

EPISODE 145: **The Importance of Reading at Whim and Developing Your Own Taste**

Sarah Mackenzie: [00:00](#)

You are listening to the Read-Aloud Revival podcast. This is the podcast that helps you make meaningful and lasting connections with your kids through books. Hello, hello there, Sarah Mackenzie here. We are back to our every other Tuesday broadcast of the Read-Aloud Revival podcast. Today is a conversation I had with one of my favorite thinkers, Alan Jacobs. Alan is a distinguished professor of humanities in the honors program at Baylor University. He's written many wonderful books, including a biography of C. S. Lewis, a biography of the Book of Common Prayer, and my very own favorite, which we're going to talk about a lot today is called *The Pleasures of Reading in An Age of Distraction*. I mean, I just love this book. I've read it multiple times and I get something new from it at every pass.

I also really enjoyed Alan's book, *How to Think*. Oh my goodness. I think his university students are so lucky. I would love to sit in on one of his classes someday. I feel like my brain is... I feel like it wakes up, it comes alive, when I'm reading his work, and apparently when I'm talking to him. This was my first conversation with Alan Jacobs and it was just a delight. In this episode, you're going to hear him talk about the importance of reading at whim, that is reading what gives you delight, as well as the importance of being able to have your own reading taste. You guys, this translates right over to our kids. They need to read at whim and to have the freedom to develop their own reading tastes as well.

He also talks about the value of reading something you don't really enjoy, and I was fascinated by his response to my question about what reading is for. I enjoyed every minute of this conversation. I hope you do too. Before we get there though, I'm going to answer a listener question.

Nikki: [02:12](#)

Hi Sarah. My name is Nikki Pietragallo, I have two kids, four and six, and my question is about reading levels. My first grader is routinely tested for his reading level at school.

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Going into school he was ahead, both my kids could read before the age of five. However, I noticed that my son has plateaued and the reading level has not been progressing like it was at the beginning. My question for you is whether or not we should hold so much weight in those reading levels versus really just encouraging them to enjoy reading at home and continuing the decoding and reading out loud to each other.

We have read to our kids since they were tiny. We continue to do so, but I see that these are struggles and I want to make sure that my child is continuing to build his reading abilities. But I'm not sure if I need to be focusing too much on that reading level or if that's just a general indicator and we just keep doing what we're doing. Thanks for your podcast and all that you do. It has been invaluable to me over the last year, so thank you.

Sarah Mackenzie: [03:23](#)

Okay. You have opened up a can of worms my dear Nikki, reading levels. Reading levels are, quite honestly, very rarely useful. They're most helpful as a diagnostic tool to help a teacher know what a student understands or gets so that she knows what to teach that child next. The problems arise when we use reading levels as a way to measure whether a child is progressing at whatever we're currently calling an appropriate pace. Why I'm saying, "Whatever we're currently calling our appropriate pace," is because that pace fluctuates pretty wildly over time. Just consider this, consider that 10 years ago, only 15% of kindergartners could read, and by that I mean only 15% of kids who finished kindergarten could read at the end of their kindergarten year, could read at all.

If we go back 30 years, only 5% of kindergartners could read at the end of their kindergarten year, but these days it's pretty expected that at the end of their kindergarten year, kindergartners are capable of reading at a much higher level than you or I were expected when we were kindergartners.

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Certainly that our parents or grandparents were expected at the same age. But of course kids didn't change. We're not suddenly having babies that are so much more reading-advanced than our parents did. It's silly that we all think that they should be able to read earlier.

Let me tell you a little bit about some research. Dr. Arnold Gesell is the head of the Alliance for Childhood and he wrote this in a report, I'm just going to quote him right here, and I'll put a link to this in the show notes so that you know where to find this information yourself.

"All children go on the same path of development. However, some go faster, some go slower, and all have spurts and setbacks along the way. The obvious example is the age children learn to walk. Some children learn to walk as early as nine months, some as late as 15 months, but that's all normal. We all agree that the early walker is not a better walker than the late walker. A similar example is the age that children learn to read. Some children learn to read at age three or four years, others not until seven years or later. That range is quite normal. The most compelling part of the reading research is that by the end of third grade, early readers have no advantage over later readers. Some later readers even go on to become the top in their class. Reading early is not an indicator of higher intelligence." I'm going to repeat one thing he said there, "By the end of third grade, early readers have no advantage over later readers.

Okay. Let's come back to your situation, Nikki. I am sorry that you're having to deal with reading level testing because I don't really think it makes a whole lot of sense, that we expect our kids to learn to read at the same pace. Even if you're just comparing your son to himself, his learning is not going to be completely linear. It's more like a jig jaggy saw, like if I was... If you could see my finger, you'd see it going up and down, up and down. Because learning happens in fits and spurts. It's not completely linear.

