



RAR 100 - A Conversation with Jeanne Birdsall, Author of *The Penderwicks*

Jeanne: When you really become a writer is when your impulse is to communicate with other people and that's really a whole different thing. What I wanted to do, and I think I've done it, is to be part of the conversation that started with E. Nesbit, Edward Eager, C. S. Lewis, Elizabeth Enright, Eleanor Estes, and then I'm talking back to them. I'm saying, "Thank you for this. I love this part." But, I'm also talking forward to the people who are reading my books, and then I tell children maybe you'll be part of the conversation, too.

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

Well, hello, hello. Sarah Mackenzie here and it's really fun to be with you here today. You've got episode 100! We have a special show for you today. I know so many of you are fans of Jeanne Birdsall's *The Penderwicks series*, just like my own family, and today I get to share with you a conversation with the author and creator of *The Penderwicks*. Kick back and listen to a conversation I had with the one and only Jeanne Birdsall. I won't even make you wait for it. Here it is.

Jeanne Birdsall is a New York Times best-selling author. Perhaps you're familiar with *The Penderwicks series*. I'm sure you are. These are the middle grade novels that have collected a slew of awards including The National Book Award for Young People's Literature. She also writes picture books for younger children

including *Flora's Very Windy Day*, *Lucky and Squash*, and *My Favorite Pets: by Gus W. from Ms. Smolinski's Class*. She lives in Massachusetts with a Boston Terrier named (get this!), Cagney. Jeanne, we are so thrilled to have you on the Read-Aloud Revival podcast. Thank you so much for coming on the show.

1:49 Meet Jeanne

Jeanne: And thank you for having me. I'm delighted and I just want to put in a plug to thank you for hosting the interview I did with Nate Wilson a few years ago; Nate's one of my favorite people and also one of my favorite authors, so it's a big pleasure to have that hosted on your website.

Sarah: Oh, and it's a mutual feeling because he is one of my favorite people and favorite authors as well. Hey, listeners, we'll put a link to that – there's a video and also an audio recording, you can do it either way, listening to N. D. Wilson, author of *100 Cupboards series*, *Outlaws of Time*, and a whole slew of others, and our very own Jeanne Birdsall, talking about their writing. And it's such a good conversation. It's so interesting. They talk about their writing process and, kind of, what they're trying to do through their books and the things that just bubble up when two writers start talking about writing. So, it's really fun. We'll put a link to that in the Show Notes. OK, so we have a lot of die-hard *Penderwicks* fans, not just in my home but also listening on the podcast who are really excited to hear from you. So, maybe we should just start from the top. When did the first *Penderwicks* book come out? What year was that?

Jeanne: It came out in 2005. It was not only the first *Penderwicks* book but also the first book I'd



ever tried to write on my own and so I think I started trying to visualize how to write a book and those characters in the late nineties. So, the Penderwicks have been living inside my brain for 20 years now, but they've only been in the wide world published since 2005 which is 13 years.

Sarah: So, the very first book that you ever tried to write was the very first book that won – the very first *Penderwicks* book – which ended up winning a national book award. That's what you're telling me?

Jeanne: Yeah. Yeah.

Sarah: That's amazing. That's amazing.

Jeanne: It was insane. And part of it, I think, was that I was so certain that it wouldn't even get published that I let myself do exactly what I wanted and instead of trying to figure out what the market was like or what people would respond to. I had this very long plan that I would learn to write with the first one, just do exactly what I wanted, and then maybe by the third book I'd know enough what I was doing, and then they'd publish the whole series. But, there's that following your instincts thing that I allowed myself to do, and frankly, my husband allowed me to do because he didn't freak out that I wasn't making money while I was doing this, which is, you know, that's pretty important ...

Sarah: Yeah.

Jeanne: ... and I try to mention that to all the young mothers out there who are working fulltime jobs, taking care of their children, and trying to write a book. Or, older mothers.

Sarah: Yeah. Yeah. Because you wrote that first book, I think, 41. Is that right? I think I heard you say ... That might have been on the interview with N.D. Wilson, or maybe I've heard it

somewhere else, but you wrote your first book at 41, I think, is that right?

Jeanne: Well, no, I started writing altogether at 41, I might have been 42, I can't remember. But, it was when I got together with my husband. He had known me in high school and I was doing photography very, very seriously and had been, and he said, "I remember you as a writer." Which I didn't, but he encouraged me and we started working on the book together which didn't really go anywhere and then we got married; it's a very romantic story. And then five or so years into the marriage, or four or something, I said I've always wanted to write a children's book. And he said go for it.

Sarah: Wow.

Jeanne: So, yes that was all in my 40's. In 2005 when the first book was published I was 54 already ...

