



RAR 103 – Excellent Nonfiction Picture Books, Gail Gibbons

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. I'm your host of the Read-Aloud Revival podcast. You've got episode 103, and I'm really glad you're here. I have a wonderful non-fiction picture book author and illustrator to introduce to you today. Actually, I highly doubt I'm "introducing" her to you today. If you are not already familiar with her work I'd be surprised. Before we do that I keep forgetting to tell you here on the podcast, did you hear that the brand new book I wrote this last year, *The Read-Aloud Family: Making Meaningful and Lasting Connections with Your Kids* was a USA Today best seller? That's kind of fun, right? OK, never mind, that's really fun! I really appreciate all of you who have purchased the book and have told your friends and family about how they can get inspired to connect with their kids and make some meaningful and lasting memories with them through the power of reading aloud. I hope that you find in that book something for you in your journey wherever you are; whether you're just getting starting reading aloud or you've been reading aloud for decades. There should be book recommendations and ideas, tips and some encouragement in there for you regardless of where you are on your read-aloud journey. You can find it anywhere books are sold or head to TheReadAloudFamily.com. OK, so let's get into today's show because I've been really excited to chat with our guest.

1:58 Meet Gail

Gail Gibbons has been called the master of children's non-fiction. You will probably recognize several of her books just by seeing the style of them. I know I can spy a Gibbons book from a mile away. She created her first book at the age of 4. And began taking art lessons soon after. And since then she's created, I'm not sure how many books, I know over 170 – we're going to have to ask her – she says she's always been curious and enjoys going right to the source to learn more about topics. Today we brought her onto the Read-Aloud Revival to talk about making her wonderful non-fiction for children. Gail, welcome to the Read-Aloud Revival.

Gail: Oh, thank you very much.

Sarah: So, tell me about that first book you wrote when you were 4? Do you remember what it was?

Gail: My mom saved all of my artwork starting from when I was about 3. It was only four pages long and, I couldn't write yet, but I was doing a lot of drawing and painting. And it ended up almost being almost a visual animation. It started off with a spider at the top of the page. And then when you turned the page the spider had dropped down from a thread a little bit. And then when you got to third page it was about two-thirds of the way down the page, and then when you turned to page to the fourth page he had landed on the bottom and was crawling away and there were little dot, dot, dots behind him because I wanted to make him look like he was going in motion.

Sarah: Oh my goodness. Oh, that is ... at 4! That's amazing.



Gail: And then I asked my mom how we could put it together and she taught me how to, sort of like, tie it together with yarn, so I still actually have the book. It was so cool that she saved it.

Sarah: That's amazing. So, then you took art lesson after that? Did you know when you were a kid that you wanted to make books when you were older? Was that something you always wanted to do?

Gail: Well, what happened was when I was in kindergarten my parents went to one of those teacher conferences with my kindergarten teacher. She said your daughter's always drawing and painting whenever the kids are running around, she's drawing and painting, and I think you should sort of push her in that direction a little. So when I was about 7 my mom enrolled me in the Art Institute in Chicago. I was always interested in art all the way through high school, and I majored in graphic design so that's where I was always at.

4:29 Creating Nonfiction

Sarah: And then, what drew you to making non-fiction for kids? Your non-fiction just, it's unique, it's singular, it's my favorite – even when I'm introducing a topic to my older kids in high school I'll often start with your books because they're so well researched, they're so informative, and delightful to read. So, I really feel like they just appeal to such a broad age range and I'm curious to know what drew you to making non-fiction specifically which has really become your specialty, right?

