

Foreword by SALLY CLARKSON

Mothering

by the

B

O

O

K

THE POWER
of READING ALOUD *to* OVERCOME FEAR
and RECAPTURE JOY

JENNIFER PEPITO





THE POWER *of* READING ALOUD
to OVERCOME FEAR *and* RECAPTURE JOY

JENNIFER PEPITO



BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Mothering by the Book • Jennifer Pepito

Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022 used by permission

© 2022 by Jennifer Pepito

Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Pepito, Jennifer, author.

Title: Mothering by the book : the power of reading aloud to overcome fear and recapture joy / Jennifer Pepito.

Description: Minneapolis, MN : Bethany House Publishers, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2022.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022002990 | ISBN 9780764239533 (paperback) | ISBN 9780764240751 (casebound) | ISBN 9781493437405 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Fear. | Joy. | Parenting. | Oral reading. | Reading (Early childhood) | Children—Books and reading.

Classification: LCC BF575.F2 P454 2022 | DDC 152.4/6—dc23/eng/20220307

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022002990>

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. ESV Text Edition: 2016

Scripture quotations identified AMP are from the Amplified Bible (AMP), copyright © 2015 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. www.Lockman.org

Scripture quotations identified KJV are from the King James Version of the Bible.

Scripture quotations identified NKJV are from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Cover design by Kelly L. Howard

Jennifer Pepito is represented by Ingrid Beck.

Baker Publishing Group publications use paper produced from sustainable forestry practices and post-consumer waste whenever possible.

22 23 24 25 26 27 28 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Emelie, Eden, Elias, Ethan,
Emmett, Ella, and Ezra.
Being your mom is my greatest joy,
and I'm so grateful for all the love and
grace you have shown me
on this journey.

To Scott. I'm so glad we get
to grow old together.

To the younger me and all of you
who see yourself in my story.
Don't be afraid, God is with you.

Contents

Foreword 11

1. Let Literature Free Us from Fear 15

2. Overcome the Fear of Being Alone through
Journaling 25

LITERATURE COMPANION: *Pride and Prejudice*

3. Overcome the Fear of the Baby Years by Staying
Present 39

LITERATURE COMPANION: *Baby*

4. Overcome the Fear of Failure by Speaking Life 55

LITERATURE COMPANION: *Charlotte's Web*

5. Overcome the Fear of My Children Being Behind
through Balance 73

LITERATURE COMPANION: *Understood Betsy*

6. Overcome the Fear of Children Leaving the Faith
through Family Identity 91

LITERATURE COMPANION: *All-of-a-Kind Family*

7. Overcome the Fear of Failing Our Children by Living
for a Greater Purpose 106
LITERATURE COMPANION: *The Railway Children*
 8. Overcome the Fear of the Future by Not
Complaining 123
LITERATURE COMPANION: *Little House on the Prairie Series*
 9. Overcome the Fear of Not Having Enough through
Thankfulness 140
LITERATURE COMPANION: *Little Britches*
 10. Overcome the Fear of Not Being Able to Manage by
Building Good Habits 155
LITERATURE COMPANION: *Cheaper by the Dozen*
 11. Overcome Fear by Running after Purpose 172
LITERATURE COMPANION: *Freedom Train*
 12. Overcome the Fear of Leading through
Forgiveness 187
LITERATURE COMPANION: *Endurance*
 13. Overcome Fear by Knowing Scripture 205
LITERATURE COMPANION: *The Hiding Place*
 14. Sing to Shut Up Fear 222
LITERATURE COMPANION: *The Door in the Wall*
- Acknowledgments 233
- Notes 234

Foreword

As a shy introvert, I have been called to a life in the public arena, where I am constantly forced to live outside my comfort zone—speaking to large groups, mingling with many strangers, smiling through hours of sharing myself as women stand in long lines to chat after I am through speaking. I cherish the life I have, but sometimes it is a bit of a stretch for my personality.

Some years ago, I boarded a train to Stratford-on-Avon in England from where I was living in Oxford. I was so very honored to be asked to speak at a Wild + Free home education conference. I rose above my insecurities and made a commitment to be engaged in the experience. The morning the conference began, I sought the building and the room where the speakers were to meet. Heart beating wildly, I convinced myself that I would surely forge friendships with some of these kindred spirits.

As I slowly began to merge into the crowd of women who seemed to already know one another, a gentle, friendly voice called to me, “Sally, come over here. I am so excited that you

were able to come join us. I've known of you for a long time and was hoping we would meet someday!"

Jennifer Pepito was the name of this lovely woman who turned the conference around for me—from questionable weekend to one of sweet memories made, with inspiration sprinkled every hour and my feeling that I was “one of the crowd” with women I so admired.

Since that time, I have had many opportunities to get to know Jennifer better. When I am with her, I always come away feeling more ready to take on all that life holds. She encourages, affirms, and takes every opportunity to make those in her life feel they are special. She knows a hidden treasure of story, love, humor, and spiritual strength rests inside many of us that probably will never be known or seen by others, yet it lives within us nonetheless.

