

A photograph of a man with a beard and dark hair, wearing a yellow t-shirt with a blue graphic, sitting on a wooden floor. He is reading a book to two young boys. One boy, wearing a blue plaid shirt, is pointing at the book. The other boy, wearing a red shirt, is looking at the book. The man is holding the book open, and the boy in the plaid shirt is pointing at a colorful illustration of a scene with people and buildings. The text 'STORYTIME' is overlaid in large, bold, red letters with a white outline, and 'reading aloud to kids' is overlaid in smaller, white, italicized letters below it.

# **STORYTIME**

*reading aloud to kids*

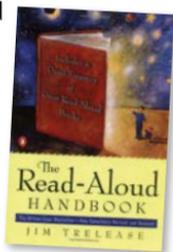
by Paul Freedman

## A CONVERSATION WITH JIM TRELEASE



Jim Trelease is a man with a passion for books. He believes reading aloud to children is one of the most life-enhancing gifts any parent can give.

Author of the million-selling 'Read Aloud Handbook', Jim has had a long and successful career in many different countries, promoting the benefits that follow when parents, relatives, friends and teachers spend quality time reading to children ... even after they're old enough to read for themselves. We caught up with Jim recently and asked him where this passion for reading aloud came from.



**JIM TRELEASE:** I got it from my father. I was a hyperactive child, always in all kinds of mischief – never sitting still for long – and somehow my father, who wasn't college educated, hit on the idea of reading to me at night. My mother would hand me over with an exhausted, "Here ... you take him!"

And ... we clicked! It was a sort of magic. And I remember that little ritual we had as though it was yesterday.

At elementary school I was in a class with 94 kids. So the teacher coped by using flashcards, making us do the drill and sound out the vowels. I remember thinking, "This isn't what reading's all about! What my dad and I do every night, that's real reading! But, if this is what I have to do to get to the magic, then okay, I'll endure all this chanting and singing." And, somehow, I learned to read that way ... but my real purpose was to get to the magic my father showed me.

**GRAPEVINE:** So what was the spur that prompted the *Read Aloud Handbook*?

**JIM:** Well, I read to my own children because my father had read to me – I didn't want my kids to miss that great feeling. I was an artist and journalist, and I'd started visiting classrooms giving the children little career talks. One day, as I was leaving a class, I noticed a book on the shelf that I'd just finished reading to my daughter. It was *The Bears' House* by Marilyn Sachs – a very unusual book about a welfare child who was raising her little brother and taking care of her sick mother.

I asked, "Who's reading *The Bears' House* in here?" And three little girls sheepishly raised their hands. "Don't you just love it?" I asked, and we chatted away enthusiastically about that book ... and other books.

Later, the teacher wrote me a letter thanking me because *all* the books I'd talked to the children about, they'd raced to the library to get out.

So, soon, I made a point of asking the children "What are you reading?"

And I found they weren't reading much, usually ... *except* in those classes where the teachers read aloud to the students. In other words, their teachers were advertising the product. (Doing work sheets and answering comprehension questions are *not* good advertisements for the pleasures of reading!)

Anyway, I decided to self-publish a little 30-page booklet that I could give to teachers to encourage the idea of reading aloud. This was 1979. And over the next three years it sold more than 20,000 copies in the US plus Canada. I never took out an ad – it was all word-of-mouth. One person who liked it was a Beginning Literature agent who wanted to show it to some publishers in New York. Six publishers turned it down but the seventh, *Penguin*, took a chance on it ... and that was about two million copies ago!

**GRAPEVINE:** What's the best age to start reading to a child? How old should they be for best effects?

**JIM:** You start reading to them at exactly the same time you start *talking* to them! You want to accustom the child to the sound of your voice. Makes no difference, initially, *what* you're reading. If the newborn child is feeding, then whatever book you're reading, just start reading it out loud. The child will come to associate the sound of your voice, the rise-and-fall cadences of your reading, with a secure, happy experience.

And then, as the child grows, you can start holding books up, talking about pictures, talking about the story. "*Cindy the moo cow jumped over the moon ...*" touching her hands on the page, talking about features you can see. It's all a very

pleasurable connection to print. As the child develops an idea of what a cow is and what a moon is, she gets to know what family love is too.

But, heavens – you don't wait! "Oh honey, the child's three years old now. I think we ought to start *talking* to him!" The longer you wait to say important little words like 'the' and 'you' and all the others, the harder it's going to be for that child to get a grasp of words at all – especially word in print.