Gail: I was starting to do books but my first few books were like a combination of fiction and non-fiction because two publishers I was working with were more interested in (I hate the term) but they

were into cute books, but I did a book called, Willy and His Wheel Wagon and then one called, A Missing Maple Syrup Sap Mystery which was a combination of fiction and non-fiction, and I had worked in television at NBC as a graphic artist, and the art work that I did at NBC had to be extremely graphic because the images were only on the screen for about ten seconds. It was for a children's show but it was pre-electric company, and the kids kept saying, "Why don't you do children's books?" but when I started researching children's books I noticed non-fiction was pretty darn boring. It was black and white stick figures or photo essays that were boring (and they were black and white photo essays not color photo essays). I went to one publisher and I pulled out my slides from my television background and she said, "Can you match up your art work with non-fiction?" and I said, "Why not?" I mean, that's an area I love because the children's show I was on was geared toward non-fiction for kids. It was called "Take a Giant Step" and some of the kids on the show said why don't you do children's books? So, it all sort of fell together. But when I started researching, like I said, I noticed that there was a big hole in the non-fiction area that was just boring. And so, I did a book called Clocks and How They Go which was my first really straight hat on non-fiction book with very bold graphic covers. It was very bold and graphic. That's how it started. That book won some awards and then all of a sudden everybody said, "Oh, do one for us!" so then I kept on going.

Sarah: Yeah, yeah.

Gail: But as a kid I was curious about stuff all the time and I thought it was sort of funny when I did Clocks and How They Go because I remember as a kid I took a clock a part because I wanted to



see how it worked, and of course, it all ended up in a shoebox because I couldn't remember ...

Sarah: ... how to put it back.

Gail: ... how to put it back together because I was 8. So, I drove my parents a little nuts with asking them questions all the time, so it seemed like a natural thing for me to go into.

7:45 Choosing Topics

Sarah: So, what does that research look like for you now? When you're going to write a new book about a topic ... well, I guess before I ask you what the research looks like, I'm curious to know how do you choose what you're going to write about next? How do you choose that next non-fiction book?

Gail: The way I choose topics is in so many different ways. An editor will come up with an idea and throw it at me and if I like it, I like it, if I don't I don't. Sometimes when I'm talking to kids the kids will come up and say, "How come you haven't done a book on [whatever]?" So sometimes the kids give me feedback. Or, I'll get letters from kids and they have ideas and my husband came up with the idea of doing a book on rainforests. So a lot of the ideas come from a lot of places but it has to be something that really interests me or I just can't get into it. I can't sink my teeth into it. But it has to be something I really am curious about, but that's been my nature, like I said, since I was a kid.

Sarah: Well, and then you're going to spend so much time with it? Well, actually, how long does that take you from the time you go, OK, I'm going to do a book on [this topic] to the time when you turn it all in? How long does that take?

Gail: From the time I start ... well, see, I'm usually working on two or three topics at the same time. What I do is I'll be researching one book already for a book off in the future, and then I'm researching for the book I'm working on at the moment...

Sarah: Got it.

Gail: ... and then, I do my first going to the libraries and looking everywhere for the topic, and then I find an expert in the area because if you look at any of my books on the copyright pages I always say thank you to an expert.

Sarah: Yeah, I've noticed that.

Gail: Because I have found a lot of mistakes in non-fiction books so a lot of the times the people who are my experts have picked up on stuff and said where did you get this from? And it was just bad information.

Sarah: Interesting.

Gail: So, I always go to ... like, when I did my zoo book, I dealt with a fellow named Jim Doherty at the Bronx Zoo and a couple of my books like my gorillas book I did with Holiday House, Jim actually got me and my husband in with eighteen Gorillas and my husband does all the photo research so he took over 300 photos in three hours and I learned from being with the gorillas how they actually walk on their front feet, front hands, or whatever you want to call it. It's called a knuckle walk, but every illustration I looked at in a drawing of a book was wrong. It showed up in Ken's photos – the knuckle walk that I did in the book was right but the books I was looking at were wrong, and so I talked to Jim Doherty, my expert, again and I said, "Oh gosh, I don't know where you got your reference from," and I said, "I think the people just referred to other books ...



Sarah: Right.

