

EPISODE 163: **A Reader's Guide to a More Tranquil Mind (Alan Jacobs)**

- Alan: [00:00](#) When you read an old book, you want to look for something that has thoughts that are not your thoughts, that has assumptions that are not your assumptions, that sees the world very differently than you see the world, because those are the words that are going to teach us. They really teach us through difference more than they teach us through similarity. Don't worry about being systematic. Don't worry about having a plan. What really matters is not having a plan but having a disposition. The disposition is to be taught. The disposition is to grow in virtue and wisdom, the disposition to be delighted.
- Sarah: [00:53](#) You're listening to the Read-Aloud Revival Podcast. I'm your host, Sarah Mackenzie, homeschooling mama of six and author of the Read-Aloud Family and Teaching from Rest. As parents, we're overwhelmed with a lot to do. It feels like every child needs something different. The good news is you are the best person to help your kids learn and grow, and home is the best place to fall in love with books. This podcast has been downloaded 7 million times in over 160 countries. So, if you want to nurture warm relationships while also raising kids who love to read, you're in good company. We'll help your kids fall in love with books, and we'll help you fall in love with homeschooling. Let's get started.
- Sarah: [01:44](#) Hello, hello, Sarah Mackenzie here. This is Episode 163. I'm really excited about this one. I mean, I'm pretty much excited about every episode. You know how I am, but I love this show. I love hanging out you and I love talking about the things we talk about here. So, today, we've got a special guest who's coming back for another episode. I have been revisited by Baylor University professor, Alan Jacobs.
- Sarah: [02:12](#) He's the author of several of my favorite adult trade nonfiction books, including The Pleasures of Reading in an Age of Distraction, How to Think, and a brand new book hitting shelves this very month, Breaking Bread with the Dead: A Reader's Guide to a More Tranquil Mind. It's all about reading old books. It will make you think about old books in a way you've probably never thought of them before. Oh, yes, we are talking all about it today. Before we do though, I am going to tackle a listener question.

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- Elizabeth: [02:47](#) Hi, Sarah, my name is Elizabeth. I'm from Saint Paul, Minnesota. I'm actually coming to you as a teacher. I am not a mom yet, but I'm about to go into my second year of teaching sixth grade language arts. Thankfully, I found you and also Jim Trelease's book in college and started my teaching career with a belief in read-aloud. So, I read-aloud to the kids every single day this past school year, but that brings me to my question for you. So, during read-aloud time, I would often have a couple of students who just pull out their own book that they were reading and read it themselves, instead of listening to the read-aloud.
- Elizabeth: [03:23](#) On the one hand, great, they're reading. They were avid readers, and they were enjoying themselves. So, I just let it go this year. But I'm wondering for the future, if you would suggest that I ask that all the kids be listening to the read-aloud because, there is that relationship building that happens around the common story that we're all listening to together. There's that common language and being able to talk about it and refer back to it. I want all the kids to be a part of that. So, I can see both sides, the self-selection of texts and enjoying that and then being a part of the classroom community with the read-aloud. I do think that I choose books that are pretty widely loved by almost everybody in the class. So, I was just curious what your advice would be on that. Thank you so much.
- Sarah: [04:12](#) Hey, Elizabeth. Well, first of all, that's awesome. I'm really inspired that you read-aloud to your students every day. They are super lucky to have you. I remember very well, the books my own sixth grade teacher read to us. In response to your question, I do think I'd require the kids to listen into whatever you're reading aloud together for the reasons you mentioned, the shared community, shared vocabulary and story. But also, because there are some benefits that kids get when the language comes in through the ear that actually they don't get when they're reading the words with their eyes.
- Sarah: [04:48](#) Grammatically correct sophisticated language patterns coming into the ear actually come in order, because when we're listening to a book, the reader - whoever's reading it, so you in this case, you're not skipping those small connector words like most of us do when we read words off the page. So, we don't get those grammatically correct sophisticated language patterns stored into our kids'

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brains, unless they get those words in order. That comes in best through the ear.

Sarah: [05:18](#) Also, oftentimes, the kids who have less patience for listening to a read-aloud are the kids who really... They read fast. So, they probably are skipping a lot of those connector words, because good fast readers do skip a lot when they're reading. They do more skimming than slower readers. That's oftentimes why some kids say they don't like being read to, right? Because they can just read the story for themselves with their eyes faster. They are very oftentimes kids who are avid readers who love reading, but I don't know.