Sarah: OK.

Jeanne: ... which is another thing I point out to people who are frantic in their 30's when they haven't had success yet.

Sarah: Yes, because it's so encouraging to hear. I love stories – and we have a lot of both young aspiring writers who are kids listening but also a lot of mothers listening and fathers, I'm sure too, who are aspiring writers or writing and trying to navigate that water and so, that's really inspiring, I think, to hear. Because ...

Jeanne: Yeah.

Sarah: the success of *The Penderwicks*, not just the success in that they are actually really best-selling books but also just that they're such wonderful books. I think so many of us feel like, of course, when you're reading a book that you



love, like any of *The Penderwicks* books, they read like you just sat down and wrote them front to back in one sitting, like it all just came out as beautiful as it is. And, of course, I know that's not what happened but that's what it feels like when you're reading a book that's so well written. And so, then to hear about the back story of what was going on in the background of your life, that's really inspiring.

Jeanne: Thank you for putting it that way. I don't think anyone's ever said that to me before that it sounds like I sat down and wrote it in one sitting. I would never have even thought to try to do that, but I think one of the things that might lend itself to that is, as a reader, the thing I really dislike in a book is when all of a sudden I'm pulled out of the story and made to pay attention to the author or something's wrong historically or something like that, so I work really, really, really hard to try, and I hope I do, to keep you so lost in that world that it does seem like it's just happening in front of you and I'm never waving my hand and saying, "Here I am. Here I am."

Sarah: Well, I think that comes through – I mean, these are the kinds of books that we read and re-read, actually I think there's a post of me on Instagram last summer where I was watching my kids play in the pool. And I said, "I know, I've read this ..." but it was the first *Penderwicks* book, "I've read this book so many times but this is how I'm spending my afternoon." Just re-reading it because it does feel like you just get lost in there, you don't remember where you are, you never get pulled out of the story.

8:23 Jeanne's writing process

So, tell me about writing and planning. Like, when you – I don't know – it's probably changed,

I would imagine from the first book to your now new book which we'll talk about in a few minutes but that releases today, so if you're listening to this and you're thinking, 'Yeah, when's the fifth *Penderwicks* book coming out?' yeah, you want to head to a bookstore today because you can get your hands on it today, May 15, 2018. But, I'm sure your process has changed, but do you plan a lot, do you outline, can you talk a little bit about what your process looks like when you start writing a new book?

Jeanne: It hasn't changed that much because I'm still the kind of writer, I've just learned a lot and trying to make the process a little more streamlined; it took me 10 years to go from dreaming up *The Penderwicks* to having it published, so I'm more streamlined than that. I do not make an outline because I hated making outlines in school.

Sarah: Yeah, totally.

Jeanne: I hated that so much. I can still picture one, and the AA and then the little aa, but also because I am -- writer's can, sort of, very generally put themselves into two groups which are people character driven or plot driven and then there, of course, a lot of people that go back and forth between them. Nate, of course, is one of them, but I know when I start a book I know who's in it, I know who's going to be the one driving that book, and I know where she and/or he is going to end up, but it's not always clear to me how, what's going to happen with (I'll just say her at this point) ...

Sarah: Sure.

Jeanne: ... even though often it was Jeffery or Ben, too; how she was going to get there, what was going to happen, what was going to happen to all the people around her, and when like the



last book, I know we aren't talking about yet, but Lydia who was just a toddler in the fourth book is now an 11 year old, I had to write a lot before I really got to know her, if that makes sense. And I often get to know people through how they interact with other people so I had to learn more about the people around her, and then as I worked that through then I could go back to the beginning and start over again. So, my books are very emotion-driven but the fourth book I had known since I wrote the first book that there was a wound between two of the sisters, Batty and Skye, and I knew why it was there, and in the fourth book I knew that I was going to work on them starting to heal that wound. So, that's – I can't remember exactly – but that's where I knew I was going...

Sarah: OK.

Jeanne: ... with that. But, also I was always working on this arc to get to the fifth book. So, I was always keeping Rosalind and Tommy in the loop. I always was keeping Skye and Jeffrey where they were going. I was progressing Jane's writing career, and Batty's love of music – she doesn't even learn to love music until the second book, but it was essential to get her to the fifth. One of the ways I think about these books and that I've written them and structured them is that really they are one big giant book. So, the first three books I think of as Act I (if we're talking about the theatre), and the fourth book is Act II, and then the fifth book is Act III.

11:53 Where the story came from

Sarah: Oh, that's so good. OK, because, that's one of the things I wanted to ask you is when you were writing that first book did you know it was going to be a series?

Jeanne: Yes.

