

Furnishing the Mind with Reading – Read With Me Episode 414 Transcript

Julie Walker: Well, Andrew, we have had many conversations on this podcast about our tagline, listen, speak, read, write, think. And today is one of those.

Andrew Pudewa: Good.

Julie Walker: Yep.

Andrew Pudewa: We have guests.

Julie Walker: We do have guests. And before we introduce our guests, I wanted to introduce our listeners to our theme for this month. And this month, February, our theme is Furnishing the Mind with Great Sources with an emphasis on reading out loud. So this is kind of a read, read month. So this is part of listen, speak, read month. And we have some friends that are on today, as you mentioned, who have started a program. Well, and they'll tell you more about when it started and all the details of it called Read With Me. I love that.

Andrew Pudewa: Sounds so friendly.

Julie Walker: It does sound so friendly. So welcome Lisa and Joseph to our podcast.

Lisa: Thank you very much for having me.

Joseph: Yeah. Thank you so much.

Andrew Pudewa: So Lisa, we probably should get a little bit of background and context here. You have had a very remarkable school that you have been, I think, the creator or the director or the founder. Tell us just a little bit about your school, how it came to be, and why it is considered remarkable by so many people.

Lisa: Well, I appreciate that. I started, it was kind of an unusual start to my career. I had gotten a degree in philosophy and then decided I was going to, instead of getting a PhD and teaching at the university level, that I would teach philosophy through literature. So I was planning to get a master's in education and teach in the public schools.

And then I came home one day to a message on my answering machine from a family here in Southern California who were looking for a private homeschool teacher for their children, which at the time was a very unusual sort of situation. This was 25 years ago. I feel like it's more common now post-COVID and micro, the concept of micro schools, but I got this invitation, and since it was not at all what I had planned, I was just sort of stunned by it and spent about 24 hours thinking it through and questioning whether this is something that would interest me or I felt I could do and then after that 24 hours, I decided this was my job. This was my calling. This was my life. And this is what I absolutely had to do. And I usually teasingly say that desire was born of resentment for my own education.

Because I was a, I was an eager learner, I think a bright kid who wanted to do well, and did as I was told, and then graduated not just from high school, but from college feeling pretty utterly ignorant. And that seemed tragic to me, that I'd done all that was asked for me, and I'd put in all those years. And then, especially by comparison to my grandparents, previous generation of very well-educated people, I just felt totally ignorant by comparison. So this was my chance not only to redeem that for myself and educate myself at the same time as my students, but to give them a gift that I had not received.

So it's an ambitious goal, and I think of myself as pretty bold in retrospect at 24 thinking I can do this, but it was really a magical experience. I didn't feel like I was able to educate myself and then simultaneously, at least do better than the alternatives that existed for them. And then the school slowly over the last 25 years has grown out of that to now being a school of 140 students kindergarten through 8th grade.

Andrew Pudewa: So that's a nice size. You are in Orange County, Southern California. And I would guess you have probably a waiting list for your school. Is that true?

Lisa: We do. We have a waiting list for most of the upper grades. We actually have a few spaces available in kindergarten and 1st grade, which is an unusual thing for us, but we don't advertise this school. We're known entirely by word of mouth, and I like it that way. Marketing is not what I want my focus to be.

I want my focus to be on the quality of the classroom. So it's been nice that it's just been able to grow organically through word of mouth and attract people who share the kind of educational vision that we're presenting.

Andrew Pudewa: And so literature is a hugely important part of your curriculum. How do you work that into daily business of teaching reading, writing, and math, and science, and health, and all the other things that people expect you to teach in schools.

Lisa: I love that question because I think of literature as one of the most formative aspects of their education. When they go on to high school, there are certain things that they might my graduates will call their superpowers, and I think just being armed with so many years of having read very high quality excellent books and having deep daily discussions of them is definitely one of the things that shaped the kind of people they are when they go on to high school.

But to answer your question, we... instead of... so usually there's an English classes as one of the kind of conventional classes in the structured school day, and English is this umbrella for writing, reading, grammar, spelling, vocabulary, at least ideally it is if those things are addressed at all, often they aren't in schools, but what we've done is break all of those down into separate classes.