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Tell me this, when was the last job interview that you or someone you know took where one of the questions was, "How old were you when you were reading fluently?" Isn't that just a ridiculous question? That's because it doesn't matter. We know that early readers are not better readers than later readers. In fact, okay, so I have six kids. Three oldest of them are teenagers. All of them are avid readers and good readers. All of them, by the way, were late readers. If any of them had taken reading level tests at first grade, second grade, third grade, fourth grade, they would have been remediated. I would have been told they were behind.

What we need to remember is that early reading is not an indicator of better reading than late reading. In your particular case, if your son was reading before he went to kindergarten, he did that big spurt ahead of time, before he went to school, before he started school. Now his pace is not going... it's like he's going to be a race horse the whole way. There's going to be fits and spurts. But that's okay because him being able to read before he left for kindergarten wasn't actually an indicator that he was going to be a better reader, and him going on a plateau, like you mentioned right now, is also not an indicator that he is going to be a better reader or a worse reader.

When your reading level tests come back and you get this information, that's information, so that's great. That there's not really a problem with the information, it's when we make the information mean something it doesn't mean. The information does not mean that your child is not going to be an amazing voracious reader. In fact, a lot of the best readers and some of the best writers that we know today were very late or struggling readers for many, many years.

I think what we need to do is just take the information, you want to take that information, and just don't make it mean something it doesn't mean. It doesn't mean anything about your child's intelligence just means its pace has slowed

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down some. I would read aloud tons so that stories are joy and warmth and light and connection and magic. Yes, I would keep doing what you're doing. A little bit of phonics, the reading practice, smile a lot, and then just not let that anxiety about how long it's taking a certain child to get the hang of reading on their own cloud that child's experience of becoming a reader because that is a unique journey. For some of our kids it happens really fast, none of mine actually, and so some of our kids that happens over a lot slower, but it doesn't really matter how fast you got there.

I'm probably going to be talking more about the dangers of using reading levels with our older kids in another episode of the podcast coming up, but I hope this little bit was helpful for you today. In the show notes, I'll have a link to where you can find that quote that I read to you from Dr. Arnold Gesell at the Alliance for Childhood and thanks so much for your question. Hey, if you have a question you'd like me to answer on the show, head to readaloudrevival.com, scroll to the bottom of the page and that's where you'll see where to leave your voicemail. Okay, now on to my conversation with Alan Jacobs.

I have to tell you, I just finished rereading the Pleasures of Reading in An Age of Distraction for, I think it was my fourth or fifth time. I can't quite remember. I loved it as much as ever. I would just love to start our conversation with this idea of reading at whim, which is, of course, central to the book. Can you tell us what you mean by reading at whim?

Alan Jacobs: [10:07](#)

Sure. It's actually a phrase I get from a poet named Randall Jarrell, who says that in one of his essays. It really stuck with me. I think the main reason it stuck with me is, I've taught literature for more than 30 years now and I've had so many wonderful students. More times than I can count, I've had a student come into my office, usually in his or her senior year. Let's say she's anticipating life after college, and she's so worried that she won't know what to read. She's had all of

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these years in which she's had teachers to tell her what to read, and then now she's about to graduate and she's going to be on her own. Oh, no. She would say to me, "Can you give me like 10 books that every intelligent person should read, or 20 books, or 100 books?" I would always say, "Read at whim. Read what you want to. You've had all of these years of being told what to read."

The answer would almost always be something like, "Yeah, but what if I read junk? What if I read stuff that's not really good?" I say, "Well, do that for a while. Read stuff that's of no literary value for a while." If you care about the books that you've read in class, you're going to come back to that. You won't exist on a diet of junk food forever, but give yourself a chance to take some of the pressure off and just go and read. It was so funny because their first response would be, "I can't do that," and then their second response would be, "I'm now so liberated." That was always wonderful, to be able to say, "No, it's okay, it's okay." So many students have written letters and said, "That was the best advice anyone ever gave me. Read at whim."

Sarah Mackenzie: [12:10](#)

That's so good. Well, so I'm hearing a couple of things. One thing I'm wondering about is you said, they're thinking, "Okay, so all these years of being told what to read, now I don't really know how to make these decisions for myself," or I'm worried about trusting my gut, I guess. Do you think those years of being told what to read were... Well, this is going to go into a question I want to ask you about assigning books, but I guess, how crucial do you think that is to reading later on?

Alan Jacobs: [12:37](#)

Well, I think what happens is that, especially students who major in the humanities, let's say in English or maybe in history, and often people who major in English also take a lot of history classes or who major in history also take a lot of philosophy classes. These are reading-heavy courses, they're reading heavy disciplines. Almost invariably what

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happens is that, during the time that they're in college, their scope for purely recreational reading is so limited.

