

Reach Out & Read Podcast

EP 094: “Stories of Gratitude”

Guest Speakers: Traci Sorell, Ann Clare LeZotte, Dr. Sayantani DasGupta

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1	<p><u>SERIES INTRO</u></p> <p>Reach Out and Read: Where Books Build Better Brains.</p> <p>This is the Reach Out and Read podcast. I'm your host, Dr. Dipesh Navsaria, a practicing pediatrician with degrees in public health and children's librarianship. I'm a clinical professor of Human Development and Family Studies at the School of Human Ecology, and a professor of Pediatrics at the School of Medicine and Public Health, both at the University of Wisconsin in Madison.</p> <p>At Reach Out and Read, we dream of a world in which every child is read to every day. Our show explores how children and families flourish and thrive through a combination of individual well-being, confident parents, supportive communities, strong public health, and good policy. Join us here for thought provoking conversations on these issues with expert guests, authors, and leaders in the field of early childhood health and literacy.</p> <p>Research shows that reading physical books together brings the strongest benefits to children. That's why we're happy to have Boise Paper, a responsible paper manufacturer, as the founding sponsor of this podcast. Through their Paper with Purpose Promise, Boise Paper looks for ways to make a difference in local communities. Thank you to Boise Paper for investing in our Reach Out and Read community.</p>
2	<p><u>HOST INTRO / Dr. Navsaria:</u></p> <p>Three years ago, and several months into the pandemic, we recorded a special Thanksgiving episode. We didn't know how long the pandemic was going to last, and we didn't know what other surprises might be in store for us, but we did know that we were grateful for what we had and that we were grateful for you, our listeners.</p> <p>At Reach Out and Read, we know that reading aloud brings people together and encourages shared thoughtfulness, reflection, empathy, and laughter. We're thankful for every person out there who reads aloud to a child and doubly thankful for those</p>

	<p>who help encourage, coach, model, and reinforce shared reading as a regular occurrence in the lives of as many children as possible.</p> <p>On this holiday devoted to the spirit of giving thanks, we want to play that special Thanksgiving episode for you again today and have a few stories on that very theme read aloud to you. We asked three children’s authors - Traci Sorell, Ann Clare LeZotte, and Dr. Sayantani DasGupta - to share what ‘gratitude’ means to them. No interviews, no back and forth, just the authors in their own voice, telling their stories.</p> <p>And, before we go to them, thank you for the last three plus years that you've given us of listening to us in our many interviews, of your kind notes, your ideas, your thoughts and for being with us on this amazing journey. We're looking forward to doing much, much more.</p> <p>Transcriptions of all these pieces, along with the authors full bios, are available on our website at reachoutandread.org/podcast</p> <p><i>(transition sfx: page turn)</i></p>
3	<p><u>HOST SEGMENT INTRO / Dr. Navsaria:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traci Sorell is a citizen of the Cherokee Nation and an award-winning fiction and nonfiction writer of books, short stories and poems for young people. A former federal Indian law attorney and advocate, she lives with her family in the Cherokee Nation, located in northeastern Oklahoma. She turned to writing for young people because of her own experience as a child of never encountering culturally-accurate books about the Cherokee. <p>Her meditation on gratitude and thanks is rooted in the traditions of the Cherokee people — and how she draws on those strengths to cope with the modern challenges of now.</p> <p>Let’s listen.</p> <p><i>(Play Traci’s clip)</i></p>
4	<p><u>AUTHOR PIECE #1: Traci Sorell, in her own voice:</u></p> <p>What a time to live through – a global pandemic. Our ancestors lived through them before, but now we’re experiencing one firsthand with COVID-19 which has</p>

changed our lives forever. Focusing on gratitude in such a scary, uncertain and dangerous time can be difficult.

When I wrote *We Are Grateful: Otsaliheliga*, my debut picture book about my Cherokee culture's view of gratitude, I didn't realize how much I would rely on its message during the pandemic. As a Cherokee Nation citizen and mother, I wanted to share with others how we are taught to be grateful for the wonderful things that happen in life as well as the difficulties. Keeping balance in our lives is fundamental to our worldview.

The book starts in the fall with the Cherokee New Year and goes through the four seasons, sharing aspects of Cherokee culture, our history and family connections. Otsaliheliga is the sentence "we are grateful" in Cherokee and it's a familiar refrain throughout the book. Let me read the introduction and fall section for you now.

The Cherokee people say otsaliheliga to express gratitude. It is a reminder to celebrate our blessings and reflect on struggles—daily, throughout the year, and across the seasons.