Gail: ... and had it wrong for years.” And so what happened it takes me usually from the time I research I go through a series of writes and re-writes, like the book I’m working on right now, I’ve re-written it five times at this point because I usually overwrite the first time so then I go back and cut text, cut text, cut text, work with my editor and we cut more text, and add things that we thought of later, and it goes through probably I’d say, three to four months of back and forth, over the phone, meetings in New York, stuff like that. And then, once that’s done I go ahead and do the dummy which is the visual part of the book, rough sketches in a fake book form, and they can get an idea with the art department as to what the book will look like even though my sketches are really rough.

Sarah: OK.

Gail: And then I can start the art work and pick out the typeface and everything once that’s done. So, from the time I start ‘til the time it’s done is about a year...

Sarah: Yeah, OK.

Gail: ... to a year and a half, but at one point I was working for three publishers but Holiday House was my favorite one so I just ended up staying with them, and they have most of my books.

Sarah: OK, yeah, and a new one that we’re going to talk about in a minute, too.

Gail: Yeah, great.

Sarah: So that’s interesting. So, you always start with the text and then move to the illustrations, which makes so much sense, of course.

Gail: I always start with the research.

Sarah: Oh, thank you. Yes. Start with the research.

Gail: Research is the most important part then I go to the text.

Sarah: OK, OK.

Gail: But, I have to do research and put it down and just let my head do some work on it, sort of on a subconscious level, and I also visualize how the book will layout because I can do that. I can, sort of, visual page edit, and I kind of imagine in my head what a page turn will look like so I, sort of, write knowing what page is facing what page...

Sarah: What do you think is the hardest ...

Gail: ... if that makes sense.

Sarah: It does. Well, for our kids that are listening, too, and families that are listening, so a page turn is exactly what you think it is, it’s when you turn the page. What you might not know is that children’s book authors and illustrators plan and time those page turns very carefully to make you want to keep turning the pages, right, so they’re all ...

Gail: Right, right! That’s why in a lot of my books you’ll see big illustration and then on the next page there might be three illustrations separate and then the next page spread might be a double page piece of artwork, and that to me makes the book more visually stimulating. If it was one drawing on each page, to me, it gets to be boring.

Sarah: Now we’re all pulling off the Gail Gibbons books off our shelves and looking after listening to that.



13:42 Connection, Community & Confidence

Let's take just a quick break here. Do you want your kids to fall more in love books than ever this school year? Do you feel short on time, or do you ever feel pulled in too many directions? I know it can feel impossible to give our kids a meaningful education and a delightful experience with books especially if we didn't grow up that way ourselves. Even if we know that we want reading stories to be one of our kids' favorite parts of their childhood we don't always know how to make that happen. Well, I'm a homeschooling mom of six from preschool to high school, and trust me I know what it feels like to be pulled in too many directions, spinning my wheels, and not quite sure how to teach my kids in a way where I can still enjoy them, and feel good about the kind of education they're getting. I wrote two books, *Teaching from Rest: A Homeschooler's Guide to Unshakeable Peace* as well as *The Read-Aloud Family: Making Meaningful and Lasting Connections with Your Kids* for moms who want to teach from rest, want to connect with their kids in a meaningful and lasting way, and want to fall back in love with homeschooling. In Read-Aloud Revival Premium Membership we know that your relationships with your kids matter more than just about anything else. That's why in Premium Membership you get a regular dose of connection, community, and confidence. Connection – to inspire your kids and ignite their imaginations through our family book clubs, and also at live online events featuring today's best authors and illustrators. Community – to get refreshed and rejuvenated alongside other moms who are connecting with their kids through books. You'll participate in these regular mama book clubs and Master Classes that are designed