I think that one of the things that happens to young people who love to read is that they gravitate towards courses where their love of reading is rewarded. But sometimes those courses actually take them so far away from their habits of reading for enjoyment, reading for personal satisfaction, for delight, that they forget how. Then you have to gently encourage them to recover that, because that's what got them into being an English major, or a history major, or whatever in the first place.

Get back to that kind of reading and don't feel bad about it. Don't feel that everything that you read has to be a masterpiece. There's one line that I quote in the Pleasures of Reading where the poet W. H. Auden says that masterpieces really should be reserved for the high holy days of the spirit. It's not something that you... just as you don't have a Christmas feast every day, so you don't also have to be reading masterpieces every day. His view is that, a really great work of literature takes a lot out of you. It demands your attention and it demands your energy and you're going to get tired if you do that all the time and maybe burn out. That's the last thing we want is for our readers to burn out.

Sarah Mackenzie: [14:51](#)

Yeah. I've heard a lot of friends who've majored in English say that they quit reading because they were doing so much. What you're saying makes so much sense because they'll say, "Well, I was doing so much reading for school and then I almost just burned out." But again, if you're just eating this diet of classic after classic [crosstalk 00:15:07]-

Alan Jacobs: [15:07](#)

That's right.

Sarah Mackenzie: [15:07](#)

... hard books that make you really think and expect a lot of you. Yeah, you get worn out. Yeah, that makes sense.

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- Alan Jacobs: [15:13](#) You do. You're also, probably, you're learning to be a more analytical reader. You're reading and you're thinking about, "Can I write a paper on this?" Or, "How would I do on an exam?" That gets you away from it as well. I used to do... When I taught at Wheaton College, where I taught for 29 years, I would do a senior seminar. In the senior seminar, I would always assign some children's books and I would just say, "Remember what this was like?" I would tell them, "You're not allowed to make any notes. You can't read with your highlighter. Just sit down and enjoy it and just try to remember what that was like." Students would always say, "But I don't know how to read without a highlighter. I've forgotten."
- Sarah Mackenzie: [16:01](#) Did you just pick children's books that you loved to have them read or did they choose them?
- Alan Jacobs: [16:07](#) Well, one of the... Sometimes both. Sometimes what I would do is, I would assign a couple of books but then I would say, "Okay, go back and read something that meant a lot to you when you were nine years old."
- Sarah Mackenzie: [16:20](#) Oh yeah. Okay. One of the things you say in your book is that, to put any book on a list of books you want to read, say over a summer, nearly guarantees that you won't read it. This is what you said actually, let me read the quote. "No matter how anxiously I had been anticipating it, as soon as it took its place among the other assigned texts, it became as broccoli unto me, and any book not on the list, no matter how unattractive it might appear in other contexts, immediately became as desirable as a hot fudge sundae. Over the years, I have decided that this instinctive resistance to the predetermined is a gift, not a disability." Then later on the page you say, "I truly think I would rather read an indifferent book on a lark than a fine one according to schedule and plan." I think a lot of these can resonate with that [crosstalk 00:17:07].
- Alan Jacobs: [17:07](#) Yeah. Because so much of the life of a real reader, it seems to me, is about freedom, it's about choosing this thing. I

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remember when, I think I mentioned this in the pleasures of reading, I was probably around 20 years old. I was definitely in college before I ever stopped reading a book partway through. I had this kind of obsessive compulsive disorder, the sense that if I started it I had to finish it. I remember the book that I was reading, it was by an American novelist named William Gaddis, it's called *The Recognitions*, and it's about 1,100 pages long.

Sarah Mackenzie: [17:52](#)

Oh well, yeah. That's a commitment.

Alan Jacobs: [17:55](#)

I made it to page 666, I made it to the mark of the beast [crosstalk 00:18:00]-

Sarah Mackenzie: [18:00](#)

I was going to say, "There's something symbolic there."

Alan Jacobs: [18:03](#)

Yeah, and I just said, "I can't do this. I just can't do this." I just set the book down and I felt an enormous burden lifting from me. Like, "Oh, you can do that." I can do that. If I give a book a fair shot and it's just not doing it for me, then I can set it down and pick up something else. It's okay.

There's also what Francis Bacon said 400 years ago, he said, "Some books are just to be tasted," and he says, "And others are to be sampled, and some few to be chewed and digested." Most of the... I mean, it's okay if you pick up a book and you read part of it and you realize, "I've learned from this book what I needed to. I've gotten from this book what I needed to get." Now, obviously that's different if it's... that's much easier to do with a nonfiction book than it is with a work of fiction. But I do think sometimes that's all you need. You just need to have part of that book and you don't have to read every page strenuously. But with a work of fiction, you're probably not going to do that. You're not going to jump around in it.