Uligohvsdi Fall

When cool breezes blow and leaves fall, we say otsaliheliga . . .
. . . as shell shakers dance all night around the fire, and burnt cedar's scent drifts upward during the Great New Moon Ceremony.
. . . as we clean our house, wear new clothes, enjoy a feast, and forget old quarrels to welcome the Cherokee New Year.
. . . while we collect buckbrush and honeysuckle to weave baskets.
. . . to remember our ancestors who suffered hardship and loss on the Trail of Tears.
. . . and have hope as Elisi, Grandma, cradles the newest member of the family and reveals his Cherokee name.

This passage shares the preparations that Cherokee people do in preparing for a new year, getting ready to celebrate at the ceremonial grounds and feast with the community. Part of that preparation is certainly taking stock of the previous year and letting go of any quarrels with or bad feelings we may have about others before we begin the New Year. This first section also shares events that happen not just in fall like welcoming a child into the family and the grandmother giving the child their Cherokee name, but also that we remember and express gratitude for the ancestors who survived the forced removal in the winter of 1838-39 from our homelands in the southeast to Indian Territory, which is now called Oklahoma. I've reflected a lot on the struggles on my ancestors this year as I sought to help myself and my family during the pandemic.

Balancing my work, homeschooling our child (a very new experience in our family as for many others), and working to stay safe and healthy, I'll admit it's been hard to express gratitude some days. But I draw strength from those ancestors and share stories with our son about the people he comes from and how he's making them

proud by doing his part to stay safe even when it means not being around his friends.

I'm also extremely grateful that my every day work involves connecting with young people. Their unfiltered, authentic emotions and takes on life bring me joy, hope and reality checks on a daily basis. It just doesn't get any better than that. They are the first to tell me where my writing falls flat or is unclear. At the same time, hearing them share their stories or display their art makes my soul sing for our collective future. It's okay to have a mix of emotions in gratitude – the beautiful and the painful - often arrive very near, if not on top of each other. My hope is that our larger society will not just remember to focus on gratitude in November or at Thanksgiving, but as I write at the end of the book to see it as a necessity "every day, every season. Otsaliheliga. We are grateful."

May we will all continue to grow in our gratitude practice and model that for our young people daily. Wado (thank you) for this time together.

Otsaliheliga = oh-jah-LEE-hay-lee-gah
Uligohvsdi = oo-lee-GO-huhs-dee
Elisi = eh-LEE-see
Wado = wah-DOE

(transition sfx: page turn)

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HOST SEGMENT INTRO / Dr. Navsaria:

- Ann Clare LeZotte is the author of *Show Me a Sign* (a 2020 School Library Journal Book of the Year) and a forthcoming companion novel. A long-time youth services librarian who focused on underserved populations and inclusion, Ann is Deaf, bi-lingual, and bi-cultural.

Sometimes the influence that we may have on a child's life is one that we may not even realize at the time. There are many, many pieces to the story Ann Clare LeZotte shares with us today, but the one I identified with most was how much libraries meant to her education, career, and self.

(Play Ann's clip)

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AUTHOR PIECE #2: Ann Clare LeZotte, in her own voice

Jean Massieu was born in rural France in 1772. One of six deaf siblings, he was denied schooling until age 13 when he encountered a remarkable Catholic Abbey who enrolled him in the first French school for the deaf. There he learned to read and write French and later helped develop the first formalized French sign language. He became a popular teacher at the famous Paris School for the Deaf. The school was open to citizens who had never seen deaf people speak eloquently in a signed language. The audiences asked deaf teachers and students questions. When it came time for Massieu to answer, one participant wanted to test if deaf people were able to understand abstract concepts. He asked, "What is gratitude?". Massieu replied, "It is the memory of the heart." This quote has become famous in France though many may not know its origins - once a deaf shepherd boy without language, who grew to be an extraordinary and influential man.

I've been thinking about Massieu's definition of gratitude and who's memory I hold in my own heart. Born to a family, deaf with a pulmonary disability, in Long Island New York in 1969, I was fortunate to have parents who saw my worth as equal to that of my brother, Peter, who was born a year and some months before me. Peter grew up as a prodigy while I was always delayed in school. It was a time period when parents were encouraged not to teach their deaf children sign language. It was erroneously believed that if children signed they would never learn to use oral speech. I did learn American Sign Language, or ASL, in class outside of school but children who signed in class were told to sit on their hands.

Upon graduation, I was viewed as an oral success. That doesn't mean that I was a good student. Many deaf children spend so much time learning how to learn and to communicate that we fall behind in areas like literacy. I keep in my heart the memory of my parents, siblings and every teacher or adult who showed me that they believed that someday I could not just live independently or make a living wage but make my mark in the world.

Right out of college, I worked in my hometown library. I worked behind the scenes. I enjoyed the work and felt that it was something I was capable of doing equal to others. Imagine my surprise when I moved to Florida and I was hired to sit at a reference and circulation desk and to do storytimes and other library programs. How would that be possible? My manager saw before I did that my fluency in American Sign Language, and even my deafness, could be an asset to our library branch community. My oral voice is not always understood in my bilingual storytimes but young and old library patrons enjoy watching my signed story performances. I feel gratitude to my wonderful colleagues and friends who help me, even by just holding open a picture book so I'll have my hands free to sign. That first manager also encouraged me to teach free, intergenerational ASL classes at the library.

