

A Visit with Sarah Mackenzie

Transcript of Podcast Episode 337

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.

So Andrew, I am just like squirming with excitement. I’m so delighted with our guest that we have on our podcast today.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, you’re squirming. I’m buzzing. We’re like insects.

Julie Walker: Yes. Well, you know, this is a friend of ours from many years ago, and I actually have a book on my shelf, a book that she wrote. He’s like – how I’m keeping this mysterious. Who is it that we’re talking to today?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, everyone knows because it’s in the title of the podcast.

Julie Walker: It is in the title.

Andrew Pudewa: So spill the beans quickly.

Julie Walker: Okay. So the book that Sarah Mackenzie wrote called *Read-Aloud Family*. She wrote, you know, just a little inscription to me. It’s not published or anything, but my personal copy says: “To Julie, who gave me the first ‘Yes’ I needed.” And that yes, of course, was she asked me if you, Andrew Pudewa, could be on her podcast that she was just starting. So really, I just was the channel.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, back in those days, I’d basically go on anyone’s podcast, whether anyone knew them or not.

Sarah Mackenzie: The minor detail here is that I didn’t have a podcast when I asked, but I created one real quick.

Julie Walker: And wow, has it grown, Sarah. We’re so proud of you.

Sarah Mackenzie: Oh, thank you.

Andrew Pudewa: It is a delight. And of course, you know, hearing your voice, we had such a great convention year though, didn’t we?

Sarah Mackenzie: We did. That was my favorite session that we did at every conference: “The Ten Best Questions We Ever Got.” I think that’s what we called it, right?

Andrew Pudewa: I think so. Of course, we made up all the questions ourselves, but you know, composite.

Sarah Mackenzie: And sometimes you would surprise me with one I wasn't prepared for. That happened too.

Andrew Pudewa: Yes. Well, I thought we've got to mix it up a little bit. We don't want to get stale, but we did it five times.

Sarah Mackenzie: We did. And I have to tell you; I was going to tell you this the other day. I was going to text you, and I forgot, that now anytime my husband makes asparagus for dinner, he cuts that up, really high up the stalk and says, "Andrew told me I could." Now people are going to have to listen to the episode to understand what that means.

Andrew Pudewa: I won't give it away, but yes, there was a thing about asparagus. I hope it's on that particular episode.

Sarah Mackenzie: It is, it is; I was just listening to it. Yeah, it is.

Andrew Pudewa: Good.

Julie Walker: So, and for all of our listeners who did not have a chance to go to the great homeschool conventions this year to see you and Sarah do this talk, where can they find this talk? I'm going to ask you, Sarah, because I think you're putting it up on your podcast. Is that correct?

Sarah Mackenzie: Yes, that is a podcast episode going up on September 1, 2022. You'll be able to find it in the Read-Aloud Revival podcasts. So wherever you listen to this podcast, you can look for the Read-Aloud Revival podcasts, or you can go to readaloudrevival.com/212 because it's Episode 212. And, that's really, I mean, it was really fun for me to listen to it again, to prepare to put it up on the podcast because it really was a joy.

And also, I feel like a lot of the questions we tackled during that hour were questions that I was going to say haunted me. I'm not sure that's the right word, but they were. They followed me all in my early days of homeschooling. So yeah, it was really a joy to share the microphone with Andrew and see and talk to all those wonderful mamas.

Andrew Pudewa: I almost felt guilty, like having so much fun and feeling like I was, you know, working at the same time. So it was great. And I hope we do such a thing once again, but I'm thinking back to when we had dinner a couple years ago. And you confided in me that you had a new project coming.

Sarah Mackenzie: Yes.

Andrew Pudewa: And I had to keep it under wraps. It was really hard for me not to just go tell every mother that I would meet, "Guess what's going to happen?" But I restrained myself. But

now the news is out, and the Sarah Mackenzie and Company new project is so exciting. Can you tell us a little bit about it?

Sarah Mackenzie: I'd love to, yes. So I have been writing for children for some time. You know, at Read-Aloud Revival, that's what we do, right? We're reading and recommending books for parents to read aloud with their kids. And so picture books are something I have always wanted to write and have been trying to write for years.

And over the last decade or so, I've managed to have about four or five of them now that were ready to like go out to publishers. So for several years I had an agent who was taking them out to all these big New York publishers. And the New York publishers, surprise, surprise, were not interested in them.