Sarah: OK. And, was that like publisher-driven or is that in your own heart, you knew this was going to be a series, there were more stories?

Jeanne: No, that was in my own heart because just like I said earlier about like a reader's theatre I make, every decision I make as a writer is based on how I read and I consider myself much more of a reader than a writer, I mean, my identity, because I've been reading all my life, reading voraciously, and re-reading voraciously, and I still do – probably up to four books a week – so the books that I loved as a child were series and that's always what I wanted to read and if there wasn't a series I would read everything by that author anyway, like with Louisa May Alcott, just to feel like I was staying in the same world, but *Narnia* and *The Borrowers*, E. Nesbit's *The Bastable Kids*, all that stuff was series, so it was not publisher-driven and I have a funny story to tell about that. My editor just told me, well she told as an anecdote and she just told me this in the last year – after all these years, the same manager I've been working with – and she was talking about when we were trying to come up with a title for the first book and she wanted this subtitle and I said, "Well, are we going to have subtitles for all the rest of the books? Do we want to worry about consistency?" And she said, "Oh, we'll worry about that when we get there," and what she was really thinking is, 'Honey, you're never going to get five books out of this. It's not going to sell well enough. I love this book. I love you but everybody thinks they're going to get to keep writing and it rarely happens.' So, it was the opposite of publisher-driven.

Sarah: Oh, that's so funny.



Jeanne: And so, if I hadn't won the National Book Award I don't know what would have happened except that the Indi Book Seller, long before that, had already picked it up and were running with it, so I might have been able to be OK anyway. But, Michelle stands up in front of marketing and laughs about me saying that and her turning me down and then she holds up the fifth book and says, "She did it."

Sarah: That's so fun.

14:28 Get signed copies!

Jeanne: I have a local bookstore that's three blocks from my house and anyone who wants a signed copy can get it through them ...

Sarah: Oh, awesome.

Jeanne: ...and it's on my website so if they want to go there, they just have to call them or email them or something, I don't know how that works, and then tell them who I want it to sign it to and then the bookstore ships it out.

Sarah: Oh, great. What's the name of the bookstore?

Jeanne: Broadside Bookshop.

Sarah: OK, great. We'll put a link in our Show Notes as well so people can find those because that is fantastic. I love it.

15:09 Which books inspired Jeanne

OK, so one of the things I wanted to ask you, well actually, some of the kids who wrote in I asked on Facebook and in our Premium Member Forum, I asked, "What do you want me to ask Jeanne Birdsall when she's on the show?" And one of the questions was what books inspired your writing?

And I think we all know *Little Women*, of course, but then you mentioned like, *The Bastables*, and what else did you just now mention?

Jeanne: C. S. Lewis.

Sarah: Yes.

Jeanne: *The Narnia Series*.

Sarah: Yes.

Jeanne: And it doesn't really make sense that they inspired me. I mean, *The Penderwicks* are not an alternate reality or anything like that, and certainly I'm not comparing myself to C. S. Lewis. He inspired me, but what he did of being able to want children to live in that world was so inspiring and magical. I remember being in fifth grade and out in the recess with my friend, Susan, and we would say, "If we just go past that tree we'll be in Narnia." And we knew it wouldn't happen but somehow we weren't absolutely positive it wouldn't happen, that in-between, and that's what he's done, that's what he did for people. Also, *The Secret Garden* was a big influence just in terms of what it's like to have space and have beautiful things around you when you're a child. When I was writing the first book I'd said it's a love letter to the books I loved as a child.

16:52 What you might not know about the characters

Sarah: Dillon is 13 and she wants to know if *The Penderwicks* are based on your life, or are they more of a life you wanted to live, or something else?

Jeanne: They were much closer to a life I wanted to live. They were absolutely not based on my life.



Sarah: OK. Finnegan is 7 and wants to know who your favorite character in the series is? He says, “Skye is his favorite character.”

Jeanne: Finnegan is a boy and Skye is his favorite character?

Sarah: Yep.

Jeanne: I always have the same answer, which is that I can’t have a favorite. But, what I can say is the ones that I relate to the best, so with now six siblings Rosalind is not very much like me at all. She, I had to make up a lot because my oldest sister – she’s the oldest sister I would have loved to have had. Skye ... but, I mean there has to be parts of me in there other else I couldn’t have written her. Skye and Batty ... Batty is probably closest to me, but Skye is my temper, and also the tendency to see the world in black and white – that’s me, kicking the trees when she gets annoyed, that’s definitely me. My temper has been moderated as I’ve gotten older, but it took a lot of work to get it there, and it was only because I kept breaking my toes kicking the trees. And Jane, of course, is just ... she’s the most fun to write because she’s a writer so I just give her all my opinions.

