

READ-ALLOUD REVIVAL

Transcript Episode **Narnia Bonus Episode**

RAR – Douglas Gresham

Sarah: Well, hello there. Sarah Mackenzie here. So, this is, sort of, a bonus episode of the podcast. I told you that in 2019 we would be releasing new episodes every two weeks, and we are, but I got the chance to talk to Douglas Gresham who is the stepson of the author of the Chronicles of Narnia, C. S. Lewis. And, when you get the chance to talk to the stepson of C. S. Lewis you have to share it with the world. Right? Definitely with the Read-Aloud Revival world.

And, I didn't want to make you wait for it, so we just slid this little mini-episode in here just because we can. So, it's a very short episode and I have a little bit to tell you about it. So, first of all, it's a short episode because Douglas and I recorded this conversation the day after Christmas. He's also on the other side of the world so he, at the time of our conversation, was in Australia, in New South Wales. He also had just come in off of a whole bunch of travels, was heading back toward Spain, and so I had to catch him the day after Christmas in a very short window of time. But I did catch him. And we had a great conversation that I'm excited to share with you today.

1:10 Great Homeschool Conventions

A couple of things: Douglas Gresham is the honored guest of the Great Homeschool Conventions in 2019. He will be speaking at the Fort Worth, Texas Homeschool Convention, March 7-9, 2019, and also, at the Ohio Homeschool Convention in Cincinnati, April 25-27, and you can find out more about those and grab tickets at GreatHomeschoolConventions.com. I will be

there—I am going to all seven of the Great Homeschool Conventions; there is a convention also happening in Greenville, South Carolina, in St. Charles, Missouri, in Ontario, California, Rochester, New York, and in Jacksonville, Florida. And, I'll be at all of them, speaking and would love to meet you there. So, grab tickets at GreatHomeschoolConventions.com.

I wanted to tell you, too, they have some discounts that not a whole lot of people know about, so I wanted to make sure you did know about them. First of all, if you're active military you get into the conference for free (which is pretty awesome), and also if you are in ministry, fulltime ministry as a pastor or married to a pastor. So, go to GreatHomeschoolConventions.com, grab your tickets (totally worth buying tickets), I want to meet you there, I want you to come to my sessions, I want to hug your neck, I want to talk books and kids with you, so come to the conventions and if you are active military or your family is in the pastoral ministry then definitely find out about those discounts because you can get into the conference for free.

2:36 A Narnia deep dive

In Read-Aloud Revival Premium Membership we are reading through all the Chronicles of Narnia, doing a deep dive into Narnia right now, so it is very exciting for me to get to have this conversation, a little behind-the-scenes. A little back story for you: Douglas Gresham's mother was Joy Gresham and she was an American woman with two sons and moved over to England, ended up in this very romantic love story of falling in love with C. S. Lewis and marrying C. S. Lewis when Douglas was about 9. Imagine this? Imagine being a 9 year old kid and

you walk through the wardrobe for the first time, you read through Narnia, and not only do you get to go to England with your mother and then meet C. S. Lewis, your mother marries him, and he becomes your stepfather. And as you'll find out in this conversation, he was quite the stepfather and someone that Douglas looked up to and leaned on and learned a whole lot from all through his life and continues to do so, which is a really moving thing. So, one of the things you'll notice in our conversation is that Douglas calls C. S. Lewis "Jack" that is because that is what C. S. Lewis went by, he went by "Jack." So, when he talks about Jack he means C. S. Lewis. Also, he discusses Tolkien who was, of course, one of C. S. Lewis' closest friends, and Douglas refers to him as "Tollers" because that is what Tolkien's friends called him, was "Tollers." So, if you hear Jack he's talking about C. S. Lewis and if you hear Tollers he's talking about Tolkien. Alright, I am not going to make you wait any longer. Here is Douglas Gresham, the stepson of C. S. Lewis.

4:36 'I was hooked from there on'

Sarah: My first question is about your experience into Narnia. I'm wondering was it read to you, did you read it on your own, or do you remember how it felt to first step through the wardrobe yourself?