Sarah: [05:49](#) I think in a time when we really want to cultivate habit of attention and a habit of patient careful reading, listening to a read-aloud can be a really useful tool for kids who usually read really quickly on their own. Not that we're discouraging them just like you said. You're not discouraging them from choosing their own books and reading their own books and having free choice there but making space and time instead for this more careful, deep, slower paced kind of reading and letting it be a different kind of gift to them.

Sarah: [06:20](#) I would let them do something with their hands, sketching, drawing, doodling, whatever you're comfortable with. That way, if they're antsy when they listen, their body will feel a little calmer. I'm like that actually. I can sit and read a book with my eyes for long periods of time. But even though I adore being read to and actually listening to an audio book is my preferred mode of reading, I need to do something with my body while I'm listening to someone read to me. Otherwise, my mind goes crazy. It's strange. I think about all kinds of things that are not the story. So, inviting the kids to doodle might just do the trick and help them still their body and their mind and tune in. So, I hope that is helpful, Elizabeth. Thank you so much for calling. I hope you and your students have a wonderful reading year.

Sarah: [07:05](#) Hey, if you have a question you'd like me to answer on a future episode of the show, head to [ReadAloudRevival.com](http://ReadAloudRevival.com) and scroll down the page until you see the button that says, "Send a voice message to Sarah Mackenzie." Now, speaking of [ReadAloudRevival.com](http://ReadAloudRevival.com),

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that's where we have all of our excellent free resources, like our book lists for example. We have a picture book list for every single month of the year. They're excellent for all kinds of ages. We have book lists for that are related to math, different times in history, books that boys especially love, books that the girls especially love, first chapter books. We have all different kinds of book lists. Those are all at [ReadAloudRevival.com/recommendations](http://ReadAloudRevival.com/recommendations). You'll find all the lists right there. You can print them out. You can access them online. They're all free.

Sarah: [07:55](#) So, make sure you're using those. Those are carefully curated lists. We keep our lists as short as we can with the best books we can find. You see our December Christmas list or some of our lists are kind of long, you're going to be like, "Sure, short as you can." But what I'm trying to say is we're very picky about what makes it on the list. So, I think what we're trying to always keep in mind as we're making these book lists are books that are going to have a very high likelihood of being a win for you when you read them aloud with your kids. So, check out those book lists. Those are all at [ReadAloudRevival.com](http://ReadAloudRevival.com).

Sarah: [08:30](#) If the idea of a whole list feels a little overwhelming, I understand that too. That's why we made our quiz which you can find at [ReadAloudRevival.com/quiz](http://ReadAloudRevival.com/quiz) or just by texting the word 'quiz' to the number 33777. What you do with that is you answer three super quick questions. It'll take you less than two minutes. And then I give you a couple of book recommendations, just two. That's instead of giving you a whole giant list, I tell you, "Hey, okay, based on your kids' ages and the amount of time you have and what you're kind of looking for, these two book read-alouds would be really excellent." That's free as well. Like I said, [ReadAloudRevival.com/quiz](http://ReadAloudRevival.com/quiz) or just text the word 'quiz' to 33777. In two minutes, you'll know what you should read-aloud next.

Sarah: [09:17](#) Okay, are you ready to enliven your mind and think about old books in a way you might never have before? I hope so, because that is what Alan Jacobs and I are about to talk about. Here we go.

Sarah: [09:50](#) Alan, welcome back to the Read-Aloud Revival.

Alan: [09:54](#) It is great to be back, Sarah.

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- Sarah: [09:56](#) Well, okay, so this new book, I love it so much. I told you in an email that I brought it with me to the lake and I was sitting there. My husband's like, "This is not what people mean when they say beach reading." I've got like an advanced copy of your book printed out from my printer. I am furiously writing notes in the margins and underlining things. He's trying to read it over my shoulder and just telling me that I'm taking nerding out to a whole new level, but I've loved it so much.
- Alan: [10:22](#) Readers are just a different breed, aren't we?
- Sarah: [10:25](#) We are.
- Alan: [10:26](#) We just live differently than other people do.
- Sarah: [10:29](#) Oh, it's true. Well, in the preface, you say this is a book that discusses "the value of paying attention to old books that come from strange times and are written in peculiar language and frankly, don't make a whole lot of sense." This is a lot of our experiences, I think. I think a lot of listeners are thinking, "Yeah, that's exactly what it feels like to me sometimes, reading old books." Probably none of us are immune to that experience. So, talk to me about why you felt compelled to write this particular book about reading old books.
- Alan: [11:03](#) Yeah, I think that it really started with a sense that our society right now is not doing a really good job of... We're not doing well at talking to one another and listening to one another. We're building more and more barriers. We're increasingly suspicious and hostile to one another. We're kind of on hair triggers all the time. Something on social media is going to set us off. This is just something that increasingly worried me and troubled me. And then I was reading for some scholarly work that I was doing. I was going back to reread Thomas Pynchon's novel *Gravity's Rainbow*, which is not something I necessarily recommend to everybody, because it's one of the most difficult books ever written.
- Sarah: [12:03](#) Okay.
- Alan: [12:04](#) But there's a great passage where there is a German engineer... The book is set during World War II. He's a German aeronautical engineer named Kurt Mondaugen. He is talking to someone and he announces what he calls