specifically to help you teach from rest and lead with confidence. I know you're short on time and in Read-Aloud Revival Premium Membership we are focused on helping you spend that time where it matters most so that you can connect with your kids through books, you can teach from a state of rest, and you can fall back in love with homeschooling. Read-Aloud Revival Premium can also take the place of your literature curriculum in your home school. We use a very simple three step system that helps your kids deep-dive into books while it also nurtures family relationships and wholeness at the same time. In our family book clubs that three step system is reading aloud, sharing experiences, and having meaningful conversations about books. And we show you how to do it step by step. Your kids' relationships with books will just never be the same once they engage in that way with their books and with each other, and especially once they meet the creators who write the words and make the pictures that tell their favorite stories. We bring the very best authors and illustrators to Read-Aloud Revival Premium Membership in live video streams every single month. There is nothing else quite like it. If you don't want to let another school year get away from you, if you want to delight in your kids and in teaching them this year, if you're feeling a little burned out and stretched too thin, I invite you to join Read-Aloud Revival Premium Membership to help focus on what matters most to your family; to teach from rest, and to make meaningful and lasting connections with your kids through books. We actually only open doors to new members a few times each year and the next time we're opening doors is August. So, to make sure you don't miss it, head to RARmembership.com and request an invitation. I hope you join us and make this a



fabulous year for your kids, for you, and for your whole family.

17:19 Fitting BIG Topics Into 29 Pages

Sarah: OK, so what's the hardest, what's the most challenging thing that comes up with trying to explain a topic in a picture book, a 32-page picture book?

Gail: Condensing it, condensing the text so that it's all going to fit in 29 pages because you have your title page, your copyright page, then I start it out almost like a new thing, I started adding extra interesting things and I would put it on page 32, so I have to make it so that each page is explaining something in as short as it can possibly be but clearly, and also it's got to be fitting into 29 pages or 30 pages, which isn't easy...

Sarah: No, I can imagine.

Gail: ... so usually, when I write the first manuscript it's usually terrible because I've got all this information in my head and on paper and I'm trying to put it down and it's usually too much information, so I put it down anyway, and that's when I start cutting. And that's when I start saying ...

Sarah: Well, I imagine ...

Gail: ... well, I don't need this, I can put this in a label instead of in the text, or something like that.

Sarah: I see. I can imagine because I know when I finish reading one of your books there's so much that I've just learned so from a reader's perspective it's just enjoyable, of course, you're just reading and absorbing all this information. When I stop and think about how hard it must be to figure out what should go where and how you

should say it that has got to be massive, a massive project.

Gail: It's really hard and I learned quite early on that if I used labels in my illustrations it would bring attention to certain parts of the page and it was giving information but it didn't have to be in the text, so I could reduce the text.

Sarah: I see, because the illustrations tell part of what you were saying, so now you can cut the words ...

Gail: Well, I mean, you know that old expression a picture's worth a thousand words? My pictures, my illustrations, if you look at the artwork a lot of times you can pick up on what's going on a page without reading it, because the picture's trying to explain about 50% or more of the information is in the artwork.

22:03 Gail's Newest Book

Sarah: Yeah, I can see. I'm looking at your newest book, the book that we're going to talk about in just a second, your book on flowers that is coming out the same day that we're airing this podcast, so readers and listeners, you can ...

Gail: Great.

Sarah: ... go to your bookshop or library, go find it today if you're looking for it. I'm looking at the page on pollination which is about halfway in and it's one sentence of text but there is so much information on this page because the illustrations are giving me a lot of information about ...

Gail: Yeah, right. I think there were only seven words on that page in text, right?

Sarah: There's more. Actually, there's two sentences now that I'm looking at it more carefully.



Gail: Two sentences?

Sarah: Yep.

Gail: But the labels are explaining what's going on with the pollination.

Sarah: Exactly.

Gail: If I had put them in text, the text would have been too long.

Sarah: Yeah, right. I'm looking at another page too, how seeds travel book, is another one where you have ...

Gail: Oh, that's one of my favorite spreads because it's so simple.

