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Response to Jim Trelease's fifth edition of *The Read-Aloud Handbook*

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Last month I mentioned that while, I adored the vast majority of Jim Trelease's book *The Read-Aloud Handbook*, a contradiction in the fifth edition caught my eye. Let me state right up front and as clearly as possible, I loved the book and think it should be required reading for every parent and teacher.

In his new edition, Trelease adds a chapter on the phenomenal success of both Oprah's book club and the Harry Potter series. He explores what the success of Oprah's book club has to do with a class of fifth-graders who hate to read. He links the success with passion, sharing, and a true love of reading. It is not a "class," but a club, and Oprah doesn't lecture and expect her viewers to write book reports. She speaks passionately about why she loved the book. Next, she invites viewers, who wrote in about the book, to have dinner with the author, the other invited readers, and herself. They eat dinner, talk, laugh, and cry while discussing the book.

All of this I agree with, literature is not to be lectured, it is to be loved or hated, but not lectured. Books are to be explored for their meaning in our day-to-day life, as we connect with their essence or truth. People read to feel less alone. To read of other's adventures, experiences, and histories, whether they are similar or far apart from our own, we are still sharing this thing called life.

It is in this context that Trelease first describes who is watching Oprah. (I should qualify that I don't watch Oprah. I would love to, but that is a busy time around our household):

- *Let's look at who is watching television at ten in the morning or two in the afternoon, when Oprah's show is aired in a lot of places: not the valedictorians, or honor graduates, or the former gifted and talented students. They're all working. Oprah's "class" often consists of the laid-off, the laid-back, and the lying-down crowd, people who haven't read a book in twenty years, people who quit reading because they got tired of reading dead poets they couldn't understand back in high school. (pg. 171)*

Trelease states here that all the smart people are off "working." My immediate response to this is, "What about all the people who are home because they choose to stay home to raise their children?" The implication is that anybody smart, would choose to work outside of the home. Yet ironically in another section of the book, Trelease includes a letter from a teacher describing her confusion at finding so many language and reading delays in her students from a predominantly upper-middle class, well-educated area.

- *Short attention spans among three-year-olds are not unusual, but when they continue into the early primary grades, there is cause for alarm. With parents averaging about eleven minutes a day of one-on-one time with a child, it's little wonder I receive letters like this from a speech and language clinician in a Massachusetts school system:*

A teacher wondering why in a middle-class to upper-middle-class community, was there a rising number of primary children who lacked vocabulary development,

memory skills, and processing abilities. They often seemed to lack motivations, had limited imaginations and attention spans, and found it difficult to follow directions. In addition, only a handful were diagnosed as learning disabled.

As I became more familiar with the children and their family situations, several possible causes appeared. Many of them have been in child-care from infancy and/or early childhood. Many presently go to a child-care situation after school. Many parents admitted they had little time or energy to read to them. Nor did they have the patience to answer (or find out together) the unending questions of a curious three- or four-year-old. Television served as a babysitter and pacifier.

Some parents were quick to point out the children were read to in child care and had good experiential learning activities in their centers. But somehow, without the cozy, one-on-one giving of a parent or primary caregiver, the "group" input had lost meaningfulness for many of the children."(pg. 41)

Here is the contradiction: (a) women are considered dumb if they choose to stay home and give their young children that very one-on-one time, however, (b) women are essentially to blame for their children's language and reading delays if they choose to work outside the home during this same time. We're damned if we do and damned if we don't.

Trelease writes, and I agree with him, of the prevalence of too many people today who "can't bring themselves to 'raise' their children, they can only 'watch them grow up.' Yet if they make the choice to stay home to raise their children, he assumes that they are "not working, not the valedictorians, or former gifted and talented students." He continues by describing them as "the laid-off, the laid-back, and lying-down crowd, people who haven't read a book in twenty years, people who quit reading because they got tired of reading dead poets they couldn't understand back in high school."

Most of the stay-at-home moms I know are among the best-educated and most well-read people I know. They choose to stay at home precisely because they are educated and well-read and feel it is the best thing for their child. They are willing to forgo the paycheck and career advancement while their children are young exactly *because* of all they've read. They intuitively know that they want to be there to raise, love, and educate their child in those early years.

This reminds me of one of my personal favorite lines I've heard when referring to moms who stay home with their children, "Oh, my wife could never stay home. She's too driven." The decision has absolutely nothing to do with how driven one is. It is a choice and has everything to do with how a woman, or man, wants to raise their children.

Since becoming a parent, I have become increasingly aware of this contradiction with which society, as a whole, looks upon motherhood of young children. It seems that the same people who belittle a woman's choice to stay home, will also say in the next sentence, "Oh, I could never do it! It's too hard." Men and women acknowledge how hard it is by not wanting to do it, and in the same breath will marginalize and belittle the work being done by the people who make that choice.

I bring attention to two distinct paradoxes: first, the marginalization of women who choose to stay home as being less intelligent and less driven, while at the same blaming women who work outside the home for their children's failure in schools; and second, the belittling of the work done by parents who choose to stay home on one hand, and acknowledging it's

fiercely challenging and demanding nature on the other. As we raise our awareness about these contradictions, we are better able to move toward a more open and accepting understanding of their complexities.

Many parents *must* work outside of the home. The point of this story is the contradictory societal views of either choice: working at home or working outside the home.