They were just not the kind of books that they were looking to publish at the time. A lot of the feedback we got was very insightful for my Read-Aloud Revival self because we'd hear: Oh, they're too classic. They're too old fashioned. They're too timeless ... which is the kind of books that we are looking for, right?

And I thought, "How interesting; what I'm hearing from Read-Aloud Revival families is, 'Sarah, where are all the classic, timeless books?'"

And then what I'm hearing from publishers is, "That's not what we publish." So, couple years ago, we decided we are going to do it ourselves and create a publishing house.

So we've created Waxwing Books, which is a publishing house really dedicated to children's books that are excellent read-alouds. And our very first book is ready now; it's called *A Little More Beautiful: The Story of a Garden*. I wrote the text for this one. We have a delightful, wonderfully talented illustrator, Breezy Brookshire, who is homeschooled herself, which is ...

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, wow, that's awesome.

Sarah Mackenzie: so awesome. And you know, she's not professionally trained. She didn't go to art school. She just had all this time as a homeschooled student to study books, to study art, to learn like all the things that we believe in, I think, in homeschooling about, I mean, the time and space to pursue your interests. And her artwork is truly stellar.

So it's been a really ... it's been a joy and a huge challenge because I feel like every time we turn around we have to learn something, how to do something we have no idea how to do, which is sort of the story of Waxwing.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, if I remember correctly, you kind of told me that, you know, every year because you have quite the following, you get samples of the new books, the new children's books from a variety of publishers, and that one year you looked at the whole stack and thought, "I really can't recommend any of these books to our families or the parents."

Sarah Mackenzie: Yeah, it's true.

Andrew Pudewa: And what do I do when there's no more good stuff available? I guess we'll just have to start a publishing house and do it ourselves. Was that the story?

Sarah Mackenzie: Yeah. I mean, that is pretty much the story. There would be entire boxes full. Some publishing houses will send us their entire lineup, which sounds amazing, right, because you get all these free books until you realize some of the ... A lot of times when we open them up, we're, "Hmm."

And I think because I read aloud so much with my own kids and at my homeschool co-op with everybody else's children too. You know, I'll read aloud to any child I can snag. I feel like, the experience of a parent who reads with their kids and reads the same books again and again because that's what kids really want, right, is different than maybe what the publishing establishment, you know, like in-air quotes here, thinks about when they're deciding on what they're going to publish.

And so a lot of times the reason I think that families grab and reach for those old, timeless classics, like *Make Way for Ducklings* and *Miss Rumphius* and *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*.

Andrew Pudewa: *Blueberries for Sal* – I just read that four times in one week.

Sarah Mackenzie: Wow. Yes.

Andrew Pudewa: Grandchildren were visiting. I don't know what it is. They just, they love to hear. So I have some theories on why kids love to hear the same books again and again and again and again. Why do you think that is?

Sarah Mackenzie: Oh, that's interesting. I want to hear your theories. A couple of things. As a child so many things are new and unpredictable. You can't control like anything in your life, but like you are reading *Blueberries for Sal*, and the same things happen in the same order every time. And so you turn the page, and you know what's going to happen.

And then it does. There's like something really satisfying about that. But I actually think a really well-structured narrative, like a really well-told story – it hits so many of the beats of the way God made us that, like, we are people, creatures who want story. We ... Someone starts telling a story, and we can't even keep ourselves from like leaning in to want to hear it.

It immediately grabs our attention. And so when an author has done that really well, or an author illustrator has done that really well with his story, I think we ... it feeds something in our soul that's just ... we can't get it anywhere else. We can't quench that thirst anywhere else.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, that on a spiritual level absolutely. I think that is so true. And then there's kind of an intellectual component. It seems to me, and I haven't had any child explain this to me, but it seems to me that every time they hear it, they understand it a little bit more and a little bit more and a little bit more.

And one of the definitions of a classic that I have heard and used and shared with people is a classic is a book or a piece of music or art or something, which you can experience again and again and again and again and get more out of it each time. And so when we say “classic” children’s books, I don’t think we’re limiting that to old children’s books.

It’s a nature of a book that it can be experienced again and again and again, and then there’s something ... They see something more, something at a different angle, or they have a little more life experience that they connect it to. And that love of that connection is also just so satisfying.

Sarah Mackenzie: Oh, I mean, as a reader myself, I feel this, you know. I can read *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* again, and I’ve read it aloud multiple times and read it to myself. And it doesn’t matter. I know when I read it again, there will be a new layer like, you’re saying. There’ll be something new, like a new angle, which I think is a huge difference.

