is. Just a tangent: there's a lot of drug culture in that book that's part of the plot, and if you're interested in pursuing that a little further with an easier book, *Tangerine* by Edward Bloor, oh, 15 years old or so now, at this point, but it's got some really good issues in it, too, and it also handles what do you do when your older brother's into drugs? There's some racism issues in that book and even some environmentalism. It's one of those books that covers a lot of ground but does it well. So, that's maybe a 12 year old version. *Disappeared* is older teens.

Sarah: OK, got it.

Betsy: *Every Falling Star*, the North Korean memoir is a good one. One series that I'm going to plug, she's only got one book on this list, the fourth one, but the whole series we love, Megan Whalen Turner's books, the last one in the series hasn't come out, so hopefully we will continue loving it.

Sarah: She sounds familiar, but ...

Betsy: The first one is *The Thief*.

Sarah: OK.

Betsy: This year's book is *Thick as Thieves*.

Sarah: OK.

Betsy: Just a fantastic series for relationships, both men and women, and they get married, and it's actually a married relationship portrayed in a YA book, which is fantastic! So, it's not just the initial stages of romance, but it's real people relating to each other in real ways. And there's also some really interesting faith themes in those



books because she wouldn't call it God, it's sort of this made up Greek gods world, but the way that the characters have to reckon with divine providence is a pretty profound theme. So, that's a series that I would recommend. In the whole weather analogy, these are all kind of rainy books, so I'm going to throw some sunshine titles your way.

Sarah: Perfect.

Betsy: You need to read *The Vanderbeekers of 141st Street*. It's a family story, middle grade. It would make a fantastic family read-aloud, just delightful. They're going to be evicted from their apartment and they're trying to convince their landlord to let them stay. So, super great family dynamics, and those kinds of books can be just great ways to set a good default setting. This is how we relate rightly to one another. We love *Circus Mirandus*, that's another middle grade fantasy book.

Sarah: Yep.

Betsy: Of course, *The Penderwicks*. These are all middle grade, warm fuzzies.

Sarah: This is a very expensive podcast interview because ...

Betsy: We really like Jason Reynolds as an author.

Sarah: OK.

Betsy: He's an African-American and he writes about African-Americans. He tackles heavy issues: racism, police justice, what do you do when your mom has diabetes and your dad is out of the picture and you have to live with your aunt and uncle? Just all kinds of issues but he does them in a way that has hope. He has strong father figures in his books. He is very respectful

of people's faith. Just a really well-rounded approach. They're not easy to read all the time. His latest, *Long Way Down*, we're going to review that in a few weeks. I would read it first or read the reviews pretty carefully before you hand it to a kid. There's a fairly wide age range in his books. Some books are for middle grades, some books are definitely YA. But, if you're looking to, kind of, dabble in those kinds of those questions he's a good author for that. And, then we reviewed a book, a non-fiction book, called *Under Our Skin* by Benjamin Watson. And again, upper teen/ adult, and it's also looking at racism from a similar angle, I believe the author's a Christian. So those can make a nice pairing. You really actually want to be intentional: we are going to read some things about racism and kind of, grapple with this together. Those would be a good starting point.

Sarah: Perfect.

37:18 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: Hi, my name is Taylor. I am 11 years old and I live in California and my favorite book that has been read-aloud to me is *Red Wall* and I like it because Mathias finally finds out who he really is.

Child2: Hi, my name is Chloe and I'm 7 years old and I live in California and my favorite book read-aloud to me is *Charlotte's Web*. And I like it because Wilbur finally meets a friend and now he can play.

Child3: My name is Naomi. I live in Maryland and I'm 5. And my favorite book is *The Big Friendly Giant* and [**inaudible**]. [Mom: why do you like



them?] Because I just find [**inaudible**] bubbles in it, the dog who eats soap, and the big friendly giant, I like [**inaudible**].