My first ASL class, I had young parents with their oldest son who was deaf and autistic. The boy would run around the table and stop and bang his head. I assured his parents it was fine - everyone was welcome. And I knew he was learning even if we didn't make eye contact. I remember the day that his father ran into the library

so excited to tell me that he communicated for the first time with his son. He was raking leaves and they both made the sign for “sweep.”

My outreach started when a local media specialist heard about the work I was doing at the library and invited me to her middle school classroom. A new blind student at the school was being mercilessly bullied to the degree that she was eating lunch with the media specialist in the school library. I was able to talk honestly with the class. My visit made a positive impact. It opened doors to what I realized I could do.

I'm retiring this year from the library due to a serious health concern. I am truly grateful for the memories of so many people who impacted my life and allowed me to impact theirs in ways I've never imagined.

While I worked at the library, I saw whose stories were and were not represented on the shelves. With “Show Me A Sign” and future children's books, I hope to share more deaf history, language and culture in compelling tales. I feel gratitude to everyone in the book world who made this journey possible – agent, editor, bookseller, teacher, librarian, parent and especially young readers.

Jean Massieu ended his life where he began - as a sheep owner in rural France. He's a forbearer for all deaf people everywhere. His student, Laurent Clerc, came to America with Thomas Gallaudet to form the first American school for the deaf in Hartford, Connecticut. I feel gratitude for Massieu's words and work, which I pass along.

And now I will make the sign for gratitude in American Sign Language.

Thank you.

(transition sfx: page turn)

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HOST SEGMENT INTRO / Dr. Navsaria:

- Dr. Sayantani DasGupta is a pediatrician, professor at Columbia University, and the *New York Times* bestselling author of the critically acclaimed, Bengali folktale and string theory-inspired *Kiranmala and the Kingdom Beyond* books.

My library school storytelling class professor told us something that was tremendously powerful once: “Just because it's not fiction doesn't mean it isn't storytelling.” This piece you're about to hear exemplifies exactly that — a story may not have made-up characters or fantastic settings, but will still have powerful images, apt references, and a narrative arc with a beginning, a middle, and an end, showing the listener the path to understanding the truth it wishes to tell.

(Play Sayantani's clip)

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AUTHOR PIECE #2: Dr. Sayantani DasGupta, in her own voice

“In the words, apparently, of Albert Einstein, “If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairy tales. If you want them to be more intelligent, read them more fairy tales.” And this Thanksgiving, I'm grateful for these words. I'm grateful for Einstein Gee who actually makes a guest appearance in my fantasy series. I'm grateful for children. But most of all, I'm grateful for stories. I'm grateful for being raised on them. I'm grateful for getting to read them, write them, and celebrate them.

And I'm extremely grateful to be able to do so many things that I love. Because, essentially, I'm a story receiver and a storyteller by profession. When people ask me about my different careers, I usually say it's all about the stories, because of course it is. Medicine is about giving and receiving stories - teaching the same, and writing, of course, as well. On a practical level, in pediatrics we have long recognized the importance of reading to and with children.

In fact, when I was in practice as a pediatrician, I wrote almost daily prescriptions for reading. I had an actual notepad to help me prescribe books to families of young infants and toddlers. And on that pad, I'd write things like “Read to your baby for 20 minutes.” And along with that prescription I'd give that family an age and language appropriate book to read together. I did this because I knew, as pediatricians and family practitioners who continue this practice all across the country know, that stories are good medicine. That reading aloud or being read to bonds families together - it promotes attachment. That children who are read to produce and understand language better, read earlier, and develop a lifelong love of books. But those are all changes at an individual or family or even community level. What I didn't realize at the time, was that children's literature can change the world.

What I've come to realize now, as a writer of children's fiction, is that children's books are in the business of not only improving receptive language or school performance but in the hard work of building young people's imaginations. Not just imagination, but children's books are in the business of *radical* imagination. Think about it. In children's and YA fiction, mice talk and fight with swords, little girls have big red dogs as best friends, wizards fly on brooms, and young people overthrow corrupt and unjust governments with wit and grit and a belief in themselves and each other. So, in a sense, children's and YA fiction are road maps to the future. They are blueprints for tomorrow. Because it's in their pages that

young people get the tools and the imaginative practice to envision what they want their world to look like - and if there's any time in history that this future planning is critically in need of radical imagination, it's now.