Andrew Pudewa: How many times have you gone through *The Lord of the Rings*?

Sarah Mackenzie: Do we have to talk about this on the podcast? You’re going to tell all my secrets. I tell you, this is not polite homeschooling society talk here, Andrew.

Andrew Pudewa: That’s okay. People can go listen to the “The Ten Best Questions” replay on the podcast. But let’s get back to your writing because I know that you would not do anything less than absolutely excellent. And there’s the technical side. But you must have constructed this and the other children’s stories you’ve written with that – somehow semiconscious, subconscious, intentionally—I don’t know—that desire and knowledge of how to construct a story that children would want to experience again and again and again. How did you do that?

Sarah Mackenzie: Oh, that’s an interesting question. I don’t think anyone’s asked me that yet. So I am kind of a story structure nerd, so I could listen to people talk about narrative structure and what happens at the different parts of the story and the different twists and turns and why a character needs to know, you know, have something that they need or want and can’t have, like at a certain point in the story.

I could talk about that all day long. I’d just listen to somebody talk about that all day long. One thing that’s really interesting is that there is this interesting ... I think it’s an Ira Glass quote, where he talks about how something that happens with people who have good taste is that they can ...

The reason they have good taste is because they either, like, watch a movie or listen to music or read a book, and they know it’s excellent. So then when they try to do it themselves, they are especially aware that what they’re making is not excellent. And that hurdle, like crossing that hurdle from trying to make something while you also have really good taste being like a kind of a big chasm.

That’s like, you have to kind of slog through that. So for years and years I was studying the structure and the artistry of a picture book. Picture book form is just my favorite. I just ... I think in picture books; I think about them all the time. I read them for fun all the time. I love them.

Something that's been interesting for me as a writer is that it takes me a long time to write a draft.

So a picture book is only about three hundred words, sometimes a little more, oftentimes less. And yet it will take me months and months. And I will send, I will write ten, twelve, fifteen different drafts of a book, of a manuscript that's three hundred words. And then I'll send it off to a critique partner who will send me four pages of critique on my two-page manuscript.

And then we'll go back over it several more times. And then for the books we're doing at Waxwing, we also hired a professional picture book editor who used to be a publisher at one of the big New York houses, who's freelancing for us now. And he'll give me feedback that helps me see things I hadn't seen.

And I would never have known until I tried to write one, just ... There's a difference. So, you know, when you read *Blueberries for Sal*, this book is magical. It is so good. It's so well structured. The language is better than most picture books. But it's the knowing that, like that hunch, and then knowing how to do that is so different.

Like those are so different. That's what I feel like has been my biggest challenge. And the thing that also is very motivating to me because it's very exciting: like how do we do that? Actually, I do want to know what makes a book, the kind that you really want to read again and again.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, I'm thinking of Bill Pete.

Sarah Mackenzie: Okay. Yes.

Andrew Pudewa: And what he does with combining the story and the language, his use of words and imagery is just so amazing. And my favorite, of course, is Hubert the lion, whose mane catches on fire and how he did the whole thing in rhyme.

Sarah Mackenzie: Oh, yes.

Andrew Pudewa: Do you have any ambitions to do one in rhyme?

Sarah Mackenzie: Okay. Yes. Oh, this is such a fun conversation. I am a huge fan of rhyme, but I am the world's biggest picture book snob when it comes to rhyme. This, our second book at Waxwing is actually in rhyme, and I took a whole class that was like twelve or fourteen weeks, I'm trying to remember, online – that was all about lyrical language.

And about half of that class, you're just learning how to scan for meter and emphasis and rhyming perfectly in making that language sound just right. So a really good rhyming picture book will be ... Well, here's a good test. So if you were to hand like a rhyming picture book text to somebody and then hand it ...

So if I was to hand you one that you'd never read, Andrew, and then hand you the same one, Julie, that you hadn't read, it should sound pretty much the same as far as cadence and rhythm

regardless of who's reading it because it's all built into the way that those sentences are structured. And the pros at rhyming picture books do it really well.

Karma Wilson and the *Bear Snores On* series. I love the picture book, *The Seven Silly Eaters*. I mean, that one's a masterpiece because she really rhymes unconventional words you would never expect. And the language is really delicious, and it's hilarious. All of that. It's happening in a rhyming story that's very comedic too, so ...