I have a friend, a wonderful writer, he calls himself a writer who draws, his name is Austin Kleon.

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- Sarah Mackenzie: [19:27](#) Oh yes. I love his work-
- Alan Jacobs: [19:29](#) I'm so glad you know of Austin. Yeah, he's just terrific. Austin says that, one of the things that he will say to people who say, "Oh, you've got to read this book and this book is so great, this is so important." If it's a book that he's tried and he didn't finish, he will just say, "Yeah, it's just not for me" which I think is a great answer. It's not like, "It's a bad book. You shouldn't read it. You shouldn't like it." He's just saying, "It's just not for me," that's all. No offense to anyone, no insult to anyone. I think that's a terrific answer because some books just are not for you. Sometimes a book that might not be for you at some stage in your life will be for you at another stage in your life. I think I mentioned this in *The Pleasures of Reading* as well, that I probably tried reading G. K. Chesterton's, *The Man Who Was Thursday* four or five times-
- Sarah Mackenzie: [20:22](#) Yeah, you did mention this. Yes.
- Alan Jacobs: [20:23](#) Yeah. I was in my 40s, I think, before I thought it just hit me, and all of a sudden I adored that book and loved that book. To this day, I don't know why it took me so long because I look at it now and I think, "Oh, you should always have liked that book." But I just couldn't get in sync with it somehow. I was always out of sync with that book. Then at a certain point I fell into sync with it and then it became one of my favorites.
- Sarah Mackenzie: [20:52](#) Okay. You're giving me hope because I'm 38 and I cannot get into Tolkien. I can't even say that on this podcast, we will get 100 emails for that comment.
- Alan Jacobs: [21:02](#) You are in so much trouble.
- Sarah Mackenzie: [21:03](#) I know, but for my 40s. I'm going to fall in in my 40s. I just know it. Something is going to click.
- Alan Jacobs: [21:12](#) But you know what? It's okay if you don't, it's okay if you don't, it really is. Now, this is the other thing, my wife is a big

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reader and she loves reading. She loves a wide range of books. She's never been able to get into Tolkien. I didn't want her to watch the movies because I wanted her to read the books first and then you can watch the movies. But I finally thought to myself, "That's just not her genre. It's just not her kind of thing, so let's just watch the movies together." She loved the movies and it was fine.

It's a funny thing because there are two or three books that are really important to me that I really wish that she would read, but I know that it's just not going to be in her wheelhouse, and I don't want to put a burden on her. In that way, if I read something, if I think about it that way, then sometimes I read something and I go, "This really will connect with her," and then I'll give her that to read, and that usually works out great. By thinking more about what I know about her mind and how her mind works, I can be more judicious in recommending her to read things that she and I can really have a fruitful conversation about, and that she won't just read out of duty.

I mean, if I said, "You've got to read the Lord of the Rings," she would do it because she loves me. But, it's not something that just suits her particular readerly temperament and I'm okay with that. Took me awhile to get there, but I'm okay with that.

Sarah Mackenzie: [23:03](#)

It's that freedom to have taste, because I think there's some kind of a resistance we have... I wonder if it's out of a fear, the same kind of fear that your students mentioned when they're like, "I don't know what to read." It's that sort of fear that, "I won't be able to recognize what's good or not good because there might be a deficiency in me." It's almost a skepticism we have. Like we're almost afraid to trust our own taste in some ways.

Alan Jacobs: [23:25](#)

No, I think that's exactly right. One of the things that... I was listening to an interview one time with a music critic and he says, "Whenever I ask people, what kind of music do you

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like? They say, 'Oh, I like all kinds of music.'" He says, "That's not true. Nobody likes all kinds of music." But people want to present themselves as having very broad tastes and, "I can get into everything." He says, "It's actually okay if you don't." Because you're probably better off knowing that about yourself, that there are some things that you just naturally... some kinds of music you just naturally gravitate towards and some that you find off-putting. That doesn't mean that you would never listen to it, but you should probably acknowledge that that's going to be work rather than fun for you.

I think the same thing is true about books. There are just certain... there's some genres, or some kinds of authors, or... I'm forgetting. I wish I could remember. It happened to me recently that I gave up on a writer that... Oh yes, I do remember it, but I'm not going to say. It was a writer that several people had really pressured me to read for some time. I finally sat down said, "I'm really going to give it a try," and I thought, "This does not work for me at all." I'm just going to have to say that. I'm just going to have to say, "I tried it," and then as Austin says, "It's not for me," and then move on because there's a world full of books. I never can read them all anyway, so.