**GRAPEVINE:** Does it matter *who* reads? Should it just be Mum and Dad – or is it good to have a wide variety: grandparents, aunts and uncles, older siblings?

**JIM:** Ideally, *everybody's* involved. Whoever has the care of the child for a particular time, *that* person should be reading. I read to my granddaughter today. If I hadn't, my wife would've done so, or my daughter. Everybody should have a hand in reading. And it's especially important when children are very little for *fathers* to be involved – particularly with their sons.

**GRAPEVINE:** Is there a best time for reading – for example, before bed? Could time after school be better?

**JIM:** That depends on the child. Some children will take a story anytime. My son was like that. However my daughter was a social butterfly. You didn't want to force the book on her, because force-feeding, as Plato said, "turns the stomach!" So we'd wait until she was tired, getting drowsy – then we'd bring out the book.

And as she matured, I found the best time for my daughter was bedtime. Whereas with Jamie – well, he was always ready for a story!

**GRAPEVINE:** Something else happens




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when children are read to – there’s bonding going on, right?

**JIM:** Right. It’s the same kind of bonding that occurs when you go walking with a child. You’re talking about things that you see – a flower, a dog, a fence, a lady hanging laundry on the line. The child’s learning facts from you, but also she’s learning to *trust* you – as a kind of confidante. And this sharing, plus the security and pleasure that comes with it, is a bond.

When my father died at the age of 54, all the things I wanted to talk to him about, I couldn’t ... he was gone. But what I *did* have were wonderful memories of the

times we’d spent together where he taught me how to figure out baseball averages, how to put shading into a picture, and all those hours when he’d read to me.

There’s another thing: when you’re reading (and especially when you get to novels), you start to enter a period when the child might not accept a lecture, but *will* take a story. Jesus Christ is a perfect example. (Whether you believe in Jesus or not doesn’t make any difference.) He was a famous teacher, and in every one of his lesson-plans he used *the story* to get the message across.

When you’re trying to introduce a

difficult subject – like coping with death – stories really help. The puppy dies; the bird dies; the grandmother dies ... and now you and the child are sharing the intimacy of this deep and sacred experience in a way that would *never* happen in mere conversation.

**GRAPEVINE:** How do you encourage parents who don't feel comfortable reading – or maybe aren't good with English?

**JIM:** Firstly, I stress that this is important. Most parents want to help their children. They may feel inadequate reading to their kids (just as some parents feel inadequate about algebra!) but they do want to help. If they start with picture books and simple stories, they'll find they get better and better at it.

Secondly, I assure them that accent doesn't matter. Don't worry. The child's learning to enjoy the *book* – he's not thinking about the accent.

Thirdly, many books are now available on CD. The next best thing to a live voice is a recorded voice – providing you're listening with the child and the book is there! You can pause the recording and ask questions: “*Why do you think he did that?*” “*Can you see the puppy in the picture?*” – as you would if you were reading it yourself. It's just the recorded voice that's different.

**GRAPEVINE:** Lots of children's books have suggestions for the age and vocab range in the blurb. Is it best to stick within that range?

**JIM:** Well, it's not just vocab. There's also the social level of a book – the emotional level. In the story, let's say a seven-year-old classmate dies. Now, your pre-schooler might understand all the words in that book, but is he ready for the death

of a classmate? And do you, as the reader, know that's coming?

It's a tough call. You, as a parent, want to protect your child, but you also need to *prepare* him. So, when you get to chapter books, you'd better thoroughly read the flap on the jacket – and you'd better stay at least a chapter ahead.

I can think of a couple of books I read to my children where I was almost caught unawares and the subject-matter was getting too deep. So I'd say “Let's take a little break here!” and maybe skip over sections I thought the child would have trouble handling.

Suitable vocab is important. You don't want to be interrupting the flow of the story to explain hard words – and nor do you want to turn it into a ‘test’, where you're drilling the child: “What does that word mean?”

But don't go the other way, either, and ‘dumb-down’ the book for your child. There is a ‘reading level’ to a book, but there's also a ‘listening level’. So a five-year-old can often *hear* stories that are written in an eight-year-old's vocab.

**GRAPEVINE:** We're not talking about raising ‘super-kids’ are we – child-prodigies who read at three and top exam-results?

**JIM:** The idea is to create a ‘lifetime reader’ ... not just a ‘school-time reader’. The school-time reader reads just enough to get by – to get the diploma, or pass mark – but quite likely takes a silent vow on graduation to never read another book in his life!

No, we want people who view books as *friends*, not *enemies* ... who're going to be reading for *pleasure* when they're 35 and 65 and 85 ... people who wouldn't *dream*



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of getting through a day without picking up a book.