Sarah: It's so simple but there's so much information. I can see all these different ways seeds travel and there's only two sentences going on here. But there is so much information in the really beautiful illustrations. So, I can see the one that stuck to a girl's sock, and one that's in the rabbit's mouth, one that's in the goldfinch's mouth, and then the dandelion seeds ...

Gail: You got it.

Sarah: Oh yeah, it's amazing.

Gail: And then the ones that are just blowing around in the wind. I planted some flowers in a flowerbed at home called Bachelor Buttons and they grew all over our place just by wind, it wasn't pollination, it was the wind that carried them and started them, because every year they just pop up in new places. I don't know why people think non-fiction has to be dry. To me, the world we live in there's so much beauty in it, and there's so many interesting things in it, and because, like I said, my TV background I had to really be conscious of color, and I end up using a lot of bright colors because I needed that when I was working at NBC, you needed a lot of color

contrasts in order for it to transmit properly. So, that background carried over into the children's books because I just love color.

Sarah: I can tell. Especially in this flowers book, there is so much color in the flowers.

Gail: Yeah.

Sarah: But, let's talk about this one. So this one's releasing today, and what are you most excited about, or what was the most fun or challenging thing about this particular book?

Gail: Because it's one of my favorite things I do in my life; is I live in Vermont, in Central Vermont, and I'm really into perennial flower beds but then there's one flowerbed that's all annuals. And, I just love flowers. Where we live in Vermont, we live in the middle of 300 acres but we've got some porches off of the house, and I'm the one who planted all those flowers, I mean every single bulb, every single seed. Lilac bushes because I put that in the book. I wasn't just talking about seeds and bulbs, I was talking about wet one flowers and tropical flowers. Kids don't live in the wetlands or the tropics a lot of them, and that should have been included in the book I thought, because they're so different than a tulip or a dandelion. So, I wanted to get all that information in there, but one of my favorite things is just getting my hands in the soil and planting things and I love flowers. I always have. I have six pots in my office that are always either filled with living flowers or flowers from the florist. They're a thing I cherish. So, to do that book as a topic was a piece of cake. I mean, for excitement.

Sarah: Yeah, right.

Gail: Something that I really am excited about. I did a book a long time ago called From Seed to



Plant but I never got involved in the flower part. It was just on how does a seed grow?

Sarah: Yeah, we have that book. I read it to my kids every summer.

Gail: But this I really wanted to be a flower book because it's something that really interests me.

24:02 Gail's Influences as a Child

Sarah: So, one of the questions that kids always want to have answered from their favorite illustrators and authors is what were your favorite books as a child?

Gail: I honestly can't tell you that I had a favorite book because I was all over the place when it came to reading as a kid. I was enjoying books of all kinds, even National Geographic I was looking at. It was just like I didn't have a favorite book, I didn't have a favorite one like Peter Rabbit or anything like that. I just loved holding a book. It was tactile. I could hold it, I could look at the pictures. I liked young level books and older level books, and so if it was a coffee table book, if it was for adults, I enjoyed it anyway. But National Geographic collection was my grandmother's collection and I just was curious about stuff way back then and I couldn't read the words yet, and I was like 6, but I was enjoying learning about things in the pictures, so it didn't have to be a "book," most of the time it was a book.

Sarah: But, you know it's interesting when you say that, is that I think your book, my non-reading young kids, the kids who aren't reading words yet, love looking through them and I bet they learn just a ton from the illustrations which is kind of what you're saying happened with National Geographic, you just look at the illustrations and look at the pictures... not illustrations so much.

Gail: Exactly.

Sarah: So that's something you're offering the world now with your books which is really amazing.

27:12 What's Next

Gail: Well, I'm working away. I'm working on a book on migration right now.

Sarah: Oh cool.

Gail: Where I live in Vermont we're very remote, and we can really see the migration going on, but that's one topic I'm working on, but then I'm also wanting to do a book on seashells – it's a book I've always wanted to do.

Sarah: Oh, I hope you do that one. That would be so wonderful, oh my gosh, I could just picture it.