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Mondaugen's law. He's coined this law and come up with it on his own and named after himself. The law is *personal density is proportionate to temporal bandwidth*, which is a really fancy phrase. But what it means is that if you have, as he puts it, a bigger now, if you can sort of extend your thinking and your experience so that you're not just embracing what's happening today, but that you can embrace what's happened over a much longer period of time, then he says, that gives you more personal density.

Alan: [13:03](#) That's a really interesting phrase, because what he means by that is it makes you more stable. It makes you more grounded, almost literally, right? We probably all know that experience of seeing something on social media and then just having our emotions, positive or negative, but usually negative, having our emotions just kind of run away with us. We're off flying into anger or pain or frustration or whatever it happens to be. We're flying because we don't have any personal density. We don't have anything that'll kind of keep us grounded.

Alan: [13:38](#) When I read that, I thought, "Well, hey, I've kind of been doing this my whole career, helping people to read old books and helping people engage with and respond to people who lived long ago and far away." All that time I've kind of been helping people to develop their personal density and giving them a little more temporal bandwidth, making them a little more grounded.

Alan: [14:05](#) Maybe that's something that we could all use. Maybe all of us now need something that will ground us a little more and make us a little less vulnerable to whatever it is that happens to be going across our social media feeds. I started thinking about that and realizing that there were a lot of different ways in which reading old books could be valuable to us in our attempts to try to manage these complicated and agitating lives that we have today.

Sarah: [14:36](#) Yeah, well, even in your subtitle of your book, which is *A Reader's Guide to a More Tranquil Mind*, I mean, there's not a single person listening to this podcast who doesn't long for a more tranquil mind. You named the opposite of that tranquility in your book as twitchiness. You write that "Constant low-level anxiety at being communicatively unstimulated, which seems so normal now that we may be slightly disconcerted when it's absent." I'm thinking about

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the way that you're talking about sort of being blown by the storm of social media. We all feel this way.

Sarah: [15:08](#) In fact, in the margins of my book, I drew a little sketch note of a woman trying to hold on to this flagpole while she's being blown by the wind, because that is exactly what you feel like when you're on social media. You feel like you're tossed by the wind. This temporal bandwidth or this personal density that we need is a way... I think you called it a port in a storm.

Alan: [15:31](#) Yeah, the phrase about a tranquil mind, about having a more tranquil mind actually comes from the ancient Roman poet Horace. Horace wrote that while he was living more or less in exile in the countryside. Horace was someone. He was a Roman and he loved Rome. He loved the kind of the hustle and bustle of it. He loved the energy of the city, but he found himself at some point in political disfavor. He had a patron who bought a farm for him out in the countryside, and he moved out there. He really didn't have much of a choice at first. He just needed to escape. And then once he got there, he thought, "Wait a minute, I'm actually happier than I was." He starts thinking about the fact that he doesn't have as much stimulation, but he has more tranquility. He says that one of the ways that he gets tranquility is by sort of sitting in his farmhouse and consulting the writings of the wise. He's got his books.

Alan: [16:49](#) It's not just being in the countryside. It's also being able to read these people who are not from his own time and his own place. They kind of settle him down, and they give him a little more perspective on things. He's still interested in Rome. He's very interested in what's happening. He writes to his friends who are still in Rome and he says, "Hey, tell me what's going on." But he's not as vulnerable to the sudden ups and downs, the kind of crazy mood swings that he went through when he was in in the city and constantly either climbing the political ladder or falling off the political ladder. I thought, "Well, that's Horace. He's kind of our model. This is what we need."

Alan: [17:33](#) We need to be able, maybe not all the time. It's not like we don't care what's going on in the world. It's not like we don't want to know anything about it, but we're unbalanced. All of our information, all of our stimulation is coming from the immediate now, the present. So, what we

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need to do is to balance that out and have a bigger now, as Mondaugen would say, extending it in time especially, but I think to some extent also in space. In that way, just get ourselves a little more adjusted and a little less vulnerable to those emotional mood swings that are so hard on us and also, if we're going to be honest about it, hard on the people who live with us.