Sarah: Yeah, I love it.

Jeanne: And, also ...

Sarah: She might be my favorite.

Jeanne: Yeah. And, also the mother’s best influenced her in a different way that made her less scarred, in a way. Rosalind had to become the mom, and Skye lost her anchor in the family. And, Batty never had a mom until Iantha came in, but Jane dove into her imagination – which is, of course, what I did – but as the rest of the family heals around her, Jane still has her imagination. So, she was fun to write because there were no

real central scars with her. The biggest thing she learns is like don’t trust cute boys on skateboards.

Sarah: Which is an important lesson to learn.

Jeanne: Which is an important lesson to learn for all of us, right.

Sarah: Both Heather and Viv have a similar question. I know Heather’s 11, I’m not sure how old Viv is, but they want to know if you based any of the sisters off of real people? Viv says, “How did you make your characters so relatable and realistic?”

Jeanne: I mean, they took pieces of me from them. I don’t base anybody on a real person, but I definitely, for some characters, have touchstone that I use as, kind of, a central magnet so that I can know if the character’s getting too far away from that person. With Mr. Penderwick, my husband does that for me. He’s that kind of parent, and I have a great story that I always tell about him. My husband’s children who are now mine, too – I’m just so lucky – they’re quite grown up, they’re in their mid-to-late 30’s now, and David was visiting us, I guess about 10 years ago, and he and I were standing at the kitchen window looking into our back garden and my husband – his dad – was on the bench reading a newspaper, sort of in his face, and our dog, Cagney, was still quite young at the time, was racing around and around and around and around and around and barking and barking and barking and barking and barking, barking, and David turned to me and said, “Now, you know what our childhood was like.” And that was just exactly what I wanted for Mr. Penderwick, and when David said that, it nailed what I’d put in to Mr. Penderwick, is that ability to keep his children safe, that they always know he’s there, they



always know he won't let them do anything so terrible but that he doesn't monitor their every moment. He gives them a lot of freedom.

21:03 Ahhhh, Mr. Penderwick

Sarah: We've talked – we've had an episode before on the podcast about parents in literature that inspire us as parents – and so, I had a guest, Greta Eskridge on, we were talking about the different parents in literature who inspire us as we're reading these books with our kids, make us thing, 'I want to be like that' and I felt that way, several times, about Mr. Penderwick, because he's got that steady, rock solid, completely loving nature and yet, just like you said, he doesn't micromanage his kids or try to keep them from making any mistakes at all.

Jeanne: We have two grandchildren now, daughters who live only 20 minutes from us, again – lucky, lucky, lucky, lucky, lucky – they're 7 and 5, and it's so much fun to see him with them, when it's just the two of us, my husband and me with the girls, I just get on the floor and play. I become like another 6 year old with them. He always gives, these very calm ways of figuring out, directing things but without controlling them, I guess that's what he does...

Sarah: Yeah.

Jeanne: And, so he'll just, kind of, take a step on a different path and they'll go whoosh along that path and I'm just sort of clopping along behind everybody.

22:27 Questions about the craft of writing

Sarah: Lisa Gustafson wants to know how you choose which viewpoint to write from?

Jeanne: The first book was the family. They're a chorus. And the whole real ... it took me a while ... it maybe took me until I was writing the second book to understand that what I was always writing about was family. The whole point of the books for me is that if you have this healthy family, these healthy people who love each other, which is Mr. Penderwick and his four daughters, and the girls, that that family continues to expand. So the normal (I shouldn't say normal) but the more usual way of writing the first book would have been to have it be Jeffrey's book, and that Jeffrey needs to be rescued from his life and he finds a way, and then Jeffrey gets rescued and then the book is done. But, what I was writing about was let's make this family bigger, which is what I believe in. That you keep a safe enough hub, and if you take good enough care of yourself (meaning, myself) that then more and more people will come in. So, the first book was the family as a chorus bringing in Jeffrey and setting up this platform of adding people, and then the second book was Rosalind because I needed to let Rosalind off the hook. I didn't want her to be ... I wanted her to go into her teen years just being able to be a teenager and not a mom.

Sarah: Mm-hmmm, yeah.

Jeanne: And, so then they bring in lantha and Ben, and so now the family's bigger. And then, the third book I actually send Rosalind away. I send her. She's so free now she doesn't even have to be there. And, then it's Skye's book because she has to then, she has to figure out how to take care of Batty when she'd rather basically just let her drown. And, so that's leading them to the fourth book which is Batty's book because she's 11, and for Batty to really dedicate herself to music to find her voice, which is, of course, is a metaphor, and for Batty and Skye to



start becoming friends, and just start becoming friends so that the fifth book can happen.