If we humans are to deal as a planet with everything from religious bigotry to racial injustice to environmental disaster, our future leaders, teachers, artists, politicians - our future adults - need to imagine radical possibilities for the world and simultaneously enact a sort of radical empathy - a radical love - towards those both like and unlike themselves. And I truly believe that children's and YA fiction has the responsibility and the power to do that critical work. So, I'm grateful then for stories. But I'm specifically grateful for the sense of imagination they promote and create. I'm also grateful for representation - ideally of a community from within a community. You've heard that expression "It's hard to be what you can't see." Well, it's going to be near impossible to change the world for the better if all our children and young people can't see themselves into the future - not just surviving, but powerful enough to thrive and create meaningful change.

Stories in which children of all racial and ethnic backgrounds are heroes, children of all family structures are centered, children of all sexualities and economic backgrounds and genders are the protagonists do the critical work of growing all our children's radical imaginations. They also do the work of building a radical empathy and love among all the children who read these stories. Because the truth is being deprived of stories about people like you or being deprived of stories about people in community with you, it's not just simply unfair or unjust it is deeply unhealthy on a personal level but also on a wider social level. Narrative erasure is a kind of psychic violence. In the absence of positive, plentiful representation the message of that reading prescription gets twisted - reading feels oppressive something for others not for me - reading becomes a bitter pill if not downright poisonous.

I know about the importance of representation. Not just as a pediatrician or a professor or writer. I know about the importance of diverse books in my bones - as an immigrant daughter myself who rarely got to see Brown girls like me in the stories I was exposed to growing up. After years of not seeing myself represented, there became a part of me that believed, deep down, maybe I wasn't worthy of representation. Maybe I couldn't be a hero - even of my own story. Maybe I shouldn't even be. It took years for me to get over this feeling of trying to make myself invisible. Years for me to stop wishing my brown skin family or my brown skin body could just disappear. Years for me to repair those gaping holes in myself concept and self-esteem.

It was in the Bengali folk tales I would hear from my grandmother on long summer vacations to India that I would find psychic healing. These folk tales, mostly from a collection called Thakurmar jhuli (or literally, "grandmothers satchel") were set in the kingdom beyond seven oceans and thirteen rivers. They were stories of princes and princesses on flying horses, evil serpents, drooling carnivorous rakkhosh demons. Here, finally, were brown kids like me having adventures. Being heroic! Saving the world! And I was so grateful to hear them. I

thirstily drank up those stories like a desert traveler who doesn't even know they are parched until they reached an oasis - that's how much I needed the balm of representation.

Eventually, I collected and translated a book of these folk tales and when I became a mom raising my own brown skinned, book-loving kids, I was inspired to delve into a different kind of a healing practice. I was inspired to reach back to those folk tales to write my fantasy adventure series. I wrote these stories for the same reason I had so desperately in my pediatric clinics looked for the right book for the right patient - because I wanted my kids and all our kids to know that they're worthy of starring in their own story, important enough to take up room and space, powerful enough to save the world. So, I wrote these books in answer to Toni Morrison's call "if there's a book you want to read and it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it".

Who's allowed to envision themselves into the future? Who's allowed to not just survive but thrive? Regardless of genre, these questions are at the heart of all of children's literature. For it's through these stories that the future is born in the imaginations of our young readers. Before they can make it be, they've got to have the room and the tools to dream it. I'm grateful for stories in general, but children's and YA stories in particular because these stories are paradigm shifters. They have the ability to show those who have been culturally centered new superheroes, new ways of leadership, new paths to community-making and love.

Children's and YA stories have the ability to shine a light on those communities who have been traditionally marginalized and highlight the power and vision that has always been there but maybe, in many ways, hidden. Children and YA stories, when fully and radically representational of our todays, pave roads towards better tomorrows for us all. These stories are the imaginative building blocks to the future. They are our rocket ships to the stars. For it's in these spaces that young readers will imagine new worlds of fantastical beauty. Through these stories, young people will liberate their imaginations and save us all. And for that I give thanks and thanks and thanks."

(transition sfx: chime, then page turn)

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PRE-RECORDED OUTRO w/ MUSIC BED

You've been listening to the Reach Out and Read Podcast.

Reach Out and Read is a non-profit organization that is the authoritative national voice for the positive effects of reading daily and supports, coaches, and celebrates engaging in those language-rich activities with young children.

We're continually inspired by stories that encourage language, literacy, and early relational health. Visit us at reachoutandread.org/podcast to find out more, and don't forget to subscribe to our show wherever you listen to your podcasts. If you like what you hear, please leave us a review - your feedback helps grow our podcast community and tells others that this podcast is worth listening to.

Our show is a production of Reach Out and Read. Our producer is Jill Ruby. Lori Brooks is our National Senior Director of External Affairs. Thank you to our founding sponsor, Boise Paper, for making a difference in local communities like ours. I'm your host Dr. Dipesh Navsaria. I look forward to spending time with you soon, and remember, books build better brains.

END OF TRANSCRIPTION