- Alan: [18:31](#) Anybody who's been to a museum knows that it's possible to just stand too close to the painting you're trying to look at. You're so close to it, you can see certain things, but you can't see the overall composition. You can't see how the different elements of the painting relate to one another. So, what do you do? You step back. You take a step back. You get away from it a little bit.
- Sarah: [18:58](#) You get the bigger picture. Yeah.
- Alan: [19:00](#) You get the bigger picture and then you see how things relate to one another. That I think is one of the things that can happen when you step away from the continual stimulus of the present.
- Sarah: [19:12](#) There's a quote from your book on page 49, where you say, "By reading and considering the past, we cut through the thick, strong vines that bind our attention to the things of the moment. Our attention thereby becomes more free." When I read that, I thought, "Yeah, I want that." I want that for my kids too. I want that experience in the world.
- Alan: [19:33](#) Yeah. Yeah. I mean, it's so important for young people to learn that they can have that, right? Because sometimes I think that they don't have it because they don't know that they can.
- Sarah: [19:45](#) Yeah. Especially now, yeah. Kids that have been raised entirely in the social media age didn't know an existence where that wasn't a thing
- Alan: [19:54](#) Yup. Matt Crawford is a really interesting writer. He writes about technology of various kinds. He's got a new book about driving cars. He has an essay, which actually then went into one of his books about what he calls the attentional commons. That's kind of a fancy phrase, but what he means by that is you know how when you're in an airport and there's a TV on? The sound is turned up and it's asking for your attention. You're in the kind of a

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common space that you're sharing with other people, but there's these things here saying, "Pay attention to me. Pay attention to me. Pay attention to me."

- Alan: [20:38](#) Even when you go to fill up your car with gas, right? You step out and get ready to put the nozzle in to your gas tank and then a video starts playing, saying, "Listen to me, listen to me. Watch me. Listen to me." The commons space of the world, not your private space at home, but the common space, the public space gets increasingly full of these demands for your attention. I think what that does is it ultimately makes you relatively passive in how you give your attention, because it's like, "Well, I just have to give my attention to whatever is demanding it right now." What's demanding it might be the video at the gas station or it might be the TV at the airport or it's just the notifications going off on my phone or on my computer. You can kind of get out of the habit of establishing your own patterns of attention.
- Alan: [21:35](#) One of the great things about reading these, well, this is true reading any book, but it's I think especially true of reading the older books is that it just gets you so far out of those passive habits of attention and allows you to kind of cultivate your own sense of what you need to be attending to, not what someone else is telling you you need to attend to.
- Sarah: [21:57](#) This corresponds so well with the title of your book, *Breaking Bread with the Dead*, which I think I understand to be invoked from a quote by W. H. Auden, right, that "Art is our chief means of breaking bread with the dead." And then you go on to say that when we read old books, we're sitting at a table with our ancestors and learning to know them in their difference from as well as their likeness to us. I just love this so much, because I love this image of when I'm diving into an old book, either with my kids or on my own, I'm sitting at a table, sharing a meal, right, with those who have gone before.
- Sarah: [22:30](#) I think that's kind of the opposite experience of what I had in... It's the opposite of the fire hose. A lot of times we approach classic literature, old literature with our kids like a fire hose, kind of like I'm going to teach you this book and we're dumping information into their brain. But what if

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we engaged in a meal like this is an image I can totally get my head wrapped around. I love this so much.

Alan: [22:51](#) Yeah, I knew right from the beginning that that's what I wanted to call the book. So, I wasn't sure whether my publisher was going to go for it. I was really, really happy when they liked the title. Yeah. I love this idea of breaking bread. The idea is that you're in a familiar and comfortable and intimate relationship with these people from the past. What I think is especially interesting about it is that you're having table fellowship with them. I used that phrase because that's a phrase that actually, it's important in the Bible, in Biblical narratives. Who can you have table fellowship and who can't you have table fellowship with. I think that that's something that we feel today. You read a lot of stories about people who are like, "I'm not going to sit in the same restaurant with that person."

Alan: [23:55](#) When you do that, you're saying, "I don't want to have anything even remotely table fellowship with that person." We can feel such intense revulsion towards people who are our contemporaries and live in our world, because they vote in the same elections that we vote in. But when you're reading the works from the past, you have so much more control over it. You can say, "I'm going to sit down and have table fellowship with you. If that becomes really uncomfortable with for me, I'll close this book," right? I'll close this book, and I'll walk away from it for a little while. That's the great thing about the books, right?