Andrew Pudewa: Have you done a podcast specifically on rhyming children's books?

Sarah Mackenzie: Nope, but I'm writing it down right now. You keep giving me great ideas for our podcast.

Andrew Pudewa: That's what Dr. Suzuki called me. I couldn't play the violin worth beans, but he said, "You are Idea Man."

Sarah Mackenzie: That feels accurate to me.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. So I would love to have a podcast and a resource of your favorite rhyming children's books because you know, you can look at stuff, you know, online and think it's good. And then, you know, I've got a couple, and I just thought, "Well, that didn't live up to my hopes or expectation. In fact, I don't like that well enough to ever even want to read it again." And then it ends up in a box or the trash.

So I think that would be fantastic if you would focus in on rhyming. Okay, another question: I know people are thinking this because I'm thinking it, and I don't know the answer. You might have told me, but why "Waxwing"? Where did that come from?

Sarah Mackenzie: Do you know, I wish I had realized I was going to get asked this question a lot. And so I should have a really compelling, intellectual answer for it. But the truth is that cedar waxwings are my favorite bird. And there is a flock of them that come to my, a big tree that's right outside of my bedroom window.

And they just come for about a week every February, and they eat all the berries off this tree that ... I can't remember the name of the tree. And I know that, like, winter's on its way out, and spring is pretty darn close when the cedar waxwings come. And they're there for such a fleeting little visit. So I had this in my mind. And also I was very good friends with Tomie dePaola, the iconic children's book, author, and illustrator.

He passed away in 2020. One of his things that, kind of his media empire basically, his illustration empire was called Whitebird. So I knew I wanted the publishing company to be named after a bird as a nod to Tomie. And then the cedar waxwings are just my favorite. So Waxwing Books.

Andrew Pudewa: Beautiful. Oh, I love that.

Julie Walker: I wondered if it was the cedar waxwings. Because when I saw that, I went, “I wonder ...”

Sarah Mackenzie: Oh, yeah. Somebody asked me if they had an Icarus connection. And I thought maybe I need to familiarize myself with the Icarus story a little closer. Maybe I will sound more intellectual if I answer that way.

Julie Walker: No, I like the cedar waxwing. Stick with that.

Andrew Pudewa: And I don’t even know what a cedar waxwing might even possibly look like other than it has wings.

Julie Walker: This is the guy that was born and raised in Southern California. And like you, Sarah, I was born where it’s cold in the wintertime, and we actually get winter and spring as opposed to not having ...

Andrew Pudewa: I know a lot of fish names from swimming in the ocean.

Sarah Mackenzie: Aha. Yes.

Andrew Pudewa: Okay, so your book, the first one is about a woman who plants a garden.

Sarah Mackenzie: Yes.

Andrew Pudewa: And I’m not, I’m not saying give the story away. I am ...

Julie Walker: The name of the story – *A Little More Beautiful*.

Andrew Pudewa: *A Little More Beautiful*

Julie Walker: And that’s important because that’s where we should send our listeners to: *alittlemorebeautiful.com*. And that’s where you can find out where you can actually get a copy of this really beautiful book.

Andrew Pudewa: How soon are you going to be shipping now, Sarah?

Sarah Mackenzie: We’ll be shipping in February of 2023, which feels like eons way, doesn’t it? One of the things I was so excited about when we decided to create our own publishing house was, you know, we can speed this process up. But it turns out you can only speed up so much without compromising on quality, which is one of those things I won’t do.

So, yes, well, we’re shipping in February of 2023. So what we decided to do because we’re just a little baby publishing company, and we have no idea how many books to order. I’ve asked Andrew Pudewa about five hundred times: how many books should I order? Is that we decided to open preorders on *Kickstarter*, and we did that so that we could have an actual number.

You tell us, you know: Everybody just tell us how ... If you want a copy in the first print run so we know how many to order. And then, of course, we'll be offering the book afterwards as well. But that *Kickstarter* is sort of the way that we're guaranteeing the first, a copy of the book in the first print run.

And then the fun thing about *Kickstarter* is it also gives us a chance to include some fun things like a really beautiful book bag. And we have a seed packet that's like with the cover art on the book; it's really cute. So, you know, fun, things like that. Yeah.

Julie Walker: Your *Kickstarter* campaign started and ended in August. Is that correct?

Sarah Mackenzie: Actually it ends September 1.

