

Episode 431: Why Read Moby-Dick and Other Classics

Episode Transcript

Andrew Pudewa: I finished Moby-Dick and it changed my opinion. It changed my attitude about what a book can do.

Julie Walker: Hello, and welcome to the Arts of Language Podcast with Andrew Pudewa, founder of the Institute for Excellence in Writing or as many like to say, “IEW.” My name is Julie Walker, and I’m honored to serve Andrew and IEW as the chief marketing officer. Our goal is to equip teachers and teaching parents with methods and materials, which will aid them in training their students to become confident and competent communicators and thinkers.

Julie Walker: So, Andrew, I just got back from a four week getaway.

Andrew Pudewa: I noticed.

Julie Walker: Did you miss me?

Andrew Pudewa: I didn't have much on my calendar for the days that I was here. It was very relaxing for me, actually. I hope it was relaxing for you

Julie Walker: Well, most of it was relaxing. We spent some of that time with my oldest son and his family in Northern California, and my husband was roped into helping Daniel redo his front and back yard.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, what a great dad.

Julie Walker: What a great dad, right? And he's always had this penchant for gardening and doing great things. And so since it's California, you have to be careful with the water consumption and all that. So they ripped out their whole front yard. They put in a new sprinkler system. They put in some water–what do you call those? Well, water, um, water friendly plants.

Andrew Pudewa: Basically cactus.

Julie Walker: Well, succulents, some of them, but put in some rock. Anyway, at the end of the day, it looks so good. And you know what I said to my son?

Andrew Pudewa: Hard work is immensely satisfying.

Julie Walker: That is exactly what I said. And he knew it was coming. And he said, indeed. And he was super happy to have it done. You sometimes say, I don't like writing.

Andrew Pudewa: But I like having written something.

Julie Walker: Yes, yes, and so this whole podcast today is about this idea of hard work is immensely satisfying even though sometimes when we're in the throes of it, we want to give up. My husband is still sore from working out in the yard.

Andrew Pudewa: That's good. It means you tore some muscle fibers and they're going to grow back and you'll be stronger.

Julie Walker: Even stronger, yes, so

Andrew Pudewa: Soreness is immensely satisfying once you understand what it's all about.

Julie Walker: What it's all about, but we're not talking about working out although we could, Andrew.

Andrew Pudewa: No, we're talking about mental workout is my guess.

Julie Walker: Yes, exactly. And you came back from a trip recently, not most recently, saying, everyone should read *Moby-Dick*. And I groaned.

Andrew Pudewa: I don't know if I said everyone should read *Moby-Dick*, but I did say that I finished *Moby-Dick*, and it changed my opinion. It changed my attitude about what a book can do and about what reading can be. Andrew Kern said to me—I was talking to him about this—and he said, “So the book taught you how to read better.” The author of the book taught me how to read better. I thought that's a good observation because I think that's what happened. I got into *Moby-Dick* just kicking and screaming. And after, I don't know, the first 7, 8, 9 chapters, I was so ready to give up. It was just tedious. Tedious. But, I had various reasons as to why I did not want to give up.

Julie Walker: Well, true confessions, and I know you know this, Andrew, because we talked about this. I've never read *Moby-Dick*. It's not that bad. It's worse. I assigned *Moby-Dick* to my boys when I was homeschooling them and forced them to read it, and they didn't have the maturity to say hard work is immensely satisfying. And they hated it.

Andrew Pudewa: So it's an interesting case study because what it brought to me is the fact that I am so thoroughly modern and so thoroughly formed in a way by growing up with American entertainment, this book completely didn't fall into that category of entertaining. And so, I rebelled against it, I rejected it because I'm expecting a book to have quick engagement, a good plot, some kind of mysteries or problems to be solved. I can read a long book, but it's got to keep you going. I've read probably every John Grisham novel there is. He's a great storyteller. He's also good at building your attention toward the descriptions of things.

Julie Walker: Yes.

Andrew Pudewa: But he's very, very modern. And that's what I came up against was this book is not modern. This book isn't even close to it. This book is more, *Moby-Dick* is more like an ancient epic poem...

Julie Walker: Oh, okay.

Andrew Pudewa: ...than it is a novel, at least in my experience.

Julie Walker: When you were saying the book isn't modern, I was thinking of Homer, speaking of epic poems. But that has stories within the story that kind of carry you along, not unlike John Grisham does.

Andrew Pudewa: Yes. The plot, if you want to call it that, of *The Iliad* or *The Odyssey*. It's fairly simple, particularly Iliad, they basically just fight. and it's a long, long fight, and

Julie Walker: resort to trickery

Andrew Pudewa: ... lots of unhappy people in the process of it, but doesn't have much in the way of suspense, I guess, compared to a more modern novel.