Child4: My name is Ailey. I am 8 years old and I'm from Texas. And, my favorite series is *Whatever After* and because I like it is because the main character, Abby, has a brother, Jonah, and so do I.

Child5: My name is Eli Everett. I'm 10 years old. I'm from Texas and my favorite book I've been read-aloud is *Peter Nimble and His Fantastic Eyes* because he goes on a lot of exciting adventures.

Child6: My name is Griffin and I'm 5 years old, and I live in Virginia, and I love *The Bark of the Bog Owl* and the part where they're in the cave and there's a huge explosion.

Child7: My name is Ewen. I live in Virginia. I am 8 years old. My favorite book is *King Arthur*. I like it because it's like adventurous.

Child8: Hi, my name is Wyatt. I'm 10 years old and I live in Virginia. One of my favorite books is *Ender's Game* because I really like science fiction.

Child9: My name is Lilly. And, I'm 12 and I live in Virginia. My favorite book is *Anne of Green Gables* because of the sense of belonging, love, and friendship she shares with the other characters. Also, because we both share one thing, we both hate geometry.

Child10: Hi, my name is Jonah. I live in Virginia. I'm 13 and my favorite book is *The Lord of the Rings* because of the friendship between Frodo and Sam.

Child11: [Mom: tell me your name.] Olive. [Mom: hi, Olive. How old are you?] 3. [Mom: where do

you live?] In this house. [Mom: in this house in Utah. What's your favorite book?] *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. [Mom: and tell me something you like about it.] Because the Grinch stole every toy but the people didn't cry.

Child12: My name is Kaley, I'm 13. I live in Saint George, Utah, and my favorite book is *Edenbrooke* by Julianne Donaldson and my favorite part about it is the romance.

Child13: My name is Eli and I am 6 years old. I live in Oklahoma City. My favorite book is *Mercy Watson*. I like it because she's a pig and she likes toast.

Child14: Hi, my name is Luke and I'm 7. I like the book [**inaudible**] because they're so crazy and funny. And, I live in Alabama.

Child15: My name's Eric and I am 5. And my favorite book is *Here Comes the Big, Mean Dust Bunny* because it's so funny, and I live in Alabama.

Child16: Hello, my name is Amy. I'm 8 years old. I live in New York. My favorite read-aloud is *Forest Born* by Shannon Hale. My favorite part is at the end when Wren sat in a tree and spoke with it all night.

Sarah: Thank you, kids; great recommendations today. Remember, Show Notes for today's episode including a transcript can be found at ReadAloudRevival.com/85. That's where you'll find all the books we mentioned and all the links we mentioned during today's program. And, then you can get the free Read-Aloud Revival book list by texting the word BOOKS to the number 345345. You can also just get it right at ReadAloudRevival.com. One more thing, we talked a lot today about conversation with our kids and you probably heard Betsy mention the



importance of asking open-ended questions. I'm a huge believer in asking open-ended questions. I think asking them can be the single best way to connect with our kids. And so two entire chapters of the brand new book I wrote, *The Read-Aloud Family* are dedicated to just that. In the book you'll find 10 open-ended questions that you can ask your kids about any book from picture books with your 2 or 3 year old to epic novels with your college-age student. You can ask any one of those questions and have a really wonderful conversation. Those are chapters 10 and 11—I have a feeling they're going to be a favorite of the book because discussions, even short informal ones, gosh, maybe most especially short, informal ones can be a game-changer for your relationship with your kids and for your kids' relationship with each other and with the books that they're reading. So, *The Read-Aloud Family* releases March 27, but remember to order it before that date to get all the bonus gifts we have for you including a promo code I mentioned earlier to a brand new video Master Class on how to choose books for your kids. I'm super excited about that. And, you can visit TheReadAloudFamily.com to pre-order your book now. That's it for today. Next week, I'll be back, of course, with another episode of the Read-Aloud Revival podcast but in the meantime, go make meaningful and lasting connections with your kids through books.