So writing is its own class. And I will take this opportunity to thank you for the IEW program, which all of my teachers are trained in. It's just an invaluable resource for, you know, taking something that is one of the most formidable tasks that child learns and making it incrementally developed in a way that feels natural and is turns them into really proficient writers.

So, I'm very grateful for that program, but literature is also its own class. And I feel that the same kind of. You know, scaffolded attention to the skill of reading and appreciating great literature is needed, just like it is in writing. So literature is its own class. As soon as the kids are reading fluently, which is usually midway through their kindergarten year, they're part of a book group that's discussing beautiful works of children's literature that we've found for them.

We are trying to curate a beautiful collection of worthwhile works. And then by the time they get to second grade, literature is a class and a daily class in their schedule. They read about ten novels a year. We at our school have a no homework policy. So reading is the only thing, is pretty much the only thing we ask them to do at home.

And then the literature class is spent reflecting on, clarifying, making connections in, and really mining the meaning and the value out of the book that they're reading. So selectivity of the greatest works, most worthwhile works for discussion, and then daily guided mentored discussion of those works in class is the basic approach.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, there's a quick question I know some of our listeners would have, because they always want to know, if you're getting all these little kids reading well in a relatively short period of time, what curriculum, or approach, or I'm assuming some kind of phonics-based orthography is standard for your developing the basic skills of decoding. Can you share that with us briefly?

Lisa: Sure. It's not my area of expertise. I have a wonderful teacher who has worked for me for 25 years, who is the one who guides them through the learning-to-read process. But what we have is a Montessori environment for just for kindergarten and first grade. Actually half of their day is spent in a Montessori environment. And half of their day is spent in that kind of traditional classroom environment to help them with the transition to the traditional classroom at second grade. But the Montessori approach is very phonics based, and it's just broken down into incremental steps that appear almost magical from the outside.

And the kids are. Learning those steps in in, you know, discreetly in the process and then at a certain point halfway through the year, they realize that they're capable of reading. It's kind of something that they've developed without even being conscious of it. So the curriculum is the Montessori curriculum.

Andrew Pudewa: I love it. You know, my wife and one of my older daughters are very, very well trained in Montessori and to the degree that we can bring the philosophy and even some of the materials into homeschool and the homeschool co-op, we've tried. But there's really nothing that quite substitutes for a well-equipped, well-ordered, beautifully directed Montessori program at that age.

So your parents are very, very lucky, fortunate, blessed, we'll say blessed rather than lucky. Now we're going to have to move on because I could ruminate on your school all day and I really must come and visit at some point. But you undertook to expand beyond the walls of your physical building and try to bring this, this goodness of literature, this connection with the greatest minds and the greatest stories that have ever been told. You've been working on bringing this. out to a larger world and, uh, that would involve, I think, to some degree, our

next guest, Joseph Tabenkin, who hails from Vancouver, Canada. And I have had the pleasure of meeting him on several occasions. So Joseph, how did you find Lisa and her literature stuff and what motivated you to want to get into this world? Because you, you aren't yet a parent. I don't think you've worked in a school per se, but you have an incredible inquisitive mind. So give us a little bit of history on you and how you got connected with Lisa and now what the two of you are doing together.

Joseph: Well, I think I first heard about Lisa in my early 20s through Facebook. I knew of her and her school. And as somebody that really enjoys to learn and has an interest in education and the importance of education, I was following the work she had been doing. And I don't exactly recall how I heard about this new reading program she was starting. It was somewhere on Facebook, and I immediately started started to consume it and reached out to her at some point to offer my assistance in any way I could because at the time she was using Youtube, and I have some technical skills for app development. So I thought I could help, give her some help there, but I'll leave it to Lisa to maybe give some background on why she even wanted to start this thing. And what exactly it is.