Douglas: Yeah, I remember a certain amount about it, but I have to admit I was 6 years old, I think, or thereabouts, so it's not a very detailed memory but I can remember my mother coming into the room and reading the beginning of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* to me, and I was hooked from there on. I mean, it was only the first page and I was hooked. It's a book that grabs you and I enjoy that story enormously. I've been reading Narnia ever since. You might say

I'm strange, but I probably read each of those books at least once a year. In my work, of course, I do an awful lot of work with stage plays and so forth that are being made about Narnia and about the various books and so on, and to my joy I've often been asked to help with some of them, and I have a great time doing it. And stage plays are put on by such people as Trumpet Theatre in Manila, for example, are fabulous, or the Logos Theatre Company in North Carolina—absolutely amazingly good work, and so it's always an honor and a pleasure to help those people with rehearsals and little bits and pieces. But, it's interesting—the books they don't ever ** on you. You can read them over and over—at least, I can—and over and over again, and they still have the same thrills attached to them and that's one of the wonderful things about great writing it works that way.

Sarah: Now, not all of the Narnia books were written before you met C. S. Lewis, is that right?

Douglas: I suppose they were mostly written before I met him but I think *The Last Battle* was written after I'd met him, so there was just one that I hadn't read until after I met Jack. But it was an astonishing, astonishing thing that they'd all been written in that period of time anyway as far as I look at it. He wrote them very quickly and then the books came out quite one after the other, quite fast I think.

Sarah: Oh, I didn't realize that he was a quick writer but I guess that makes sense because he had such a cannon of writing, and all the letters that he wrote on top of that, right?

Douglas: Yes, it would have taken anybody else two lifetimes to achieve what he achieved in one, I think.

Sarah: My next question might be irrelevant then. I was going to ask if he read working versions of Narnia to you or ask you for your feedback before he went forward with his story but...

Douglas: No, that never happened I'm afraid—I wish it had, it would have been fun. I couldn't have improved anything, of course, but it would have been fun for me.

7:01 Reading aloud

Sarah: That would have been fun. Did C. S. Lewis ever read-aloud to you or tell you bedtime stories or do you have any memories of that?

Douglas: He didn't tell bedtime stories but he did read-aloud to me on a couple of occasions, particularly, when he wanted my advice (and that word comes in inverted commas: "advice" please note). He wanted my opinion, he wanted to hear what I had to say about what he might have been writing about something he wanted. In particular, there was a story called "The Man Born Blind" which I think has since been retitled "Light" and I was fascinated by that story (still am, as a matter of fact). It's not very well-known. It's in books of compilations of his short stories. It's only a short story but it has an immensely powerful message to it like most of Jack's stuff. But he read that to me to, probably, to try it out on somebody. By that time I was a teenager. I enjoyed the story and honestly, told him it should be published, and I think it was published a short while later in some magazine or something.

7:55 'A conversation with Tolkien'

Sarah: Well, I am so interested in hearing more about his experience of Narnia himself. Did he talk about it at home or was it just, sort of,

something that happened between him and the page?

Douglas: That's an interesting question because Jack was ... the whole thing started during a conversation between him and Tolkien, I think, in which they both decided that nobody in the 1940's and 1950's was writing books they regarded as being worth children's reading. And, also books that they wouldn't particularly wanted to have read themselves as children. So they decided that ... each of them decided to write a book which would be what they would have wanted to have read when they were kids; the sort of material that they would look forward to when they were children, and of course, Jack came up with The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe eventually. And Tolkien came up with The Hobbit, eventually, and the rest is history, in a sense. But it was fascinating to me that what they both could do is revert to a childhood mentality looking at it, though, from outside at the same time as from inside, and write just astonishingly wonderful books which appeal so much to children.

Sarah: Did C. S. Lewis ever speak to you about the first ideas of Narnia or the very first spark that he got, or the beginnings of when he was just starting to play with the ideas that became this Chronicle account that we love so much?

Douglas: Not in a great depth but he did say to me that he never intended to write a series. He just wrote a book and then Aslan leaped into the book and dragged all the other stories with him as it were. So the idea that he set at to write a series is just not true. He set out to write one book as did Tolkien. I don't think Tolkien was particularly keen of going on with the entire story of middle earth when he started but, of course, it grew on him like Narnia grew on Jack. Tolkien, of

course, being a philologist and an expert in language and an expert in mythology actually, Norse mythology in particular, objected strongly to Jack mixing up the various mythologies all in one book like a soup, you know, you just chuck everything in that you've got left over in the fridge and hope for the best, and Tollers regarded that as what Jack had done with the various mythologies he brings to Narnia and didn't like it of course. He was a purist in that area. But, everybody else in the world, fortunately, does like Narnia. So, it's kind of interesting that Jack didn't set out to write a series, he set out to write one book to demonstrate what children's books should be like because they couldn't find any children's books that they would actually have wanted to have read when they were children so they set about writing their own. And so, Jack did this wonderful work which was really, I suppose, a demonstration of what a children's book should and could be. Jack, himself, never forgot what it was like to be a child. He always said he wasn't good with children but he was wrong—he was very good with children.