Well, Melville lived in the mid to late 1800s, I think, so he really would be in the modern category,

Julie Walker: Oh, yes.

Andrew Pudewa: but this book isn't like anything else written in that time period. Nothing like Dickens, really.

So what is it? What is it? It's this, for an appropriate adjective, behemoth book.

Julie Walker: You love that word.

Andrew Pudewa: I do. Only, I guess the more appropriate word would be, it's a leviathan of a book because he uses that word all the way through as a synonym for whale.

Julie Walker: Because Leviathan was a sea monster...

Andrew Pudewa: And because you need a lot of ways to say whale when you're writing a long, long book about whales. So I was irritated in the beginning because it didn't have any plot development going on. It's basically... You could tell the whole plot of *Moby-Dick* in about three sentences.

Julie Walker: White whale. Kill it.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, yeah, I mean,

Julie Walker: That was two. I need to set the context.

Andrew Pudewa: Whaling captain injured by whale wants revenge. Goes in search of famous said white whale. Finally gets to him, and everybody except one guy dies.

So there, that's it. That is it. And this strings out for whatever edition you have, but hundreds of pages. So, what is it doing? Well, it's interesting because there's actually, I think there's a chapter title that says "Encyclopedia of –something– of Whales." And it's giving this very long encyclopedic-style explanation of different kinds of whales and where you find them and what they're for. And it's not scientifically correct anymore. So you even know this is not true, up-to-date encyclopedic information, but it is obviously what somebody thought 150 years ago.

But I think the analogy here, the best analogy I've come up with is, if you were to go into a museum and look at a huge painting, like imagine the hugest painting you could imagine and make it bigger than that, 60 feet wide by 40 feet tall with tremendous amount of intricacy in this painting. Realistic type of detail. And the whole thing is just covered with whales and sailors and ships and waves. And it's just this montage of phenomenally detail in this massive, massive painting, and then someone forces you to look at every square inch of this painting for five minutes or something. You're just taking forever.

And after a while you think, "Well this, this is kind of just tedious and dull and I don't have a mind for this." But then, you give up. You say, "Let it happen. I will do this. I will contemplate." That's the thing. It's a contemplation rather than a story in the sense that we think of a story. And I've not been a fan of books like this my whole life. I can think of a few that I've slogged through, I thought, "eh, I didn't get much out of that."

But once I gave my soul over to Melville, and it took a little bit of trust, I started to really appreciate the phenomenal level of detail which he is capable of. And in our Unit 7, we call it inventive writing, right? Invention. Well, this guy wrote an entire chapter on the color white. And all the manifestations of the color white, and what it represents, and where you find it, and what's the underlying meaning of white, and why white is white, and how some white is not as white as other whites, and all of this. I don't know how long it was, but well over a dozen pages, just contemplating the color white, so that you could understand this white whale a little bit more the way he wanted you to understand.

So, it's kind of like a house with mirrors and detours. You can't just walk through and get the lay of the land and say, "Yep, I see it." You are having to explore the nooks and crannies and the crevices. And, after a while, I really started to enjoy it. But I wasn't expecting an entertaining story. I was expecting the exercise of imagination. A lot of people think, "Oh, imagination, that's fantasy. That's something that nobody ever thought of before, and you have this contact with this new world of things that nobody ever imagined." No, this is an old world of things that everyone has forgotten existed. The author's way of using the prose to describe this forces your brain to dredge up these images and put them together. And it's like exercise. It's like exercise. But I'm very glad that I finished that book because now I can speak about it with a little bit of experience or authority.

I don't know if I'll ever do it again. There's so many other books.

Julie Walker: Well, the definition of a classic.

Andrew Pudewa: I know. You can read it again and again and again, and I have to, you can't know if it's a classic by reading it only once. So I don't know, I'm going to give it some time, and it's very possible that I will read it again and start noticing things I never noticed the first time.

I finished *Anna Karenina* for the third time.

Julie Walker: Yes

Andrew Pudewa: The third time was by far the best experience ever of book reading. So, maybe I will read *Moby-Dick* again, but it's kind of like a marathon, you may have to train for it.

Julie Walker: Andrew, some of your description of *Moby-Dick* reminded me of the book that I, I'm not sure the author I know. Once I mention the book, I would love to hear your thoughts on it and why you think I'm thinking of this Leaf by...

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, "Leaf by Niggle." Yes, it's a short story. It's a long short story by Tolkien.

Julie Walker: Yes. That's what I thought it was.

Andrew Pudewa: Yes, and it's been some time since I read it, but it has to do with someone kind of in the afterlife creating a painting. And the painting gets more and more and more detailed as he kind of unravels his being alive compared with the afterlife. It's a very good story to read.