Gail: Mary liked the idea, my editor liked the idea for seashells because where do they come from? And why are they up on the beach? How do you find them? There's these massive seashell collections in natural history museums and places like that, and they're all so different. My son, when he was 5, I guess, he was wanting to make money as a young kid, we lived out in Provincetown and he would collect seashells along the beach and he would sit in front of our house selling the seashells to people as they went by for 25 cents a pop. He just loved the seashells though. He loved collecting them but he also liked making money.

Sarah: That's so funny.

Gail: But, anyway.

Sarah: Well, thank you, thank you. I am so grateful for this time you've spent with us. I appreciate your time, Gail, thanks.



27:12 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 Silas and I'm 4 years old. I live in California. I like Little Blue Truck and I like it because I like the part when he says, "Get out of my way."

Child2: Hello, my name is Crawford. I'm at the age 9 and I live in Georgia. Today, I'm going to be giving a review on Henry's Red Sea we just finished it. It's about this Mennonite family who lived on a farm in Russia and they're trying to escape from a free country away from the Russia communists at the end of World War II. I love how it shows courage, faith, and perseverance. It's a very good book, it shows all those. I do highly recommend it and it's just really, really, really good.

Child3: My name is Betsy. I am 11 years old and I live in Buies Creek, North Carolina. My favorite book is Fablehaven by Brandon Mull because however unrealistic the world in the book is the brother/sister relationship between Kendra and Seth is very real.

Child4: I'm Ben and I live in Minnesota, and my favorite book is The BFG.

Child5: I'm Lily and I live in Minnesota, and I am 5, and my favorite book is All of a Kind Family, and Matilda, and Where the Mountain Meets the Moon.

Child6: My name's Bella. I'm 13. I live in Minnesota and my favorite book is Matilda.

Child7: I'm Alison and I'm 37 and my favorite book is Matilda.

Child8: Hi, my name is Ellie, I'm 9 years old. I live in Midland, Michigan, and my favorite book is Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone. I like it because it has a lot of adventure and exciting parts and my favorite part is when Harry goes through a trap which is a magic chest set.

Child9: Hi, my name is Liam. I'm 7 years old. I live in Midland Michigan. My favorite book is Dorothy's the Stolen Check. I like it because there's a man named Nobody.

Child10: Hi, my name is Lilah. I am 4½ years old and my favorite book is Jack and the Beanstalk and my favorite part is when Jack climbs the beanstalk. [Mom: where do you live, Lilah?] In Apple Creek. [Mom: what state?] Ohio.

Child11: Hi, my name is Nora. And I'm 5 years old. I live in Queens, New York, and my favorite book is Salvaje by Emily Hughes. And I love it because it's really funny and it's about a girl who lives in the wild, and it's in Spanish.

Sarah: Thanks kids. I love hearing your recommendations. I especially love it when you name my own favorites. I kind of squeal a little bit over here, you just can't hear me. Hey, if you want the Show Notes, if you want to see some of Gail Gibbons books, some of our favorites that we recommend or anything else that we've talked about on today's show, you want to check out the Show Notes. In fact, the Show Notes are great for more than that. Our podcast manager, Kara Anderson, puts together these really awesome Cheat Sheets where she pulls out some great quotes, some favorite take-aways from the show. Basically, she takes notes on things so you don't have to, so if you're inspired or encouraged by something in this podcast you don't want to forget, go check out the Cheat Sheet. We also have a complete transcript for

every episode of the podcast and you can find those in each episode's Show Notes. So, for today's go to ReadAloudRevival.com/103.

Thanks so much for listening. I will be back next week with episode 104 of the podcast. That'll be same place, same time, on Tuesday, you will get that dropped right into your ear buds if you're subscribed. So make sure you go into your podcast app, whatever you use to listen to the podcast, and hit subscribe so that you are first to know when that podcast is ready. Until next time, go make meaningful and lasting connections with your kids through books.