Alan: [24:41](#) I mean, if you're trying to have a debate with someone whose political or social or ethical views are dramatically different than yours, that can be a really uncomfortable situation and it can be very unpleasant. It can escalate into bad things, but the great thing about reading somebody who thinks very, very differently than you do, especially when they're from the past, it feels a little safer. You have some control over the situation. So, you can step in and you can come to the table with them. And then when it gets uncomfortable, you can get up and leave the table. And then you come back later on, and they're still there.

Alan: 25:25 So, it can kind of be a sort of a training ground for encountering your peculiar neighbor, right? That is if you read the people from the past, and then you realize, "Wow,

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they don't think like me. They don't see things the way that I do." They have a very different attitude towards whatever it happens to be, race or religion or anything. But they are human beings. They're recognizably human beings. There are things that that they say that are meaningful to me and maybe even moving to me. That's a really good experience to have, because it gives you some training. It's like having your training wheels on, right, before you're ready to ride the bike. Riding the bike is a little more challenging, a little more dangerous.

Alan: 26:15 That is when you actually deal with your neighbor or with someone in your town or with someone you see on TV. If you've read the past carefully and patiently and you've developed a little bit of tranquility, then you have a chance of kind of carrying over that tranquility to your encounters with people who disagree with you on political or social issues. That I think people really notice. If you have that tranquility and you are not in a state of agitation or even rage, people notice that, because it is sufficiently rare now that it really, really makes a difference. I think that that's something that we could all use.

Alan: 27:08 I want to be that way, because I'm a Christian, and I think I'm commanded to be that way. Like I don't think I really have a choice. I have to try to be a peacemaker. I have to try to pour the oil on the troubled waters, because this is something that I have been told over and over again to do. But even if you're not a Christian, even if you don't have those religious beliefs, it's still something that can be really, really valuable and will set you apart from other people.

Sarah: 27:47 We'll get back to my conversation with Alan Jacobs in just a moment. I wanted to take a moment to invite you to join us in our RAR Premium, where we help your kids fall in love with books and we help you fall in love with homeschooling. In RAR Premium, we host monthly family book clubs that are created specifically for families to use together, regardless of whether you've got tiny kids, teenagers or everything in between. Members receive a downloadable Family Book Club Guide, a looking closely video from me where I invite your kids to look for specific things as they read, an exclusive live video interviews with the author, illustrator of that month's book pick. There's truly nothing else like it.

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- Sarah: 28:32 We also host monthly WOW: Writers on Writing workshops. This is a wildly popular workshop series that invites your kids to be taught by some of today's best children's book authors. Every workshop comes with a WOW Guide, so that you can use the workshops either as a once a month quick dip into writing or more regularly as a main part of your writing curriculum. We really deep dive into a single skill being taught each month. Again, we invite published authors to come teach those and have gotten such rave reviews from our members about them being so impactful on their kids and also the kids love them.
- Sarah: 29:12 Also, monthly, we do homeschool professional development. We call it Circle with Sarah. It's a monthly class, live class, where I help you take one small important step towards falling more in love with your homeschool. These live monthly classes have been called, "Alone worth the price of premium;" also, a quote, "The best thing I've ever done for my homeschool;" and another quote, "My favorite day all month."
- Sarah: 29:34 Of course, as soon as you join RAR Premium, you have access to all of our previous Family Book Clubs, WOW workshops, and Circle with Sarah sessions in our library. Everything in Premium is recorded. Closed captions are added to all of our replays, so that your family can participate at a time that's best for your schedule. RAR Premium does what we think all the best curriculum does. It helps you connect with your kids, and it makes your job easier, not harder. If you're ready to join us or to learn more, go to RAR Premium.com.
- Sarah: 30:21 You mentioned L.P. Hartley's famous quote, "The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there." And then you mentioned that "What they do isn't always right. Awareness of it is always..." You say, "... illuminating and often liberating." I would love to talk about this in light of reading books that contain characters or ideas or themes that offend us. Usually were talking about kids books here. So, I'm going to bring up the Little House on the Prairie books, because those have come under fire in recent years, because, of course, they tell the story of the Ingalls family settling in the West from their white settler family's point of view. So, as we're reading these books, we come in direct contact with some racism that the racism isn't presented in a negative light, right?