It's very interesting to read that kind of close to or in tandem with Lewis's *The Great Divorce*. Because both of these are a contemplation of analogies, an analogous contemplation of the afterlife.

Julie Walker: I love *The Great Divorce*. And a lot of my friends have said, "Oh, I've never read that because divorce is a bad thing." It's like, no, no, no, no. It's not what you're thinking. It's the divorce of heaven and hell, not of a marriage. And it's like, "Oh, I had no idea." So it's a great story.

Andrew Pudewa: Tolkien was Catholic, Lewis was not, but they both had this way of kind of creating these analogous scenarios about what's the distance between us when we die and the beatific vision and that we probably just can't go there immediately. There's a process. It would be too shocking.

Julie Walker: Well, the reason I brought up *Leaf by Niggle* is because of that detail. He spends so much time painting that one leaf in this huge painting of a bicycle under a tree.

Andrew Pudewa: Because he's got to get it just right...

Julie Walker: just right. And isn't that what Melville did in *Moby-Dick*, perhaps?

Andrew Pudewa: I guess so. I have been interested because of this to read a biography of Melville. Surely someone wrote it. Ofcourse, we have his short story, "Bartleby the Scrivener," in one of our SSS courses.

Julie Walker: I believe it's in 2C. It's either in 1C or 2C, but I'm pretty sure it's 2C. And I love that. In fact, we often make comments around here, jokingly, "I'd prefer not to."

Andrew Pudewa: from that story. But Melville was not highly regarded as an author during his lifetime. And it was, his day job was working,

Julie Walker: As a scrivener?

Andrew Pudewa: No, but maybe similarly, I think he worked in the patent office or some kind of government office. And *Moby-Dick* wasn't, it didn't sell until after he died and then somehow it became more well known, and of course now it's probably hasn't been out of print for a hundred years.

So I'm curious to learn more about... The other thing that strikes me—Melville did go off and work on a whaling ship. So he had a lot of personal experience. But how some people have this phenomenal ability to remember details of things... and I am not that kind of person, unfortunately. I have met other people who are. But, that couple, however many years he was doing that, obviously had a huge impression. And then, I don't even think he went to college or university. He just could write.

And, the other thing that I realized about Melville's writing. He is the absolute master. I've never read anything that does it as well as Melville did, and that is alliteration. It's almost a continual poetic device, but he does it in that super smooth way. You hear it, and you get the perfect image from what he said, and that was exactly what he wanted to say, and then the echo of the alliteration kind of resonates a little bit in your experience. And you think, Oh, that was beautiful. I remember the first time I had that thought and then it happened again and then it happened again, and pretty soon it's just happening so often that there's a beauty to the use of language. I have not actually encountered in any other author.

I mean, Shakespeare is in a different category because it's very antiquated English, Melville's more modern. And his knowledge of the Greek, the ancient Greek, his knowledge of the Roman literature, his knowledge of Shakespeare was very, very evident. Oh, and his knowledge of the Bible. And he's working in all of these allusions and references and quotations from this great stuff. You think, how did one man become so incredibly educated in this literary way? I can't think of another author who could do what he did.

Julie Walker: Kind of weaves it all together.

Andrew Pudewa: And of course, his other book that I read was *Billy Budd*, and that's a tragic hard story. And *Moby-Dick*, pretty much, that's a tragic hard story although the main

character lives. And I think part of it is he probably had some tragic hard stuff going on in his life, and it must have been cathartic for him to write these stories of reality and loss.

Julie Walker: I know that, Andrew, often people, oftentimes people come to you, and we talk about this occasionally on social, where people want to know, what should I read? What's the book list? And I think of the dozens and dozens of titles that we have on our book list, on our website, link in the show notes. But if you were to say, it's summer and if you were to say pick a book that you can really get into. And maybe your schedule only allows for 15-20 minutes a day because you're busy. What book would you recommend? Would you recommend *Moby-Dick* for the busy mom, for the busy dad who's got either they're teaching or they've got some homeschool kids, but it's summer. Is it something, oh, here's another one... Is it a read aloud? Is *Moby-Dick* a read aloud?

Andrew Pudewa: It would be a very challenging book to read aloud well, because the sentences are very long. The audible version is very well read, and I remember as I was listening thinking it would be hard to do this. It would be hard to record this book. You'd have to do a lot of retakes, because you know how sometimes a sentence starts off, and then it doesn't go the way you expect it to go, and it goes a different way, so you would have to know what it's going to do in order to give the right nuance and substance.

Julie Walker: So kudos to the Audible editors for that book.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, well, I think it would be a hard one. I think it has more, it definitely has more appeal to men and boys. Just because, well, pretty much all the characters are men, and the thing is very active and has themes that are very boy/man oriented. So I just don't know if it's the best use of anyone's time, but I would say it, it's a challenge. It's going to be a little bit like running a long race. If you haven't read a long hard book in a while, this might not be the first one to pick up. But if you have, and you like the challenge, then it should be immensely satisfying.