Sarah: OK. It kind of goes back to what you were just saying about Mr. Penderwick, about him directing things but not being controlling about them. I was thinking when you said that about a conductor in a symphony and how a conductor keeps everything on the right path but doesn't actually control the instruments. He just, sort of, helps people know what to do. And, so then I was thinking about that and then you started talking about the journey of who's journey each book is about and what they're facing, I guess, and it just felt to me like, yeah, I can see it all. And, you started even saying it was a chorus – the first book was the chorus. I've just got this musical metaphor playing around in my mind now and I can see it.

Jeanne: Oh good, I like musical metaphors. But, I didn't finish that thing of the family expanding but then the family does keep expanding through the third and the fourth book. Oh! And can I just talk about Nick Geiger? Go back in terms of people based on real people. Nick Geiger, Tommy's older brother, showed up just (in the second book) as an older brother because Tommy needed an older brother because if Tommy were an older brother he and Rosalind would have punched each other out early on...

Sarah: Yeah.

Jeanne: ... so he needed to be a younger brother, but then as I was writing the fourth book my real nephew, Nick, who's last name is not Geiger had graduated from Penn. State in the ROTC program and was going to Afghanistan, and I knew he was in the ROTC, I guess, I'm just not that logical about things like that. It just didn't occur to me he's going to Afghanistan, he's going

to war. And, at that point I figured out Nick Geiger's timeline and realized he, too, could be in Afghanistan during this time. So, I have known my nephew Nick since he was little but he lived in Pennsylvania, I was never that close to him, and this was this incredible opportunity to ask him things. First, I wrote to him, I said, "Is this OK if I do this?" and he said yes. And, then I would email him when he was in Afghanistan.

Sarah: Wow.

Jeanne: And, what I found is that if I wrote him and said, "How are you?" I wouldn't hear. If I sent him a box of food, I wouldn't hear. But, if I wrote and said, "Are you hot?" or "Are you cold?" I'd get an answer right away, which was very interesting. And, the smells and things like that. I don't think I used any of it in the book but it just helped me know who Nick Geiger would be and what kind of shape he'd be when he came home. I think if I hadn't been talking to Nick and talking to his mother all the time it wouldn't have occurred to me that the first thing that Nick would do was just sleep and eat for days. I wouldn't know that but they were always hungry. It was just that. So, then this summer my real nephew, Nick, got married so that Nick Geiger in the fifth book could show up grown up and already married.

27:42 The hardest part of writing

Sarah: What was the hardest part about writing the series? Or, were any of the books harder to write than the other? That's another question I'm curious about.

Jeanne: The fifth book was the hardest, technically, because my tendency, and I wrote an entire first draft this way, and sent it to my editor and I had to re-do it, was to make Lydia be pretty



much just the observer and narrator of the older girls' stories because the older girls, their stories were so primary to me, and they were what had to be gotten to the point where I wanted them to be, and Lydia had no story, and that, of course, made a terrible book. So, that was technically difficult then to go back there – and when I was talking about getting to know Lydia, I really had to go through that whole process. And, then when my editor said no, very sweetly, and I went “Oh my gosh, she’s right,” then I could go back and then I had to get to know Lydia even more. So, technically that was the most difficult.

Emotionally, the fourth book was rough. That was really rough because I had to live with Batty through that. It’s the only way to write about that because that kind of pain, because I have to go in and I feel like it’s almost like method acting – these actors that remember their own tragedy to act tragedy – it’s kind of like that. Her whole stomach knots was something, was still my go to anxiety, so I had to live through her anxiety and her loneliness – that was difficult. It was a tremendous relief to finish that book.

Sarah: I would imagine.

Jeanne: Oh. Yeah.

29:26 Let's talk about revision

Sarah: So, something you just said was that you wrote a whole first draft and you sent it to your editor and she basically (she, right? I think you mentioned it was a she) ...

Jeanne: Yeah, she.

Sarah: ... basically said, like, we’re going to start again. So, I love pointing out to kids, because of course, all writers wish that the first thing that came out of our pens or our keyboards was magical but the revision is where the writing really

happens, but I’m curious to know what that felt like when your editor came back and said we’re going to try this again?

Jeanne: Well, first of all, what she kept saying to me is that – and what I realized right away – is that the architecture was all there. I mean, everything that happened was there, all the characters and everything. But, it had to be things happening with Lydia, like if there was a story about a dog in the book it had to be Lydia’s interaction with the dog...

Sarah: I see.