Julie Walker: This podcast is launching August 31. So listeners, if you're hearing this today, run over to *Kickstarter* so you can get those cool gifts that go with it. And the link to that *Kickstarter* page is alittlemorebeautiful.com. It just redirects to the *Kickstarter* page.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, if, if I remember correctly, I was telling you: You need to print as many as you can possibly afford to print; you will sell them all. And I was even hoping that you would say, "Well, Andrew Pudewa, would you like to invest?" But no, you figured out a way to print as many as you can without me, but I don't resent it.

I'm going to be a customer. I'll buy many copies for many grandchildren's families, I'm sure. But I'm glad you got this tremendous response right out of the gate. I knew it would happen. So my question about the book ... I probably have more, and I will have more as I read it more often. But very often we see people using a garden as an allegory, right?

You know, so, you know, Robert Louis Stevenson, *A Child's Garden of Verses*. We see the comparison between gardening and life. You know, we have to plant the beautiful; we have to extract and remove the weeds that impede the beautiful. Were you thinking at all, "This is going to have some allegorical value," or did you just write the story and just love the story for itself?

Sarah Mackenzie: So when I was originally writing the story, it was just writing the story. It was just the story just came to me. It was inspired by that walk I had with Jeanne Birdsall several months beforehand. But over time, some different metaphors, I guess, did kind of appear. Interestingly, several of them, it's taken somebody else who points to the book and goes, "Oh, I love how you did this thing."

And I didn't do it on purpose. And so Kate DiCamillo, who's this, you know, amazing children's book author – she will say, "The book is smarter than you are." Like, the story is always smarter than you are. So she doesn't really know what any of her books are about necessarily till someone points at it.

There's a couple things that were just pointed out to me about this particular book. Jeanne told me recently that one of the things a garden means for her is hope for the future because no one

plants a garden if there's no tomorrow, right? No one plants a garden also who plans to leave that space. And so it's like sort of a commitment to being here.

And that to me feels really beautiful. One of the other things that I didn't know was happening in the story, but I think it probably was, now that I'm looking at it from a little bit of a distance. Again, I wrote the story four years ago. But in the story we have this old woman who plants a garden at night because she's been told she can't plant it at the city hall during the day, or she can't plant it at all.

So she does it at night. And she's doing all this work to make the world more beautiful. Nobody notices. Nobody notices she's doing it. And they're reaping the benefits of her work even without, you know, her getting any accolades or praise. And then she's moved from her little house in town to a new home, which is a nursing home. And nobody notices she's gone.

But now the bird feeders she was filling start to die, and the plants start to die, and things start to get neglected. And the only person who did notice her was the little girl. And there is this spread in the book that will remind our readers of *Miss Rumphius*, if you're familiar with Barbara Cooney's *Miss Rumphius*, because the illustrator was echoing *Miss Rumphius* on this spread when she made it.

But there's this spread where the little girl is standing there. And the wind is like blowing her hair. And she has decided when Lou Alice is taken away, to take up the work of Lou Alice and do the things that Lou Alice did. But also as she's standing there, she realizes there's something more that she must do. And she's not sure what it is, but she knows it.

To me, this feels .. Like I remember; writing it, feeling like ... I felt this as a very young girl and continue to feel it to this day: that sort of responsibility to carry on the traditions of those who've gone before, to honor our parents and grandparents and great grandparents and all of those in the church and in history who have come before us, while also knowing that I'm here now for a purpose and a reason. And there's something God wants from you and for you right here and now.

That, as this little girl, would light me up with excitement ... Like I wonder what that might be. And I really feel like the illustrator captured that. And in a way, this is the part that I did not realize until this week when someone pointed it out to me, is that in some ways Waxwing Books, the publishing company, is like that little girl because we are taking these echoes and hints of *Miss Rumphius* and these timeless classic tales, *Blueberries for Sal*, all these beautiful books. And we're saying, okay, but here and now we need to be making books that are this beautiful for the next generation and the next one and the next one.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, that's beautiful. That is a magnificent vision. And there's no doubt in my mind that Providence is behind everything you're doing right now. And it's just so great to see. One of my goals, Sarah, is I want to be able to play chess and read to and swim with my grandchildren's children. So I'm working on longevity right now.

Andrew Pudewa: It's my new hobby, and I can just imagine that there will be a whole shelf of books that you have described: the new generation of the truly beautiful stories, the truly beautiful art. Not that we won't have the older classics as well, but you're going to be creating a new wave of classics that will, I'm absolutely certain, stand the test of time.