Sarah Mackenzie: [25:10](#)

That's right. Exactly, exactly. I was just interviewing Kate DiCamillo for the show not too long ago, and she and I were discussing... She had this similar experience I did as a kid where, when I was assigned a book in class, it would pretty much almost guarantee that I wasn't... it would not become my favorite. Whatever book I was assigned in fifth grade and had to write my book report on, that's not going to be the book I'm staying up late reading with my flashlight late at night. I wonder, I know, obviously when it comes to classrooms, and teachers, and assigned reading, there's limitations. But a lot of listeners to this podcast are homeschoolers and homeschoolers have almost no limitations here. I'm wondering what your thoughts are on

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assigned reading. What do you think is the ideal situation there?

Alan Jacobs: [25:54](#)

Yeah. One of the things that I try to do in teaching is to say, and I will often say this quite explicitly to my students. I will say, "It's totally okay if you don't like this." I say, "I'm not teaching it to you because I want you to like it. I'm teaching it to you because I think it's important. I will explain to you the reasons why I think it's important, but you might really dislike this book and that's perfectly fine with me as long as I can get you to understand why it matters."

For instance, I'm teaching a class right now in the history of autobiography. One of the most important books in the history of autobiography is Jean-Jacques Rousseau's, *Confessions*. I tell them right up front. I say, "I can't stand Rousseau. He is one of the most obnoxious people in the world to me, and I'm not going to try to cover that up for you. But this is a profoundly important book that had massive influence over how people understood their life stories and so we need to read it."

Then conversely, at other times, I will say... For instance, I have taught in the past, in several different classes, a fantasy novel by Susanna Clarke called *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell*. I tell my students right up front, "You do not have to like this book. This is a book that I'm teaching because it's important. I'll show you why it's important, but I have to tell you up front so you know I am a totally giddy fanboy about this book." I will just say, "I love this book, and it's okay if you don't love it, but you need to know that I do." If you want to know, do I still respect you if you don't like it, I say, "Well not as much. I don't respect you as much."

Sarah Mackenzie: [27:52](#)

I love it. Oh my gosh.

Alan Jacobs: [27:54](#)

I mean, I try to be lighthearted about it, but in both the case of Rousseau and in the case of *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell*, I'm trying to let them understand that it's not about

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me. We're not evaluating books according to how much I like them or how much I don't like them, we're doing other things here. We're trying to understand how certain ideas develop through time, or how certain kinds of stories become really common and popular, or how people deal with the modern world. For instance, fantasy as a way of dealing with an unsatisfying, modern world. Those are all things that people can appreciate, they can see the value of, even if they don't happen to like those particular books themselves.

Sarah Mackenzie: [28:52](#) I love this, because as a homeschool mom, I'm thinking through my own teenagers and how we do books. I don't assign very many, there's a few that we do, but then I tend to assign large blocks of time that are just, "This is your reading time. You're going to read for this whole... this hour and then this hour every day," sort of so they're developing their own tastes and they're enjoying what they're reading. Reading is being cemented in their mind as a pleasurable activity. But I love what you said about, "We're reading this book, we're going to read this book together because it's important. It's okay if you don't like it." I love also your excitement about, what was it called, Doctor...

Alan Jacobs: [29:28](#) Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell.

Sarah Mackenzie: [29:30](#) I changed that to Doctor Strange. Did you see how [crosstalk 00:29:33]?

Alan Jacobs: [29:32](#) Yeah, obviously. Yeah. That's the easy thing to do

Sarah Mackenzie: [29:37](#) Because if you say, "I'm a total fanboy about this book," I mean, I would, as a student, be like, "Oh, I'm starting on this one right away," just because even if I didn't like it, it would be really intriguing to me to have a teacher that was excited about the book they're teaching.

Alan Jacobs: [29:54](#) I mean, when I get that way about a book, I mean, I really will do the whole fanboy thing. I'll sit down with them and I'll say,

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"Okay, we have to cast the movie of this. Who's going to play ...?"

Sarah Mackenzie: [30:06](#)

Fan.

Alan Jacobs: [30:06](#)

We'll go through that. But what I do is, there'll be times when I'll say to them, "This book is not for me," and other times, "This book is so totally for me," but I'm still giving them attention, and I'm still working through them, and thinking through them, and trying to understand what they're doing. I'm trying to set a pattern of inability to pay close attention to things, regardless of whether I happen to like it or not. Sometimes liking a book too much can make us maybe not pay attention to some things and hating a book can make us not pay so much attention, so I'm trying to model that.

When your kids sit down and you say, "You're going to read this for an hour." Regardless of what they're reading, one of the things you're doing is that you're giving them an hour's practice in being attentive. That is huge in our society today. I'm telling a tale on my students here. One of the things I've noticed is that, since I've gotten really hardline about not allowing any digital devices in classes, more of my students have to go to the bathroom in the middle of class. I do not know because I'm not following them into the bathroom, but I just feel like there's 90% chance that they're going in there to check their social media feeds-

Sarah Mackenzie: [31:32](#)

Yeah, for sure.