Sarah: Oh.

Douglas: But he never forgot what it felt like to be a child, what sorts of things children delighted in, and they were there for him to put into the books because he still had them within himself. So he understood children very well and he understood what children liked to read and liked to know and so forth.

11:07 'Becoming Mrs. Lewis'

Sarah: So, a lot of our listeners are wondering if you've read the new biographical novel by Patti Callahan called "Becoming Mrs. Lewis" which is a fictional account of the story of your mother

and C. S. Lewis falling in love? And they want to know what you think of it? I'm curious to know what your thoughts are and if it was a fairly accurate portrayal of your mother as you remember her.

Douglas: Well, I have read the book and actually, Patti has become a friend. But, it was sent to me, I think, probably before anyone else ever saw it because she was very concerned with what I might think about it and I think that's an admirable attitude to take when you're writing about someone who's child is still alive (as I am, for awhile yet, I hope), and I found the book to be very, very interesting in several ways. It's not supposed to be a technical biography of my mother. It's not supposed to be a deep searching look into this, that, or the other thing. It's a novel. And it's a very good one. And I think that Patti actually got it as accurately, or more accurately, than most of the biographies that have been written biographical essays that have been written about my mother. I noticed that it's selling quite well, very well, I believe in the United States and possibly will sell elsewhere, but I think the important thing about it is that while it is a fictional piece it is extraordinarily accurate in many ways.

12:27 'A huge character'

Sarah: As we wrap up is there any one thing you sort of wish more people knew about C. S. Lewis?

Douglas: Jack was such a huge character in many ways. He had an enormous sense of humor and people seemed to have miss that. They don't realize that he sat at a dining table or in a pub having a beer with him, nobody at the table would be able to stop laughing because he was

so funny. He had an enormous sense of humor and was very, very good at telling wonderful jokes. The **[**13:20** inaudible.]** that Jack indulged in with his colleagues was amazing to listen to and I wish that I could have had a hidden tape recorder and recorded some of the things I heard at the dining table. I mean, even just amongst the family, he was so quick and my mother was equally quick (by the way). There was an occasion once where there were talking at the dinner table and I was there having dinner and my mother had been asking Jack to do something during the day and didn't know if he had actually done it or not so she asked him, "Jack, did you get so-and-so or such-and-such a thing done?" Jack said, "Of course, my dear, what do you take me for, a fool?" And my mother snapped back, "No Jack, I took you for better or for worse." These were remarkable people. They really were. For example, they used to play Scrabble a lot, and people would come and sometimes Jack would invite a friend or someone and he'd ask them if they wanted to play Scrabble. If they had any sense at all they'd say, "No thank you, I'm thinking of other things." Because Jack and my mother had their own rules. They would take the letter tiles from two Scrabble sets and one board and play Scrabble playing all known languages, factual or fictional, or you had to do was prove that one of the words you'd used actually existed in some book somewhere in the house, and they'd fill the whole board, the thing was just full of tiles and nothing else. People would say, "Well, I'm going to **[**14:53** inaudible]**, no, no thank you, I'll go read a book or something." Even when my mother was dying they still had their senses of humor, both of them. I think that's important to know about Jack—that he was enormously humorous.

A great man to be with in terms of conversation and fun. He was a fun guy.

Sarah: Pretty great, right? I'm really glad you joined me today to listen. Since this isn't a normal episode of the podcast we don't have a Let the Kids Speak portion today, but next week's episode, 121, my new very favorite episode of the podcast, Kate DiCamillo does not disappoint. Meet me back here next week. Make sure you're signed up for our emails because I will not let you forget something so amazing as this next podcast episode. Go to RARBooklist.com or if you're on your phone right and you just think, 'Oh my gosh, I'm going to forget to do that,' all you have to do is text the word BOOKS to the number 345345, and I will send you the booklist and I will also make sure you're on the email list so that you don't miss any future episodes. So, you just send the word BOOKS to the number 345345, you get our free book list and we'll make sure you get those Tuesday morning emails telling you all the good, free resources that will help you make 2019 an amazing year of reading with your kids. Thanks so much for listening. I'll be back next week.