I've got another question. I don't know that this is a good idea at all. But I have watched a video version of Beatrix Potter stories, which is essentially just someone reading the book and the illustrations going on the screen.

So it's not animated. It's really like just watching the pages of the book turn in sync with the way they were written. Do you have any idea that you would like to do that? And if so, would you like to ask me to read one of your books? But I'm just curious; what's your feeling about that? Because so many parents are still kind of looking at screens as a way to buy themselves a little time just to, you know, clean the kitchen or wash their hair. And so coming up with things that can be delivered through screen-based technology but are not screen-based technology.

Sarah Mackenzie: Yeah. I mean, I feel this as a parent, like this need, this desire to completely remove my children from the vice grip of screens, right, while also being a parent who has to get things done and also has to wash my hair and do the dishes and make dinner. Right? And so that feel, that pull is strong in my own life.

Here's the thing. I feel like there is nothing that can replace a parent and a child sharing a story together and flipping through the pages, and the feel of a book in your hands. But there are many times when it's ... We're not asking should you read on the couch with a book in your lap to your child or have them watch it on a screen?

When the other question is, could they be watching a story on a screen, the kind you described that's maybe not animated, that's just the illustrations put up? Or play Angry Birds™ or whatever the game is that people are wanting to play right now, whatever game. So there's like a good and a better and a best, you know, that kind of ...

So I feel like offering families good, wholesome screen options that also do the kind of things you talk about in "Nurturing Competent Communicators," Andrew – about like filling their minds and their ears with good language and big ideas and timeless stories that will stay with them and nurture them on a deep level. That feels like something worthwhile to do even as we can say this wouldn't replace our time spent reading with our kids.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, I'm kind of thinking of *Little Bear*, which I ... Just within the last year, I did not know this; I feel like an idiot for not knowing, but I didn't have a reason to care. But when I found out, it got me thinking that *Little Bear* was created by Maurice Sendak, who was primarily a children's book author and a poet. But this TV show, *Little Bear* – I mean, it is really unique in that it is not hyperstimulating visually. It uses beautiful language, and yet it's still tremendously engaging for young children.

Sarah Mackenzie: Well, and it, the book, the series, I think, is based on the books. But the series is like you're saying. It's slower paced. I think it uses the long shots or ... like the

difference between if you are watching *Sesame Street*, and they cut, cut, cut, cut, cut. And that is doing something to our children's brains that these longer ... Yeah, *Little Bear*'s pacing doesn't do when ... because it's not having your brain switch scenes so often. It feels different.

Andrew Pudewa: You may have to eventually change your name to Waxwing Productions because you may have to expand out. And I perceive a real need for super high-quality screen delivered things like *Little Bear* that are even better in terms of being good and true and beautiful. So anyway, just another bug to put in your ear, as if you didn't have enough to do already.

Julie Walker: Oh, my goodness. She's got so many great ideas and such a loyal, loyal fan base. Your Kickstarter got completely funded within how long?

Sarah Mackenzie: Ninety minutes.

Julie Walker: Ninety minutes. That's a loyal fan base, Sarah.

Sarah Mackenzie: Well, you know, I'll tell you what. We have been working on this for so long, and I am not very good at keeping things quiet, but this was one of those projects ... I thought, "Well, it's going to take us so long. We've just got to keep it quiet for now." And so to be working on something so diligently and so hard for such a long time and then, and really doing it on faith that, like, I think we're making the thing that you're going to want, like that will help you: that you want, that you're asking for.

And then to just present it and say, "Okay, how about this?" And they're such amazing people. Like there's, they're... I love ... This is why I love going to conventions because I love seeing them face to face and hugging them and just being in their presence because these are parents who are so dedicated to being faithful to God's call in their life, to raising their children, to infusing their kids with imagination and the skills that they need to do the one thing that they need to make the world more beautiful.

So it feels to me like this tremendous gift to be able to stand among them. When we launched the Kickstarter, and it was funded in ninety minutes, and it was doubled actually in the first twelve hours, I thought, "Oh, my goodness!" I just felt like, "Oh, I'm so excited to make exactly these kinds of books for our people."

And that's, I should say, because most people who are listening to this podcast will probably be listening to it after the Kickstarter ends. The Kickstarter was sort of our way of launching the project. But if you go to alittlemorebeautiful.com, you'll be able to find the project now whenever you're listening to it, because, of course, it will be available.