Lisa: Sure. Yeah. Year after year I have the great satisfaction of, I focus on teaching junior high literature, so seventh and eighth graders, but by the time they get to me, having that background that I described, we are able to read the works of Rostand and Ibsen and Victor Hugo and more. So I practically have adults and very thoughtful, sophisticated, earnest, eager, reading adults, which is an amazing gift that I get to enjoy every single day. So, it's fifteen, as I mentioned, it's fifteen students per class, and I teach just two classes, so it's thirty people a year that I'm reaching with this beautiful experience.

So, I was communicating with somebody on Facebook at some point who said, "Oh, I've always meant to read *Cyrano de Bergerac*," which I have been teaching to my 8th graders, "but I've just, I just don't know how to get into it, or I've never gotten around to reading it." And I said off the cuff back, "Well, I should have some sort of read-with-me book club, where you read it along with me because there's no greater pleasure I have than guiding somebody through that play."

So then it was one of those things that was, you know, off-the-cuff, glimmer-of-an-idea turned into, oh, no, no, this needs to be a real thing, that I have a read-with-me book club.

Julie Walker: So Lisa, when you said, read with me, Andrew and I looked across the table at each other and both just beamed. We love the name: Read with Me. And of course, that's the name of your app. That's the name of what we're talking about today is this Read with Me. So sorry for interrupting, but please do continue.

We love the name. Read with Me.

Lisa: I know I appreciate the interruption, and I think I understand why that resonates, because the challenge that so many people have is that they haven't been taught how to appreciate classic literature. They've maybe had some exposure to the potential value of it. Maybe there's one book they read that really moved them, or maybe they've witnessed somebody else deriving really deep spiritual value out of some work of classic literature. So if somebody gets exposed to the possibility that that can happen, they want it, but they don't

know how to do it, and I completely sympathize with and understand that because I don't think you can just pick up Victor Hugo's *Ninety-Three*, which is one of my favorite books of all time. I don't think you can just pick it up cold with no skills and having never been taught how to mine the value out of it and devour it the way my students do now.

So Read With Me, the idea was, I'm going to hold your hand and take you through the book, starting from the first chapter, and I'm going to provide analysis of the themes. I'm going to provide the discussion of the characters. I'm going to provide all the things that a guide should. But so often the guides that exist are a kind of whole picture/big picture sort of analysis. So if you pick up a Cliff's Notes for example, it's going to give you who the characters are, what their essence is, what the essential themes are, but that's not helping you through the process of getting that value out of the story as you're reading it. So what I decided to do is take a couple chapters at a time, read it aloud in the app so that I'm bringing my own understanding and intonation and passion to the story itself, which is meant to be a step in the way of helping them develop that skill. And then after each few chapter or few chapters, provide a summary of what they just read that points to highlights emphasizes the most important aspect of it And then things like discussion of what we ought to understand about the story so far, not the whole thing, but just what we've read up to that point, favorite lines of mine that are that I find so beautiful and stirring and why I find them beautiful and stirring to habituate them to picking those things out for themselves. So I think of myself as an encouraging, hand-holding guide through the process of reading the book.

Andrew Pudewa: That sounds just wonderful. And I'm thinking about 150 years ago before electricity. There was nowhere to go and nothing to do, except light and heat were expensive, so whole families from grandma down to the baby on the floor would be in one room, and essentially reading was the primary, almost exclusive, form of evening entertainment for almost all families, literate families, which was almost all on our continent.

And I feel like we used to have the capacity to read more challenging content and engage in it because it was a cultural way of life. And it was passed down from generation to generation. And now because of media and electricity and the ability to go places and do things, which, you know, has certain values, but we've very much lost that literary tradition that used to be such a deep part of the fabric of family life.

And so I find it kind of beautiful that you're now harnessing technology to help restore in part that very good thing that almost everyone grew up with. And until, I don't know, what do you think, sixty, seventy years ago when family reading just started to be eclipsed by television watching.

Lisa: That's so true. And so tragic. I mean, that to me, I'm sure IEW was born of seeing the necessity, the vital human necessity of people being able to develop the capacity to clearly articulate their thoughts. It is a necessity. And I feel the same way about literature.