Alan Jacobs: [31:32](#)

... in the middle of class. All of a sudden everyone has a weak bladder. How did that happen?

Sarah Mackenzie: [31:40](#)

How's that correlated? Speaking of digital devices, I really related to your own experience that you talk about in *The Pleasures of Reading*, where you found your... Kindle helped you get back in... I don't know if it was getting back into our reading group or just [crosstalk 00:31:53]-

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- Alan Jacobs: [31:53](#) It was.
- Sarah Mackenzie: [31:54](#) Yeah. Tell us more about that.
- Alan Jacobs: [31:55](#) It was. I mean, I felt like that was... First Kindle came out around a decade ago, and I felt like that was at a time when, for instance, Twitter was getting started. I mean, I'm not on Twitter anymore, but I got on Twitter in 2007, so I was a pretty early adopter of it. It was great those first few years before all the politicians and journalists got on. I mean, there was just a lot of... I had a lot of conversations. I met people who are friends of mine now, even though we never talk on Twitter anymore, we talk in other places. Social media in general was just starting to kick in. I started a blog at that time that I was pretty seriously committed to and a lot of things... I just felt like the whole online world was just ramping up.
- I had never had a problem concentrating on reading. I mean, I've been doing it since I was three years old. I started reading when I was three and I come from a family of readers, not educated people. I'm the only person in my family who even graduated from high school. But everybody was a reader, and so it's a really normal thing for me. A really normal... The characteristic evening in my house was, when I was growing up, four or five people sitting in a room, the TV is on, but the sound is turned down and everyone is reading. That was our family life. I mean, the TV never went off, but nobody ever actually paid attention to it because everybody was reading.
- From a very early age, I was used to reading and I could do it for a long, long time. All of a sudden here I am, I guess in my 40s, and I'm thinking, "Oh my gosh, I can't read anymore, what's..." I was really worried about myself. But it was just odd how the Kindle seemed to get me back into the rhythm of reading again. I think it was because, almost the only thing you can do with a Kindle is click the page turn button and that really helped me. It got me back into... I've talked to a number of other professors who do the same

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thing is that, whenever I've got a book coming up that I teach, I always assign the paper copies, and I underline, and I put stickies in, and I do all kinds of stuff that I've done for decades. But first thing I do is sit down and read it on Kindle.

Sarah Mackenzie: [34:44](#)

Interesting, yeah.

Alan Jacobs: [34:48](#)

A lot of us in teaching now have two copies of everything that we teach. We have the digital copy and then the paper copy. The digital copy is tremendously useful. It's not good in class because in class, here's what I want to do. I will say, "Turn to page 81," and people can do that. If they have a paper book, they can do that really fast. Then I will say, "Okay, put your finger there and page 81 and turn over to page 123," and then we'll go back and forth between those two. You cannot do that with a Kindle. But if you need to search for every appearance of a word, a Kindle is fantastic. I find myself using both, and I'm really grateful for e-reading. It has really been helpful to me.

Sarah Mackenzie: [35:34](#)

I always thought of myself as a, I'm a paper back reader, a codex, I think it's what you called it in your book too-

Alan Jacobs: [35:49](#)

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Sarah Mackenzie: [35:51](#)

I read books on, real books, and I'm not really into e-books because... part of it was that, I really do have a feel for, when you're holding a book and you know about where you are and where words are on a page, and so you can flip back to where you want to talk to somebody about that thing you read. You can't do that with a Kindle. But this summer I found myself... Well I've always wanted to put a book in my bag wherever we're going, if we're traveling or if we're just taking the kids to the park or something. A Kindle is very lightweight and you can bring a lot of books with you that way depending on what you're in the mood for reading.

I also like how my Paperwhite, I can read it in bed at night. I don't have to use a book light, it doesn't disturb my

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husband. I have found it to be really helpful from having a hard time sleeping. It doesn't have blue light like your phone, so you don't have to worry about that. Anyway, I have read a lot more since I've gotten myself Kindle. Yeah, [crosstalk 00:36:43]-