**GRAPEVINE:** How about reading to children of different ages at the same time? Should they share stories or should their reading times be separated?

**JIM:** I often get asked questions like that: “I’ve got three children. One’s 12, one’s seven and one’s four. What one book could I read to all of them?”

And I usually say something like: “Do your kids all ride the same size bikes?”

“No.”

“Do they wear the same size underwear?”

“No.”

“Okay. If you can’t squeeze them into the same size underwear or onto the same

size bike, why are you trying to squeeze them into the same size book?”

Now, there were some books that I read together to both my daughter and son (who was four years younger), but not many. Picture books – no problem. We did them together all the time. But as soon as she got into novels, I realised they were emotionally beyond the range of my son.

There was a book called *To Catch a Killer* by George Woods ... about a psychopath. I read it to myself and thought, “Elizabeth can handle this. And she needs to understand that there are bad people out there, who weren’t born bad – people treated them badly and

turned them that way.” So I would read to her when she was doing the dishes.

So one night I’m reading *To Catch a Killer* to her ... she’s loving it, I’m loving it – very dramatic. Jamie, who at that time was seven, came into the kitchen one day and listened. I knew he was there, but there was nothing alarming in this particular chapter, so I didn’t shoo him away. Then, the chapter was over, she went off to do her homework, and that was that,

Next day my wife said to me, “We’ve got a problem!” She points to the living room, and there’s my seven-year-old son trying to read *To Catch a Killer*. So I sit beside him and ask “How are you doing with that?”

He answers “Not too good.”

“Why? What’s the matter?”

“Well, I don’t understand it.”

I said, “Oh, okay. Come here for a second ...” So I take him into the office where I had a big suitcase I used for taking books on lecture tours. I said to him, “Do me a favour Jamie, bring that over to me would you?”

He struggles to lift it and says, “I can’t. It’s too heavy.”

So I sat him on my lap, held up *To Catch a Killer* and said, “You see this book? This book is *too heavy* – not for your hands, but for your heart and your mind. But I’ll make a deal with you. When you’re old enough to do *To Catch a Killer*, when you’re 11, I’ll read it to you. Okay?”

“Okay” he answered cheerfully, and that was that.

Every year he’d ask, “Is this the year we’re gonna do *To Catch a Killer*?” And I’d say, “No. When you’re 11!” Finally we did read the book together – and it was his all-time-favourite.

**GRAPEVINE:** What’s your response to parents who complain that they don’t have time for any of this?

**JIM:** I remember a father once grumbling, “But it’s just gonna take more time to read to them separately!” And I said to him, “Sir, I don’t know if anybody ever explained this to you, but parenting’s not about saving time. If you wanted to save time, you shouldn’t have got into the whole parenting thing ...”

Parenting, ideally, is about *investing* time in your children – not saving it.

**GRAPEVINE:** Any tips on *how* parents should read – what they sound like, how they’re coming across? Obviously a flat dull monotone isn’t best, but should we try to be dramatic?

**JIM:** Well, you don’t need to perform to the standard of Sean Connery or Meryl Streep – but you do have to put a little “oomph” into it. Don’t sound like you’re trying to get through it so you can go back to the TV. The more effort you put into enjoying the story and bringing it to life, the better everything will go. Try pausing between sentences, even between words, to add some impact.

And remember, you learn best from listening to other people read. That’s why those recorded books can be so effective. You’re listening to people who are often the best in the reading-business, and it gives you something to aspire to.

**GRAPEVINE:** What about reading to children who have special needs? Autistic or hyperactive kids? Hearing-impaired? Down syndrome? Is reading aloud just as important for those kids?

**JIM:** Absolutely. I received a letter from a mother who’d been reading to her daughter. When Jennifer was born she was



*“When you read to a child there’s bonding going on. The same kind of bonding that occurs when you go walking with a child and you talk about things you see – a flower, a dog, a fence. The child’s learning to trust you – and enjoy the pleasure that comes with it.”*

Down syndrome, and the doctors told her mother that she’d never be able to read or write or speak or have any sort of normal life. The mother was simply determined that this wasn’t going to happen – so she started reading to her faithfully, and today Jennifer’s a high school honours student and college graduate with a good job. She’s a terrific kid whom you can have a great conversation with.