Jeanne: ... it felt like I’d been an idiot and I basically beat myself up a lot about it. I’m lucky that I have a wonderful relationship with my editor. She has the ability to get inside the book and get inside of what I’m trying to do and help me do better what I’m trying to do, as opposed to the kind of editor (and these exist) that somewhere in the back of their brains say, if this were my book I’d write it this way ...

Sarah: Sure.

Jeanne: ... and then they’d try to get you to do that. And, Michelle has done all the books with me. She’s as invested with these people as I am. She had her son years ago and he’s growing up on these books and his name’s in them. It’s never a slap in the face or I never get angry or anything. I agree with 98% of what she says and the stuff I don’t agree with I just go ‘no’ and I tell her why, and she says let me think about it, and then she comes back and says you’re right.

Sarah: I love it. OK. So, you’ve got a really good working ... and I would imagine that by the end of five books you know how to work with each other, right?



Jeanne: Yes. But, also in terms of children, I happen to be the kind of writer who loves revision. I'm working on a book now, the first non-Penderwick novel, and it's going to be just a one book, no more series for awhile, and I don't like building the architecture. That first rush of 'Oh, I can do whatever I want' is too much for me, too many possibilities. I love it when that's all in place, and then I can really start with the emotions, and the funny stuff, and the conversation. That's what I love the most. I'm actually a revision-driven writer which is lucky for me.

Sarah: So, that first draft is almost like a relief to get it done because then you have the architecture there, and you're like, now I can really start playing with it, and with their emotions. Well, not "playing with their emotions" but writing, exploring their emotions and writing through their journey, and all that good stuff?

Jeanne: Right.

32:23 What's next from Jeanne Birdsall...

Sarah: OK. OK. That was a question I was going to ask you – is if you were planning on working on any other series or books, so you just answered that for me – no series for a while but you are working on another novel.

Jeanne: Yeah, no series for awhile because in hard cold facts that series, well, it took me 20 years, it wouldn't now because I know how to write books, it would take me, well 16 years, and I am about to turn 67, so right away you can see, Oh I don't particularly want to go into another series now and lock myself in for literally the rest of my life. But, I'm not going to say I'm not going to do one if I'm 80 and still feel vibrant and have

all my marbles, I can say I can write till 100. So, while I was writing *The Penderwicks* books I had ideas for other novels and I've been having them ... I feel like they're sort of backed up in the queue, so I'm letting them out one at a time now. And that's fun. It's fun to know that *The Penderwicks* they're safe. They're where I want them. People ask if I miss writing about them and I can say no, that's a simple answer, but for me, the characters existed in my head, for me they don't exist in the books. So, for me, they're still where they've always been.

Sarah: Yeah.

Jeanne: If that makes sense.

33:53 Book 5: The Penderwicks at Last

Sarah: Yeah. So, what book five ... again, listeners, book five of *The Penderwicks* at last releases today. You can get it anywhere books are sold. And, I'm curious, Jeanne, what you're most excited about with the release of book five?

Jeanne: When I was a child reader, and even now as a grown up reader, I don't want to read just one [**inaudible** 34:05], I'll read a whole bunch of [**inaudible** 34:07] altogether, because I conceived this as one story and because when I read series when I was a kid, I'd read them all as one story. I'd been looking forward to getting to interact with the readers who's experience is sitting down and for the first time reading books one through five. So, basically, I'm looking forward to the 7 and 8 year olds, talking to them in about ten years. I have one wonderful, wonderful young woman who came to meet me when the fourth book came out, and gave me a letter. And we've since then become good friends. She's 21 or 22 now, and she read the first



book when she was 10, and then so she grew up with them. So her experience is that and I get to talk to her about that, and she read the fifth book and her experience of it was as a grown up's experience of it now, and she, I think, and I don't want to read too much into this, maybe she'd say I was wrong, but I think that each time she read the book, the books as the girls got older, she wanted to return to the feeling she had when she was 10 and Jane was 10 in the first book. And, in the last book she was grown up and so were the older sisters and it was such a different experience for her. What I'm wondering is that if a child who picks up the whole series now will more easily, because they'll read them maybe within a month, maybe within a week, maybe six months, whether they'll more easily make that shift to Lydia who is now the 11 years old at Arundel in the last book.

Sarah: Yeah, that will be interesting. And, it kind of, I mean, *Little Women* (I may be getting this wrong) I guess, like *Little Women*, *Little Men*, *Jo's Boys* is similar, right, because they start as children, older children, but children in *Little Women* and then you go all the way through Jo as a mother, and ...

Jeanne: Right.

Sarah: ... and I think I read them all back to back. I mean, I think they may have all been in a single volume, which is why I'm kind of hesitating to say.

Jeanne: Well, and *Anne of Green Gables* does the same thing.