- Alan Jacobs: [36:43](#) It's nice to have that option. It really is. Sometimes it's the right thing.
- Sarah Mackenzie: [36:48](#) A question I find myself constantly wrestling with here at Read-Aloud Revival is, what is reading for? As I was reading your book this time, that was a question I was looking for. I thought, okay, well, you make a really compelling argument that reading is for pleasure. Primarily for pleasure, and secondarily, I think, for edification. But I was wondering if I was getting that right or if I was... how you would answer that question.
- Alan Jacobs: [37:09](#) Yeah. I mean, I think the really amazing thing about reading is that it's for so many different things [inaudible 00:37:14]. But I really wanted to emphasize pleasure as the beginning. That that was the... I wanted readers to be reconnected to that. As I was explaining to you, so much of this came from students who were so responsible and so guilt-stricken, and so dutiful, and I wanted them to be able to recover that pleasure because I think the pleasure is the foundation for other things. Even that pleasure, that comes in different varieties. There's that pleasure of what I call being lost in a book, right? You're just completely absorbed it. It's just you and that book in a little world. But there's also, you talk about reading aloud. There's the pleasure of connecting with other people, with people you love, through reading.
- Sarah Mackenzie: [38:07](#) Yes. Yeah. Well, as parents and educators, I think we want our kids to read well, but I am not sure that a lot of us know what we mean by that. A little background there is that, I have a strong dislike of preachy or messagey books, especially for kids. I think the reason why is because I really believe that's not what books are for. Books are not, or I

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think, they should not be primarily for getting our children to agree with us or to believe a certain thing.

I have this firm idea in my mind of what reading is not for, it's not for preaching, not for moralizing, but then I start asking the question of, "Okay, so reading's not for that. What is reading for? What are books for? And what does it mean to read well?" I trip over myself a little bit. When you're thinking of a child reading well, or a student, let's say, reading well, what does that look like for you?

Alan Jacobs:

[38:56](#)

I mean, I think that it is all about navigating the tension between sameness and difference. I feel like, especially works of fiction or I should say narrative works, because it would be equally true of a memoir, of an autobiography, as it is a work of fiction. There's this wonderful sense that you have where it's like, "This person is so much like me and yet this person isn't me. This person is..." You read and you see, "Here's someone who reminds me so much of myself. Yet in this situation, the way he acted, that's not what I would have done. He reacts differently than me. He's hurt where I would be angry."

I feel like that one of the main things it's for in life is navigating that tension between sameness and difference. That's one of the reasons why I think it's a mistake to try to choose books for kids that are going to mirror their own experience too much. You want to have some of that, but you also want to have it going beyond that experience. But you don't want it to be so alien that they just can't connect with it at any point. I feel that that is, whenever you have that encounter where there is that tension between sameness and difference where you can say, "This character is like me in these ways, but different than me in other ways," you're simultaneously learning something about the diversity of personalities in the world and the diversity of experiences in the world, and also learning something about yourself, "Oh, I'm that way. I do this rather than that. I do this..." It's a way

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of continually testing the boundaries of your own personality and coming to understand yourself better. But the way that you do that is by coming to understand other people better.

That's, I think, where the really exciting thing goes. People will often say, "Oh, I was that character. I was exactly that character. I was exactly like that." I think that's cool, but that's not necessarily the best thing. It's one of the reasons I think... Obviously the Harry Potter books are centered on Harry, but I think one of the really wise things that Rowling did was to have these two friends who were always with him who are very different personality types. People can say, "Yeah, I'm more like Ron, or I'm more like Hermione, or I'm..." They could connect with different personalities and not just the personality of the protagonist.

I feel like, for me, that's still what reading is all about. When I... I'm writing a book right now about reading old books and the value of reading old books. Thank you for that response, that's very encouraging. That's what I talk about there. When you reach out towards the past and you read these great works from the past, not even great, just anything from the past, that's what is really interesting about it. It's those moments when you say, "Oh, they're just like me," and then those moments when you say, "Oh, they're not like me at all." Because the culture is so different, and the norms are so different, and the expectations are so different.

That connecting where you see a sameness, but then in the very next moment almost you see a difference. That, I think, is so enriching and so deepening to your personality. I think that's one of the things that reading... that's what reading is for. I'm going to steal a phrase that I actually use for the subtitle of my book. There's a passage in one of Thomas Pynchon's novels, not recommended for children. Not recommended for that many adults either, they're pretty tough. But there's a character who is talking about the importance of understanding the past. He says you have to

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have temporal bandwidth, and then he says... he's an engineer, so he puts everything in engineer-like terms. He says, "Temporal bandwidth is proportionate to personal density."

What he means by that, he says, is that the bigger your now is, the bigger your sense of the world is both... this is true when you extend in space and to other cultures as well as extending into time. It's not just like you're learning stuff, but you're becoming a denser person. You're becoming... you've got more substance to your character and your personality, because the more you connect with this diversity of experiences across time and across space, the less likely you are to be blown about by whatever wind happens to be blowing in your culture at the moment.