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- Alan: 31:05 Right.
- Sarah: 31:06 So, one of the responses I see from the world at this time about the Little House books is "Just don't read them. Read something else. Read something more enlightened," which is very much like what you talk about in your book. You mentioned novelist and teacher Brian Morton's essay about his encounter with a student who was trying to read an Edith Wharton novel and threw it in the trash after 50 pages because of Wharton's overt anti-Semitism. The student said something like, "I don't want anyone like that in my house." Same thing like we're just talking about, right? I don't want table fellowship with that person.
- Sarah: 31:40 Then Morton goes on to say in his essay, and then we got the quote here, "When we pick up an old novel, we're not bringing the novelist into our world and deciding whether he or she is enlightened enough to belong here. We're journeying into the novelist's world and taking a look around." And then you mentioned on the very next page that "The discomfort we feel in those moments is very much to the point."
- Alan: 32:02 First of all, I just love that by Brian Morton. I thought that was so helpful, this sense that we're not the hosts, we're the guests. We need to do what guests usually do, which is as long as we're in somebody else's world, we need to have respect for it and respect for them. That doesn't mean that we're going to agree with everything that they do. There's something that people always, teachers especially will say this that when you're reading works from the past, you need to set aside your own beliefs, you need to set aside your own convictions. I just think that's wrong. I don't think you should ever set aside your own convictions. I think you should be aware of what those convictions are. But what I would say is, "Let's not set aside any of our convictions. That is let's keep them all in play."
- Alan: 33:02 So then if we're reading the Little House on the Prairie books, then we can say, "Is there racism here?" Yes. Is there love here? Is there generosity? Is there kindness, right? We value all those things, don't we? If we see those things, are we going to pretend that they're not there, because we see this thing that we don't like? Now. I think

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what we have to do is keep all of our values, all of our commitments in play, not just some of them.

Alan: 33:32 If you're reading books and all you're doing is I'm going to wait until I find something that I consider offensive and then I'm done, right? Then that's the principle... I talk about this, I draw on some folks who've written about this. That's the principle of negative selection. You use the negative selection to rule things out. Well, if that's your only principle, if your only principle is negative selection, you're going to have about six books to read. Because you just wake up, I found another problem. That's it, out it goes. That just doesn't seem to me like a smart way to go through life, but I think that the positive selection is a much better way to go.

Alan: 34:25 I can read the Little House books. Yes, the racism is there, and I don't want to pretend that it's not racism. I don't want to pretend, "Oh, well, they were different then. They didn't know any better." Well, if they didn't know any better, they should have known better, right? That's a real mistake. It's a real shortcoming. However, that's not the only thing that's in the books. I can learn a lot from those books.

Alan: 34:50 First of all, there's just all the historical things you learn. You learn a lot about the challenges. You learn a lot about the virtues and the resilience that people had to have in order to survive there. So, you bring that into play as well. You don't ignore the racism, you don't pretend that it doesn't exist. You don't say, "Well, they didn't know any better," but you put that in relation to all the other things and then you have a much more complex picture, right? Why should you do this? Because it's what you would want people to do for you.

Sarah: 35:25 Yes, it's this generosity. I think you talked about this in the book about reading with generosity. I think you called it looking for a utopian moment or something like that? Does that sound right?

Alan: 35:37 Yeah, that's what one literary theorist calls it, the authentic kernel, finding the authentic kernel at the heart of it. When you find that, that's the utopian moment. There's also a scholar and an acquaintance of mine, Kathleen Fitzpatrick, who teaches at Michigan State University, who talks about generous thinking. All we're really talking about

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here is doing what we hope people will do for us, because I know that some of the most valuable people in my life, some of the people who mean the most to me and are most helpful to me in my maturation and growth are people who will tell me when I'm talking nonsense or will tell me when I'm acting badly, right?