Sarah: Right.

Jeanne: She ends up doing that. What's interesting in both of those cases though, with Louisa May Alcott and Ellen Montgomery, I just

read a brand new biography of Montgomery that's coming out, I think in June, but they, neither of those women wanted to keep writing about those characters. Louisa May Alcott rather famously didn't want to write *Little Women* at all. She wanted to write grownup novels. There was a book called *Moods* that's very hard to find. She wanted to write these rather symbolic things for grownups. She wrote *Little Women* just as *Little Women* and then it was the first half of what we now think of as *Little Women* and then she was pressured into writing the second half, so I think by the time she was writing – she must have been really annoyed by the time she was writing *Little Men*. So, the difference is, what's very interesting to me, is that both those authors, and Montgomery was tired of writing about Anne, and she was like, "Oh, geez, do I have to?"

Sarah: I don't think I realized that.

Jeanne: I didn't either until I read this biography; that I've followed their example except that I wanted to do that and I, kind of, wondered at the irony of that. I wanted to see them grow up.

37:58 Fan mail

Sarah: Yeah. So, several of your fans asked if there is a place they can send fan mail to you, if they can send a letter to you? Is there a place they can send something in the mail?

Jeanne: They can send the letter c/o The Broadside Bookshop. And, I think you're going to put a link up for that.

Sarah: I will, yes.

Jeanne: They're several blocks from me and they will tell me and I'll go pick it up.

Sarah: Perfect. We'll put their address in the Show Notes, so if your kids want to send



something to Jeanne they can send it to Broadside Bookshop. But, you probably, I'm guessing that you don't have a whole lot of spare writing time to write back to fans. Am I right when I guess that?

Jeanne: You're very right and thank you for bringing that up. No, I have very little writing time and the mail is wonderful but I can't focus enough my writing energy to write letters back. I'm rude. Basically, just tell everybody I'm very rude because I won't answer their letters. But, it's still nice to get them.

Sarah: Well, I think we all would rather that you write us another book to read anyway, so I'm good with that. I know there's got to be a limit to your writing energy, right, so the time you spend writing as many books as we can get from you, we would love to read. So, we're happy with that.

Jeanne: Thank you.

39:14 Writing tips

Sarah: OK, so one final question before we go. For all of the writers listening, our young and old aspiring writers, those of us who are trying to write stories and hope that somebody will read them someday, do you have any tips or advice or a favorite book that really helped you learn to structure your stories, or something that you would love to tell us?

Jeanne: I only have one answer for this because it's the way I did it, which is to just read voraciously. The written language, the way that you tell a story in written language, is different than oral language. Some things are longer, some things are shorter, there's a different rhythm, there are different words you use; you have to learn that language before you can start creating in it, and the only way to do that is to read lots and

lots and lots and lots and lots and lots of books, and language will seep into you. It's almost like if you want to speak French, the easiest way is to go over to France and listen to everybody, but then the clue is, as you're reading, reading, lots and lots and lots of books is to, at some point, start paying attention to the one you like the best, even if you're reading the ones you'll go back and re-read, and just by doing that, but then at some point, think, 'Well, what is it that I like about these books? Why am I re-reading this book? Why did I read that other book only once? Why couldn't I get past the first chapter of that other book?' And, at that point you'll already be making decisions about how you're going to write. It's a discipline, like anything else. Like music, like dance, like anything else. People think because they can speak they can write a book and that's just not true. But, the good thing about my method is that you get to read lots of books.

Sarah: Exactly.

Jeanne: And that's really pretty painless, I think.

Sarah: Yeah, absolutely. I was going to say that has got to be the most delicious writing advice, I think, because I think, 'Oh good' then it all counts, everything we're reading counts, when we're trying to write.

Jeanne: Well, everything you read counts. The only thing that doesn't count, I mean it can count, but I shouldn't be saying this to kids, but the only thing that doesn't count is when you're being forced to write and read something you don't want to read for school. And, I hope that doesn't happen too much to these kids, but even then, you can learn by what is it about that that really drives you nuts? Why didn't you like reading yet? Can I say one more thing?

Sarah: Please do.