Digital media has provided us with other forms of entertainment and stimulation and kind of recreation. But for the most part, it's not the same level, depth of spiritual satisfaction that you can get from these great works of literature, so it's entertainment and, you know, there are, there are quality works of television and film, but they don't... In literature, we have centuries of accumulated classics that are classics because these represent the greatest minds, most

thoughtful, most astute,, most eloquent, most beautiful works that have been accumulated over the course of civilization. And those all exist and are there for the consuming, for the consuming, but you're right, we've lost the ability to do that. And it's tragic and it's something that I see as vitally necessary and really want to help people to recover that value, that personal deep value that can be gotten out of literature.

Andrew Pudewa: The other thing that strikes me about your approach in terms of you read the book, but then you kind of give a summary and then you share what you've experienced, value out of that text. This is a form of contemplation that most children really don't have much opportunity or experience with.

People say to kids, well, what do you think of it? And they'll say, it's good or I like it or I don't like it, or I don't know. And how to help children get beyond that level of response seems to be very challenging in today's world because we have not practiced, if you will, the art of contemplation. And it seems like what you're doing there is just, it's got to be so valuable to so many people. They're not going to bump into this in daily life. Our contemplations are three minute soundbites and, you know, Twitter length commentary on current stuff that is going to disappear in no time. But what you said about the greatest that has been thought and written and recorded for all of humanity, really, at least going back as far as we have writing.

So you, you started on YouTube and Joseph said, we can do better. And now you have an app. Tell us a little bit about how that works and what kind of response you've got from people.

Lisa: Joseph, I think I'll let you explain the app a little bit. Just quickly, I have to respond to what you just said because it's so, that art of contemplation and the loss of it is so absolutely true and it's wonderful that I have the students captive within my walls daily to keep the devices at bay. We have a no screens policy at all. There are no screens at all at our school. And the daily discussion, the lengthy, penetrating daily discussion of the works of literature is the whole value of it. It's teaching them, it's helping them to mine the value out of the particular works, but it's also developing that skill that you were describing of just being thoughtful and contemplative about something.

Right now I'm subbing for a fourth grade class and we're reading *Abel's Island* by William Stieg, beautiful, beautiful children's book. And there was a point in class the other day that I said, how has Abel (It's a story of a mouse that gets lost on a desert island, essentially, and is desperately trying to get back to his little mouse wife.) And at a certain point I said, how has Abel changed in the course of the first few chapters? And one of the fourth graders raised her hand and said, He is no longer a fop.

Julie Walker: A fop.

Lisa: Fop was a word she had learned from within the book because he used to be excessively concerned about his appearance and his clothing, and he was a gentleman mouse who didn't do anything for himself and sat in his library. And he has developed, it says he developed self regard from having to fend for himself and figure out how to get home and find his own food. But that is one tiny moment In a decade of literature discussions that is

just developing them as a human being to have a thought like what it means to no longer be a fop.

Julie Walker: I love that. That is so adorable. So Joseph, when you talk about the app and, and how it actually works, I'm curious to know how many books you've currently have included in the app and how many more you plan to do.

Joseph: So the app is something you can download from the App store. I'm sure we'll be able to put a link in the podcast notes where you can find more information about it. We have over twenty titles now. I'll get the exact count, but about a little over twenty titles, most of which Lisa has recorded herself reading the audio.

So, it's got an audio book, and then each, I think what's valuable about it over, you know, just let's say downloading the audio book from Audible is it's curated, so Lisa's chosen every book that's gone into the app. She's chosen what she believes are the greatest works of literature. And what she's done is she's broken those books down into really manageable chunks. I know that's what really attracted me at the start. When she first was posting about *Ninety-Three*, and that was the first book she chose to do, I had always had trouble reading Hugo. I'd always had aspirations of reading Hugo, and I had started and stopped Hugo many times.