I mean, I really do think that one of the things that reading can do for you is to give you that habit of reaching out towards other minds and reaching out towards other hearts, and that is a really good habit to have. The more that you come to understand the diversity of experiences, and the range of personality types, and the ways in which our varying cultural backgrounds shape us, I think the more patient you become with other people. The less narrowly, rigidly judgmental you become.

I think, I mean, obviously we all want our kids to have good judgment. I think reading a lot, the more reading you do, the easier it is for you to overcome that temptation I think, because you get used to encountering other people, widely varying people, but in a kind of a low stakes environment. Books give us that kind of training in connecting to others that I think really can help us because the stakes are a little lower, and it's not as threatening, and gives us some practice, and then we can use that when we encounter people later on. That'll never be automatic, it'll never be automatic. But you can help, you can encourage. If you're a parent or you're a teacher, you can encourage people to

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read with that spirit. I think if you do, you're not just enabling them to navigate the world more effectively. You're helping them to have more of this personal density.

Sarah Mackenzie: [45:46](#) Well, Alan Jacobs, this has been an absolute delight. Thank you so much for coming to the show. We would love to have you back when your next book comes out. I would love to talk with you about it.

Alan Jacobs: [45:54](#) That would be terrific. I've really had a great time, so let's do it again.

Ellie: [46:20](#) I'm Ellie and I'm seven years old. I'm from Kent, Washington. My favorite book is Boxcar Children because they solve lots of mysteries.

Alina: [46:35](#) Hi, I'm Alina, and I am 11 years old, and I live in Kent, Washington. My favorite book is Harry Potter because it's mysterious and it makes me want to keep reading. Bye.

Katherine: [46:48](#) Ruthie. Can you say hi?

Ruthie: [46:49](#) Hi.

Katherine: [46:51](#) Hi, my name is Katherine Ahrendt. I'm talking on behalf of my daughter, Ruth Ahrendt. We are in Lebanon, Oregon and she's 17 months old and her favorite book is The Little Mouse, The Red Ripe Strawberry, and the Big Hungry Bear by Don and Audrey Wood. Can you tell them what sound a mouse makes?

Ruthie: [47:13](#) [inaudible 00:47:13].

Katherine: [47:14](#) It makes, squeak, squeak. Anyhow, she loves the mouse, she loves the strawberry, and she loves the vase of flowers that appears throughout the entire book.

Elena Meadows: [47:24](#) My name is Elena Meadows and I'm 12 years old. My family moves around a lot but we live in Laurium, Michigan, with my grandparents right now. My favorite books are The Warrior

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series because they are about cats who are wild and cool but they're still furry and fluffy. That makes me happy. My favorite characters are Bluestar and Brambleclaw. I hope one day there could be an author access with one of the writers that uses the pen name Erin Hunter to make the series.

- Sean: [47:48](#) Hello, my name is Sean. I'm six years old and I live in San Antonio, Texas, and my favorite book is Mouse Soup. The funniest part in it is this, the mouse is trying to sleep and crickets come, and then has to yell because they got so wild. They go somewhere else and click somewhere else so the mouse can sleep. That's what the mouse said.
- Speaker 10: [48:32](#) My name is [inaudible 00:48:34], and I'm six years old and I live in Germany. My favorite [inaudible 00:48:44] was the [inaudible 00:48:48] because it's [inaudible 00:48:52].
- Amos: [48:53](#) Hi, my name's Amos and I'm seven years old and I live in Alabama. My favorite book series is Puppy Pirates, and the thing I like about it is the pirates and the puppies and that they can talk.
- Josiah: [49:10](#) Hi my name Josiah. I'm 11 years old. I live in Alabama, and my favorite book is The Hobbit because it is about a little Hobbit who went on an unexpected journey with 12 dwarves and a wizard name Gandalf.
- Mason: [49:24](#) Hi, my name is Mason. I'm 13 years old and I'm from Alabama. My favorite book series is The Wingfeather Saga. The reason I love The Wingfeather Saga is because of the amazing and magical worlds [inaudible 00:49:35] in the books and the incredible adventures that the main characters go on.
- Orson: [49:40](#) My name is Orson, I'm seven and a half years old. I'm from Boone, North Carolina. My favorite book that has been read aloud to me is Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban by J. K. Rowling. My favorite all time book is The Book With No Pictures by B. J. Novak.

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Oliver.: [49:59](#) Hi, my name is Oliver, and I am five years old. I live in Boone, North Carolina. My favorite book read to me, Fox in Socks by Dr. Seuss. My favorite book to look at are the Hilda by Luke Pearson.

Sarah Mackenzie: [50:30](#) Thank you so much kids. Hey, the show notes for today's episode are at readloudrevival.com/145. That's where you're going to find everything we talked about on this show today. I'll be back in two weeks with another episode for you. In the meantime, go make meaningful and lasting connections with your kids through books.