Jeanne: About wanting to be a writer. I think the transition that has to happen, and this is a transition that a lot of people don't make, and you can actually if you have friends who will write, you can see them not make it, there's this point where people want to be a writer because they want to express what's in them and they want to get it on paper and they want to make themselves more visible by putting themselves on paper, that's an initial instinct, but when you really become a writer is when your impulse is to communicate with other people and that's really a whole different thing. What I wanted to do, and I think I've done it, is to be part of the conversation that started with E. Nesbit, Edward Eager, C. S. Lewis, Elizabeth Enright, Eleanor Estes, and then I'm talking back to them. I'm saying, "Thank you for this. I love this part." But, I'm also talking forward to the people who are reading my books and then I tell children maybe you'll be part of the conversation, too. That you'll be talking back to me someday. And that's really what all, when you study literature bla-bla in English programs bla-bla, that's really what you study is where did Shakespeare come from? Did he come from just out of nowhere? No, he had some influences, but then who started using him? By the time you get to Jane Austen you know who she's read, that you know she's making fun of Richardson in some way, and then you go forward to Bronte, you go to Gaskell, and etc., etc., etc., etc. So, when you want to just not put yourself on paper but to become part of this magnificent conversation over the centuries that's when you'll feel like there's nothing else you can do, you have to sit down and you have to do it if it kills you.

44:06 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: My name is Arthur. I'm 9. I live in England. My favorite book is *Ember Falls* because it there's a lot of betrayal and it really displays what happens.

Child2: Hello, my name is Clara. I'm 7 months old and I live in England with my brother and sister. My favorite book that mommy reads and my brother and sister read out loud to me is *Lift and Look Baby Animals*. I really like it because the animals are so tasty to chew on, and I love it.

Child3: My name is Stella. I live in England. I'm 6, and my favorite book is *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of Nimh*. I like it because it's really easy to see the **[**inaudible**]** and what's already happened.

Child4: Hi, my name is Lucy and I'm 8 years old. I live in Georgia. My favorite book is *Pinocchio* because he's always getting into trouble. Once he had four, five gold pieces, and then he went and saw a fox and a cow. And, as he walked along to the field of miracles and they told him they would have five million gold pieces by the time he was finished if he planted them in a field and watered them. So, he went and planted them in a field and watered them, and then he went back to get them and there were no gold pieces. He was very sad. What I learned from this story is to be contented with what you have.

Child5: Hi, my name is Jada and I'm 8 years old and I live in Pennsylvania, and my favorite book is *Jotham's Journey*. And I like it because it's exciting. Bye.



Child6: Hi, my name's Jasmine. I'm 6 years old and I live in Pennsylvania. My favorite book is *The Green Ember* because Pickett and Heather find a new family. Bye.

Child7: [Mom: what's your name?] Henry. [Mom: Henry. How old are you, Henry?] Big. [Mom: you're big? You're showing two fingers, are you 2?] Uh-huh. [Mom: where do you live?] Home. [Mom: at home in Ohio?] Uh-huh. [Mom: yeah. What's your favorite book, Henry?] *The Mitten*. [Mom: *The Mitten* by Alvin Tresselt. And why do you like *The Mitten*?] **[**inaudible**]** [Mom: yeah, and you like the mouse and the frog in the book?] Mm-hm. [Mom: OK, thanks Henry.]

Child8: [Mom: what's your name?] Grace. [Mom: how old are you?] 3. [Mom: and what city do you live in?] Minnesota, St. Paul. [Mom: and what's your favorite book, Grace?] *The Cat Came From Tacos*. [Mom: *The Cat Who Came For Tacos*? And what is that your favorite book?] Because it's super funny. [Mom: what's funny in the book?] The one when you don't put elbows on the table.

Child9: Hi, my name is Lila. My favorite book is *Joe Dean* and my favorite part is when Joe Dean went for the big snow. [Mom: how old are you, Lila?] 4 years old. [Mom: where do you live?] Ohio.

Child10: [Mom: what's your name?] Lucas Jackson Rice. [Mom: Lucas Jackson Rice, how old are you? Can you say 2?] 2. [Mom: what is your favorite book?] *The Foundling Fox*. [Mom: *The Foundling Fox*. What is your favorite part in *The Foundling Fox*?] The badger. [Mom: the badger. What does the badger do? And what does the vixen say to the badger?] And he growls. [Mom: and the vixen says, "Go eat snails and spiders, that's the only food for you." Thank you, Lucas.]

Sarah: Thank you kids. So, that's it for season 12 of the Read-Aloud Revival podcast. We're taking about six weeks off and then we'll be back with season 13. We have got a really good lineup, so it's pretty exciting. We're not closed for the summer though, we're just not putting up new podcasts, but there are actually some really fun and exciting things happening at Read-Aloud Revival all summer long. And if you don't want to miss those you want to be on the email list because you know what? Life gets busy and you'll miss if you aren't on the email list. So, make sure you head to ReadAloudRevival.com, pop your email in there, or you can just text the word BOOKS to the number 345345. And that way you'll get emails because we have some fun things coming up and you don't want to miss out. We'll be back in July with new episodes, but in the meantime, go make meaningful and lasting connections with your kids through books.