Julie Walker: So Sarah, you have given Andrew and me a great gift in that you've allowed us to preview the whole book. So as we're talking, I'm kind of paging through it. And the illustrations are beautiful. You talked about poetry, and you have this line in here over and over again: "Sow, tend, water, mend." You already have ... you are already rhyming, girl.

You're doing such a great job, but I can imagine reading this book to my granddaughter, to my grandson. And I love that you included white space, not literal white space. But on this one two-page spread, I am seeing two words. It's just so beautiful. Like pause and reflect about the story and what's happening.

And the other thing that you did is on almost every page ... And kids love this. I think Richard Scarry did this with his little Goldbug. Kids love to find the hidden thing. Well, you've got a cat on almost every page. And well, where's the cat this time? There he is. Oh, I ...

Andrew Pudewa: Was that your idea or the illustrator's?

Sarah Mackenzie: No, it was the illustrator's idea. The illustrator and art director kind of came up with it together. But that was so fun. And I think we did so many back and forths with the sketches in different stages. I really believe that my picture book nerdiness is going to come out here in a second. But a really good picture book ...

If we were to take away the text and just look at the pictures, you'd have a good idea, but you wouldn't get the full story. And if you were to take away the pictures and just read the text, same thing. And so what we were really trying to do as we went back and forth and back and forth is make sure that the words were not saying anything the pictures were.

And the pictures were not saying what the words were. We were really trying to make them each bring something to the storytelling table. So we ... There were a couple illustrations where we, I think afterwards we went ... Oh, no, we wanted to put a kitty there, but it will be fun. I think it will be fun for kids to find the kitty cat.

Andrew Pudewa: On a more technical note, I wanted to acknowledge the fact that I really appreciate: you completely separated the text from the pictures visually so that there's no overlap. I do not like it when children's books put text over illustrations. I think it makes it harder for kids who are trying to maybe read along with the parent who's reading to them.

It's just, it's visually a little chaotic. And so I really encourage you, you know, to continue with that format. You probably had the same feeling that I did.

Sarah Mackenzie: Well, thank you. And that really was our art director, who's a very accomplished art director. She's art directed some Caldecott award winners. She's sort of a big deal. She really took a chance on us. I felt like when I reached out to her, like, okay, I'm starting this thing I don't know how to do. Could you help me?

But she was ... It was fascinating to me how early in the process she can tell when she needs to guide an illustrator to ... We're going to need to move. We need room right here for text, or we're going to need room here for text because like you said, the text that covers illustrations sort of ruins that really immersive experience that you're having usually when you're reading.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, keep it up. All right. So, I would love to finish up. I'm sure you and I could go on for hours, but I would really love to finish up by inviting you to read just the first

few pages, however much you feel comfortable, so that our readers can ... They can't see, but they can hear the beginning of your story.

Sarah Mackenzie: In a little town not far from here lived an old lady named Lou Alice. She was sly as a fox and swift as a bird. Every day Lou Alice went for a walk past the library, through the city park, by the town hall, and back home to her little house. Lou Alice decided to leave each day more beautiful than she found it.

One afternoon, rather than passing the town hall, she went inside. "I would like to plant a garden here," she said to the man in charge.

"That is too much work for you, Lou Alice," the man responded. "Go on home. And don't worry about the town hall."

Lou Alice, however, was sly as a fox and swift as a bird, and under the light of the moon she planted that garden.

Sow, tend, water, mend. And the little garden grew.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, gosh.

Julie Walker: I love that.

Andrew Pudewa: And I'm so old; I start to get teary eyed at dumb things.

Julie Walker: That was not a dumb thing.

Andrew Pudewa: It's beautiful. Beautiful.

Sarah Mackenzie: Thank you.

Andrew Pudewa: Just crafted so well.

Sarah Mackenzie: Thank you.

Andrew Pudewa: All right, Sarah. We'd better let you get back to work because I know you have a lot of work.

Sarah Mackenzie: Thank you so much for having me. I mean, it's so much fun to talk to you both.

Andrew Pudewa: It always is. We'll have to do it again a year or so from now. And you can update all of our listeners on what else is going on with Waxwing. If not, I would assume probably almost all of our listeners are your listeners as well. But we'll love to get an update once you're at the finish line or beyond it or into the next project.

Sarah Mackenzie: I would love to.

Julie Walker: Thank you so much, Sarah.

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