- Alan: 36:25 I need that correction. I don't want somebody who is going to do nothing but affirm me, because I would get a false picture of myself. But I also don't want someone to say, "You know what? You are canceled. I'm not talking to you anymore. I'm done with you." I want to be treated with respect. I want people to affirm what is worth affirming. But I also want the people that I know and trust and people who know me, because they've paid attention to me to be able to say, "Here is where you're going wrong. Here is where you need to fix something." Whatever it is that they're telling me, they're pointing that out to me.
- Alan: 37:04 That is an act of love. Because I want that done to me, I want to do that for the people I love and for my friends. I also want to do it for the books that I read. I want to be able to have that kind of complex, holistic understanding of the books in which I'm clear eyed about where they go astray, but I don't let that blind me to all the things that those books have to teach me.
- Sarah: 37:51 In your book, you talk about that generosity of spirit when you're reading is you're not necessarily assuming the best of the writer. Like you said, you're not pretending like the racism isn't in Laura Ingalls Wilder's books, right? But you're taking them seriously enough to wrestle with them and their ideas. And then you liken that to the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel. How does that image of Jacob wrestling with the angel help us as readers?
- Alan: 38:16 I'm glad you asked about that. That's one of my favorite images. Though I'm not sure that it works for anybody else, right?
- Sarah: 38:21 It works for me.
- Alan: 38:22 Yeah, the wonderful thing about Jacob wrestling with this man, this angel, whoever this is by the river is that he's testing himself. He's wrestling, he's struggling, but he doesn't say, "I'm not going to let you go until I destroy you." He doesn't say, "I'm not going to let you go until I beat

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you." He says, "I will not let you go until you bless me." I think that is such a beautiful image for what we do when we wrestle with difficult and challenging books, right. is that we say, "This is hard. This is uncomfortable. This is painful at times." But I'm going to stick with this. I'm going to continue to give it my attention. I'm going to continue to reflect on it and work with it. I will not let it go until it blesses me.

Alan: 39:23 I mean, this has happened to me before where I've read a book and I've been sort of attracted to the ideas of the book, but then there were things that troubled me. I thought about it more. I worked through it and went back and re-read. Eventually I came to see, you know what? I don't want to go that path. I don't want to be like this character, or I don't want to be like this author. I want to take a different path. When I've gotten to that point, then my wrestling with that book has blessed me. Even though at the end, I said, "Yeah, I don't want to go that way. I don't want to follow that path." Nevertheless, I was blessed by the wrestling.

Alan: 48:09 So, I teach in a program about half my time here at Baylor. I teach in our Great Texts Program. So, we're reading great works from the ancient world up through the 20th century. It's kind of modeled on the old University of Chicago Great Books curriculum. And then a lot of my students are people who come from like classical Christian schools. They have backgrounds with that kind of reading. That's often really good, but there's also maybe a little bit too much reverence sometimes. They're like, "Well, this is a great book. Who am I to disagree with a great book?" Well, the thing about it is that these great books disagree with each other. So, they have very different view.

Alan: 40:56 I mean, it goes all the way back to the beginning with Socrates says that Homer's poems should not be allowed in his ideal Republic, banish all the poets, get rid of them. So, that means there's this immense hostility of this founder of philosophy to the first great poet in the Western tradition. So, you're going to have to disagree with somebody here. You've got to either disagree with Socrates or you've got to disagree with Homer. You know what? I think every writer who is worth his or her salt wants you to wrestle in that way. The writers don't want you just

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to say, "Yes, yes, you are wise. You are wise. Everything you say I believe." You don't want people to say, "Yes, you are 100% right."

- Alan: 41:46 It's actually a better response when people say, "You've really given me something to think about here. I've got to figure out how far do I go with you here or what would that look like in my life and in my reading?" That's a much more constructive and open-ended kind of engagement. So, I'm always telling my students, "Don't be reverent. If you read something here and it just strikes you as being off or wrong, somebody say so and then we'll talk about it, right? We'll try to understand it better and then if we do disagree, we have better grounds on which to say that we disagree."
- Sarah: 42:28 In your invitation for us all to read old books, you say, "To read old books is to get an education in possibility for next to nothing. Access is easy. No systematic plan is required. The risks are low, but the rewards are potentially immense." That is quite an invitation. I feel very compelled to take you up on that invitation. I hope a lot of our listeners do too. I do bet that a lot of our listeners are saying, "Okay, I'm in but, where do I start? There's so many old books to choose from. I don't know how to begin." So how did you respond to that question?
- Alan: 43:05 It doesn't matter where you begin, right? I mean, the world of old books is a house with many, many, many doors, right? You can sort of go in anywhere. In my earlier book, *The Pleasures of Reading*, I really encouraged people not to feel duty bound and guilt stricken, right? For instance, let's say, you love Tolkien, that's not a super old book, but it's certainly not a book of this moment, right? You're reading Tolkien and you think that's wonderful. You think it's great. Then one of the things you can do from there is to ask yourself, "Well, what did Tolkien read?"
- Sarah: 43:53 Oh, yeah, I think you call this reading upstream or something like that, right?
- Alan: 43:56 Reading upstream, exactly. Mm-hmm (affirmative). From any book that you pick up, any old book you pick up, there's always a door to another one. It might be an earlier one or it might be a later one, right? Like right now, in one of my classes, we're reading Milton's *Paradise Lost*. When you're reading *Paradise Lost*, you see over and over again

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his references to Homer and Virgil. So, go back and read Homer and Virgil, right?