*Is it always going to be easy? No. Will there be times when nothing seems to be getting through? Yeah, it’ll feel that way. But you just never know. Don’t write the child off without trying.*

**GRAPEVINE:** Is it ever too late to begin reading aloud to kids?

**JIM:** Parents of teenagers who have never

been read to will have a much harder time getting into it than a classroom teacher. The classroom teacher has an advantage: the kids will think, “Oh, she’s going to read to us. Great! We don’t have to do any real work!” They won’t think the teacher is dumbing things down for them. But if a *parent* suddenly says, “Okay, I’m going to read to you!” you’re likely to get a reaction: “What d’you mean, you’re going to read to me?” They’ve also got their own social agendas that the parent’s interfering with.

So yes it does become more difficult later on.

**GRAPEVINE:** What about children’s attention spans. Do parents need to consider this when choosing books for reading

aloud? And when do you move from short stories to longer chapter books?

**JIM:** Well, I visited a classroom about six months ago. The teacher, Jennie, had been corresponding with me for several years. She runs a pre-school programme for three- and four-year-olds – and she'd been reading chapter books to them as well as hundreds of picture books. I was, quite frankly, sceptical, but she'd documented it all pretty well. So I spent a day observing Jennie and her class – and I was stunned!

She was doing *Doctor Doolittle* with that class. And they comprehended! They paid attention ... depending on the child. The young three-year-olds were inclined to just put their heads down and take a little snooze. But older threes and the fours were right into it.

Does Jennie stop and explain things? Absolutely. It's never a case of just reading on, if there's something they may not understand. But it works!

**GRAPEVINE:** We have a grandson who demands four 'storybook' stories at bedtime and two 'made-up' stories, often family events like "The Day Grandpa Drove the Car Through the Garage Door". It can be quite wearing, but it's also quite fun. Do you think making up stories like that is good?

**JIM:** Oh yes, very definitely. In fact, Jenny, the teacher who has the pre-school kids doing novels, uses them a lot. Lunchtime in her class is still centred on stories, but they're *true* stories from Jenny's personal life – and she has a large repertoire. The *Gorilla Story*, *The Peanut Man Story*, *The Birthday Story* and *The Bat & the Tennis Racquet Story* were a few of their favourites.



The children told me that make-believe stories always begin with, "Once upon a time ..." whereas each *true* story begins with the words, "It happened like this ..." I thought it was wonderful!

**GRAPEVINE:** Kids these days are used to technology – and their parents have desktops and laptops and tablets. Is there a role for computers, *Kindles* and high-tech stuff in children learning to love reading?

**JIM:** It's like TV. And TV is like those bottles of pills in our medicine cupboards. They can be life-saving – or they can kill us. The *dosage* is what matters. Too little, they're ineffective – too much, and they can do serious harm.

As we come into this digital age, children are learning at a very early age how to use screens. But research proves you don't learn as well from a screen as you do from a printed page – and that's documented. Some college students were

given information on a screen ... and others the same information in a hard copy on paper. Afterwards, the students with the hard copies had more answers and recalled it better and more accurately.

So dealing with the new technologies is going to be a great challenge. The Internet offers us a world so quick, so interesting, that it's going to revolutionise textbooks. But it also has some serious liabilities because of the distractions that these things throw up: you can hear when an email comes in, you can download a video, you can listen to music. The more distractions you have, the less you learn, and the harder it is to focus.

There's also an addictive element to the whole experience. Some mothers and fathers simply cannot pull their heads away from their instant messages and emails – and now their kids see it as competition: "This is what keeps Mum or Dad so fascinated, so we'd better do it too!" It's monkey-see, monkey-do!

I wouldn't try to do picture books with a child using a screen – because there's no sense of texture, no feeling of the *geography* in the child's mind relating to those images. But I'd have no problem reading a *novel* to a child from a *Kindle* or an *iPad*.

**GRAPEVINE:** Finally, Jim, what's the best gift, the ultimate gift, we can give our kids and grandkids?

**JIM:** Well, I suppose the VERY best gift is our unconditional love – so our kids know, deeply, that there's somebody in this world who, no matter what they do, loves and supports them and is there for them.

But perhaps the NEXT best gift would be a love of reading – so when you're gone they'll be able to travel to any place, in any time, and do the magic that you had.

Plato talked about it thousands of years ago when he said, "*It is the responsibility of people who carry torches to pass them on.*" And literate people who read to their children are passing on the torch from one generation to the next.

It's a great heritage!



FOR OTHER HINTS OR FREE BROCHURES ON HOW TO READ BETTER AND HAVE FUN WITH YOUR KIDS, VISIT [WWW.TRELEASE-ON-READING.COM](http://WWW.TRELEASE-ON-READING.COM).



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Thanks so much – John Cooney (founder/editor)