And listening to her read it – first of all, she brought all of her emotion and enjoyment of it into the reading. It was not like any other audio book I'd ever listened to. It sounded like somebody that actually loved this book not as somebody who was a paid actor paid to read the book. And then breaking it into chunks made it super accessible to me. So I only had a certain amount of time each week to do this. And It wasn't too much. It wasn't too little. It's kind of that sweet spot of just enough. And then it really did feel like she was holding my hand through it. She gives summaries at the end of each one of these parts so that if I'm a little bit lost, I can keep up and kind of still have my bearings. She provides insights that model the enjoyment.

So all of this together is this nice, wonderful package. So when you download the app, you can choose from any of these books that we already offer. And on our website, we also have a literary guide on where we recommend you get started, with some of the values and benefits of reading these classics are. And so we'll share some links to that too, but it's as easy as downloading the app, choosing which books you want to start with, and jumping in. And Lisa kind of guides you through the whole process.

Julie Walker: So, yes, this literary guide, we get questions all the time. Do you have some recommendations for book lists based on ages of students? And, of course, we have available on our website hundreds of titles of books that we recommend. Families can choose to read or not based on how old their children are, but these are primarily for high school, well, in your case, maybe seventh and eighth grade, and older students, right, Lisa? Is that what you're, is that what you're including in your list of books?

Lisa: They are. So yes there's at my school, it's kindergarten through eighth grade, and we do have a list of favorite books, Van Damme Academy Favorite Books that I can certainly share. The Read With Me program was for adults. And the bridge that I see between the Read With

Me program and teachers or homeschoolers is that I think the real key to being an effective literature teacher is to love literature yourself.

I think it has to be a genuine personal enthusiasm. I think you have to be able to experience the real value that it's not just a box that's being checked for its supposed educational value. We're not just fulfilling an obligation here that you really see what there is to be gained from reading literature. So I think the Read With Me program can help a person to develop that ability. I was not a reader as a young person, so this was something that I had to develop myself. And I feel like I'm able to help people develop that skill that can then be, once you have that capacity, it can be translated to any quality work of literature.

Andrew Pudewa: It's something that I think so many people are in this category of either hating literature class or being confused and not feeling like there was much value out of it. My result, all I remember as a kid was the books I chose to read I remember them, and I like them, and I read in my spare time, but the books that I was being told to read in high school were just, as far as I can tell, kind of the most depressing, existentialist, meaningless stuff. And in retrospect, having reread some of those books as an adult, I think, no, the book wasn't really that awful, but there was nothing meaningful in my experience happening in regard to that book. So I graduated high school with the idea, I never want to read another novel again. It's just dumb. It's a waste of time. And then I took one literature class at the University of San Francisco, which confirmed my commitment to never reading fiction. And I didn't read fiction for fifteen years. And it wasn't until I was part, a good way into parenting, where I woke up to the phenomenal importance and value of the cultivation of the moral imagination and the development of eloquence and just the plain old benefits of having an expanded vocabulary.

And then I kind of flipped completely on the opposite side. So I would like to suggest that it's never too late to learn to appreciate and love literature. It's never too late to gain. It's never too late to read a good book a second or third or fourth time. And even, I'm guessing there are some people listening who are perhaps working in schools or teaching in some capacity. They're being asked to do literature with children and feeling like, well, I don't really know exactly how to, "teach this book." And what I'm hearing is that you, you can be like a secret weapon for the arsenal of some adults out there who didn't get the education we wish we would have. But it's never too late. It's the resource available, and I've only just touched it, so I can't say I've really gotten deep into any one of your books, but I'm intending to. But I know from what Joseph has told me, and what he just shared with us, it's going to enable pretty much anyone who wants to, to develop this whole new level of confidence and create shared experiences with books.

Julie Walker: So, Andrew, I've heard from you and I've heard from others this idea of having mentors. And we can have a mentor from dead mentors or alive mentors. And of course, the dead mentors are the authors of these books. And I feel like, Lisa, what you have brought to the world, to our listeners and to everyone who values good thinking, which is hopefully what we value here at IEW is a combination of both. You're having old books being presented to them, but then you are their new guide that will lead them through these books. And I just think, wow, you've done twenty or more, but there are so many more. You've got a long road to hoe girl. You've got a lot of work to do.