- Alan: 44:30 And then maybe you can also know that the Romantic poets loved Milton and they adored him, even though they were not like him. They were not Christians. Why did they like him so much? How does that show up in their writing? Let's look at some of their poems and see how they are like or unlike Milton. So, you can head back, you can go upstream, or you can go downstream.
- Alan: 45:04 Don't worry about being systematic. Don't worry about having a plan. What really matters is not having a plan but having a disposition. The disposition is to be taught. The disposition is to grow in virtue and wisdom, the disposition to be delighted. When you read an old book, you want to look for something that has thoughts that are not your thoughts, that has assumptions that are not your assumptions, that sees the world very differently than you see the world, because those are the words that are going to teach us. They really teach us through difference more than they teach us through similarity. I don't think you can go wrong if you take your model as Jacob and say, "To the books that you read, I will not let you go until you bless me."
- Sarah: 46:07 Now it's time for let the kids speak. I love this part of the podcast, because kids share the books that they've been loving lately.
- Adele: 46:22 Hello, my name is Adele. I'm eight years old. I live in Costa Mesa, California. My favorite books are The Happy Hollisters series, because I love mystery.
- Cora: 46:35 Hello my name is [Cora 00:49:03]. I live in Costa Mesa, California and I am six. My favorite books are A to Z Mysteries.
- Suzie: 46:47 Hello my name is Suzie, and I live in Costa Mesa, California. I'm four. My favorite book is the Who Would Win? series.
- Emilia Coza: 46:59 Hi. My name is [Emilia Coza 00:49:28]. I'm eight years old, and I'm from Oregon, Eastern Oregon. My favorite book is Ramona the Pest, because in the very beginning when she starts kindergarten, our teacher tells her to sit here for the present. Even though she said present, Ramona thinks

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		that her teacher meant the present wrapped in golden wrapping paper. Instead she meant right now.
Sophia:	47:30	My name is Sophia. I live in Pittsburgh. My favorite book is Narnia and princess stories.
Speaker 9:	47:39	Okay, what's your name?
Speaker 10:	47:42	I'm two.
Speaker 9:	47:43	What's your name?
Speaker 10:	47:48	Pittsburgh.
Speaker 9:	47:49	What's your name?
Speaker 10:	47:50	[Taylor my name].
Speaker 9:	47:52	What's your favorite book?
Speaker 10:	47:55	[].
Speaker 9:	47:58	The Little Excavator.
Noah:	48:02	Hi, my name is Noah. I'm seven years old and I live in Germany. My favorite book is The Lost and Found Pony by Tracy Dockray. I like about it is a little girl got it for her birthday. One day, the pony got lost. The pony had lots of adventures but sometimes she missed the little girl. But then when the girl's older, she found the pony again.
Julia:	58:43	Hi, my name is Julia and I'm four years old. I live in Kansas. My favorite book is the Wonky Donkey. Why I like it is because it has so many silly things in it.
Speaker 13:	48:57	[inaudible 00:51:24].
Speaker 14:	48:59	What's your favorite book?
Speaker 13:	49:01	City Moon.
Speaker 14:	49:03	City Moon by Rachel Cole. Where do you live?
Speaker 13:	49:06	Kansas.
Speaker 14:	49:09	All right.

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- Cadence: 49:10 I'm Cadence. I live in [inaudible 00:51:40], Washington. I'm eight years old. My favorite book is the Ramona Series, because it's really interesting. I like to hear what she does. Some parts are really funny too.
- Sharla: 49:28 Hello, I'm Sharla and I'm six. I'm from in England. I like The Fantastic Flying Journey, because it teaches you about animals.
- Matilda: 49:40 My name is Matilda. I like [inaudible 00:52:10]. My age is four. Why I like [inaudible 00:52:14] is because she never get eaten. I live in England.
- Sarah: 49:54 Well, that's a wrap on another episode of the Read-Aloud Revival, but you know I'll be back in two weeks with another one. In the meantime, you can head to [ReadAloudRevival.com](http://ReadAloudRevival.com) to grab those book lists or take that quick quiz to find out what you should read-aloud next. You can always come on over to our [RARPremium.com](http://RARPremium.com), so that you can help your kids fall in love with books and you will fall in love with your homeschool. It's the best place I know on the internet for both. Hey, until next time. Go make meaningful and lasting connections with your kids through books.