Julie Walker: Yes, indeed.

Andrew Pudewa: I would still put *Anna Karenina* as the best novel I've read, ever.

Julie Walker: Also a long, hard book though.

Andrew Pudewa: It's a long hard book. I don't think it's as hard just because there's more interesting things that happen along the way. And there's a little more intrigue, and there's these, character development happens a little more. There's not a lot of character development happening in *Moby-Dick* the way. And Tolstoy's level of truth, capital T-Truth, that he can embed in dialogue is just so, so powerful. So I guess for the men, try *Moby-Dick* or try *Billy Budd* first. That's a shorter book, challenges the idea of justice. What really is justice and how would you go about bending your knee to the law even though it was unjust? That's, as I recall, that's really the theme of that book.

And then, *Anna Karenina*, anything by Tolstoy. These are harsh books because they deal with reality. And part of reality, of being human is death. So people say, "Oh no, I don't want to

read *Anna Karenina* because—death, suicide, it's depressing, it's hard.” That's not the real story. That's the foil for the real story which is a beautiful romance and conversion story.

But, I don't know what else to say. I mean, those are two options. What do you think? I mean, if you had to give your friend or relative your best suggestion for a good hard book to challenge with over the summer?

Julie Walker: A good starting book, not too hard, not *Anna Karenina* as, and you know, Andrew, that was not my favorite book, but I've only read it once. Maybe I need to go back and read it again and again. But one of the first hard books that I read wasn't that hard, but it felt hard to me. And that was *The Scarlet Pimpernel*.

That's the book, not the movie. Don't watch the movie because there's a mystery in *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, but you have to get through some of that hard language. It jumps kind of right in the middle of the story, and to follow the characters and a little bit of the English. I would say that that's a really nice, easy book that any mom or dad could read. And if you have teenagers, you could probably read it out loud to the teenagers, but I love that book.

Andrew Pudewa: And then one notch up, or two notches up, would be *Les Misérables*.

Julie Walker: Yes.

Andrew Pudewa: That's a very long, long book.

Julie Walker: Takes place in the same era, so that would...

Andrew Pudewa: And in a way, it has these mysteries and these questions. And like a good Dickens novel, in the beginning, nothing makes a whole lot of sense. And then at the end, as it all comes together, you're just kind of in awe. How did he do that? How did he weave all those disparate ideas at the beginning into this finale?

Yeah, Dickens is the master.

Julie Walker: And we mentioned *The Great Divorce*, and that's another, a little bit hard, but still,

Andrew Pudewa: oh, I wouldn't, I would say that's way easier, way easier...

Julie Walker: Then it's an easy hard book.

Andrew Pudewa: than a Dickens novel.

Julie Walker: Oh, this is true.

Andrew Pudewa: Like *Hard Times* or *David Copperfield*

Julie Walker: *Tale of Two Cities* was a hard one.

Andrew Pudewa: *Tale of Two Cities* is possibly one of the hardest books in that, at least with Melville, You do know what's going on there. There's no mystery as to what's happening. *Tale of Two Cities*, you just don't get it. You're a third of the way into the book before you even kind of start to understand what's happening. That's really frustrating to kids, and that's where I think a really hard book if you do the audio, and it is well read, then the reader adds to the text this nuance of understanding that you can't extract from it when you're reading it silently to yourself and that you probably can't really put into it if you were reading it to someone else out loud for the first time.

But it's kind of like, “Oh, you know what's going on. So when you say this, you just add in these subtle little vocal inflections that aid tremendously in comprehension.” And that's a suggestion for families out there that have got teenagers, and you want them to read something challenging, and they just kind of give up on it. If you can get them to listen to the audio, if it's well read, while they're looking at the text, it will make a world of difference.

Julie Walker: Great suggestions. Well, reader. Well, listener whoever you are, you've got your little bit of homework for you this summer. Choose one of these great books.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, it'd be fun to find out if anyone listening to this, picked one of these, or a different book has that kind of summer rigorous reading challenge, and let us know what it was and how it changed you or affected you.

Julie Walker: Sounds great. Love to hear from you. Thank you, Andrew.

Andrew Pudewa: Thank you, Julie.

Julie Walker: Thanks so much for joining us. If you enjoyed this episode and want to hear more, please subscribe to our podcast in iTunes, Stitcher, or Spotify. Or just visit us each week at IEW.com/podcast. Here you can also find show notes and relevant links from today's broadcast. One last thing: would you mind going to iTunes to rate and review our podcast? This really helps other smart, caring listeners like you find us. Thanks so much.