Lisa/Joseph: I'm still doing it. Well, that's one of the great pleasures of life is I can do this forever and I'm looking forward to doing it forever.

Andrew Pudewa: Before we run out of time, I would like to have Joseph just elaborate briefly on the functionality of the app. And because I know this gives a lot more options and flexibility and potential than simply YouTube videos. And so what are the things, some of the things that the app can help you with that are better than just, like you said, an audio book?

Joseph: So at the core, the app has pretty much everything you'd expect from Audible. So it remembers your spot. You can speed up or slow down the speech. You can skip ahead and skip back. So all of the basic features you'd expect from an audio book app, but a couple other kind of goodies I added in: most of the works we're doing are in the public domain. So we also include all of the text for any public domain book. So you can actually read while you listen to Lisa. One of the things we, Lisa and I, spoke about when we were building the app and the program is we really want to help somebody go from not reading to reading independently. The goal is not to have them dependent on Lisa for the rest of their life to get their literary content. But how do we help them navigate that so that and learn so that they can eventually do it on their own?

So you can start by just listening to a book. That's where I would recommend somebody start. Read with Me, and *Ninety Three* is a great place to start and then try out reading while you listen to her either in the app or get a copy of the book. And one of the other things that we built into the app, which we're starting to experiment more with. We have a chapter a day program.

Lisa started this with *Les Miserables* so I can't remember when you did it, Lisa. I think it was 2018 maybe but there's 365 chapters in *Les Mis*. And so Lisa decided to write commentary for each chapter every day for the entire year. And so This is text only it's not audio but when I decided I wanted to do this, I created a service built into Read With Me where you can receive this as an email.

So every day in your inbox, you can receive a chapter of *Les Miserables* and Lisa's commentary. And it's such a wonderful way to bring reading into your life. I went from not reading. I only listen to audiobooks now. I read every morning after I finished *Les Mis*. Now I've moved on to other books. Now I can just read on my own every single morning, and it's been life changing for me.

So in the reading with me app, you can do the traditional audiobook experience You can also do this chapter a day program with *Les Mis* and you know, we're adding a lot more to it, too

Andrew Pudewa: I'm inspired.

Julie Walker: Exactly. Well, we are out of time. And so I just want to make a couple comments. And then Lisa, I want to give you opportunity just to share the most important thing you want to share with our listeners. And so my comment to our listeners is download this app, check it out, Read with Me. This is a subscription model, but I think this is an opportunity for you to evaluate whether or not this is something you want to add to your own,

or if you have high school students, maybe include them in this journey and just start reading with Lisa in this case.

Lisa: Thank you very much. Well, I guess the most important thing to say is that I sympathize entirely with what Andrew described as his experience with literature in school. It was my experience, too, and it's tragic because it's left people with the feeling that at best, reading great literature is kind of a cultural duty and maybe they want to fulfill that duty and maybe they don't.

When in reality, it is one of the greatest pleasures that life has to offer. I feel when I read great literature that I get to put on Victor Hugo's glasses and look at the world with his mind and his depth of humanity and his spirit and then I take them off and it's changed me as a person to look at the world that way.

It wasn't a capacity I had on my own. I needed his brilliant mind to show me that. And then you do that with Dostoevsky and Ibsen and the world's great writers from so many different perspectives with so many different insights and views and ways of looking at the world. And it's a superpower to be able to, to take on their minds for the time that you're reading it. And it's such a pleasure. It's so clarifying and enriching. And then it does change you as a person, develop you. It's soul stretching is the word I like to use. So you go into your life armed with new vision and new understanding and new moral depth and clarity. So the reason this program exists is that I understand completely why people don't experience or see that value now, but it's there and I want to help them find it.

Andrew Pudewa: Love it. Well, get ready for many, many thousands of downloads as a result of this because if listeners are feeling even a little bit like I'm feeling right now, we want to jump in and take advantage of the tremendous opportunity you are providing for us. So thank you so much for joining us.

Julie Walker: Thank you, Lisa. Thank you, Joseph.

Lisa/Joseph: Thank you. It was a real pleasure and do come visit. Thank you so much.