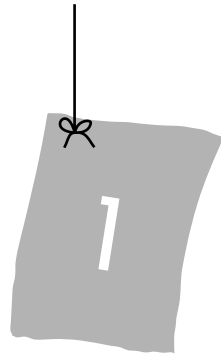
Jennifer is a woman rich in so many ways that at first were hidden from me, and yet were revealed delightfully through many encounters as a friend. As I have learned more of her life story, I have come to understand that she has walked faithfully, full-heartedly through many seasons of life. Through the years, she stored up tales of generous love for children and a wholehearted acceptance of the story of her marriage; she moved fearlessly through hardships when life felt out of control or didn't match her expectations, learning that education and inspiration are about storytelling that captures the imagination—and so much more. All of these treasures and many others are contained and revealed in *Mothering by the Book*.

Jennifer companions us, and through her words, her honesty about her struggles, and her joy in the moments, she makes us feel seen, understood. Her focus on epic books and stories calls us to live with freedom, grace for ourselves, and

appreciation for each adventure and challenge along the way. I know this book will become beloved and will be read many times by those who find it.

Thank you, Jennifer, for giving us hope and a sense of confidence to risk living our own lives with delight, freedom, and celebration.

—Sally Clarkson, author of *Awaking Wonder*, *Help, I'm Drowning*, and *The Lifegiving Home*, Oxford, 2022



Let Literature Free Us from Fear

There are no “if’s” in God’s world. And no places that are safer than other places. The center of His will is our only safety.

Betsie ten Boom quoted in Corrie ten Boom, *The Hiding Place*

As we drove down the road with the late-afternoon sun streaming into our truck, I hung up the phone, kicked my feet against the dash, and cried, “I can’t take this anymore,” before bursting into tears. My five children were squeezed into the back seat, frozen in shock and wide-eyed at my outburst. The emotional meltdown had been precipitated by yet another hard no in my search for a place for our family to stay—somewhere to escape from the crowded campgrounds we’d called home for the last few months.

We were living small in a thirty-foot travel trailer. And while I didn’t mind the tiny home, I hated having neighbors so close. RVs with thin walls were lined up tightly like horses

in rodeo chutes, and this life was starting to get old. It was winter in Southern California, and my overactive imagination was causing me anxiety as I worried about offending the elderly “snowbirds” looking for a quiet spot to camp for the winter who might instead end up next to a loud family of seven. It was a beautiful place for nature study, with exotic moths flying among the fragrant eucalyptus trees, but I was desperate to find a less conspicuous place to park our home while we worked on building a mission base just across the border in Mexico. I was getting us through each day by quietly homeschooling in the trailer and following up with an hour of PBS Kids after lunch, until I felt we’d spent enough time on schoolwork to deflect awkward questions with proof of our scholarly diligence. Then, when I felt the coast was clear, I would let the kids out to play without worrying that I’d be reported for educational neglect by curious and closed-minded neighbors.

It wasn’t easy keeping three little boys—as well as a daughter with sensory processing disorder—calm and quiet in these conditions, but with the help of my stalwart oldest daughter, we were managing. We worked hard to keep the tiny space tidy in order to help my younger daughter feel comfortable and to avoid conflicts. I didn’t want our family to be noisy neighbors and attract unwanted attention, and I was desperate for a change, hopeful that a nearby Christian camp would let us rent a space so my kids could play freely outside instead of being scrutinized by retirees who were critical of homeschooling. The stress of keeping my family cared for in the fishbowl of the campground was wearing on me, and I was careening toward a breaking point.

It didn’t help matters at all that my husband and I were quietly raging at each other, each blaming the other for the

discomfort of the present circumstances. The missionary adventure had worn us out, and we could barely speak without erupting into a fight—a far cry from our formerly tranquil relationship. Many years after this trailer-life experience, I watched a short clip of a parody on modern culture, *Portlandia*. In this short video, the characters romanticize van life and then endure its uncomfortable reality. The clip ends with the wife giving her husband the bird as she hitchhikes her way out of there. I giggled nervously at how closely it reflected our own experience. That is, I never gave my husband the middle finger, nor did I run off with a stranger, but I probably imagined doing both during the depths of this hard season. The tight quarters with zero personal space and trying to keep children happy and quiet with close neighbors were irritating enough, but with our added marital difficulties, the situation felt unbearable.

But what was really so awful about my life that I would fall apart in front of my children, kicking the dash like a two-year-old just because the Christian camp said no to our parking the trailer there? What was so bad that I would shriek like a cat in disappointment, causing my children stress and anxiety, when all I wanted was to give them a happy childhood? Why couldn't I find the joy in the life we were living, instead of constantly comparing the present circumstances with what I now idealized as the children's paradise I had created before we left our home to become missionaries? Why was I so full of fear and despair?

The truth is, there was nothing so awful about my life. But there was a lot wrong inside my head. Fear was rendering me incapacitated. I worried about the future of our family because my husband and I couldn't talk to each other without descending into a quarrel. I worried about my children

having a crappy childhood, all the while wrecking it with my anxiety and unthankfulness. I was afraid of failing as a mother, of living in Mexico, of my children getting sick or hurt. The list of fears seemed to be endless, and the joy and wonder of motherhood was being decimated as a wily enemy kept me dead to the true beauty of my life.

Fear Was Pushing Me Around

I was intent on loving my children well, but the myths I believed about my capability, my circumstances, and even God's faithfulness caused inner anguish as I let the giants of fear and worry push me around. All this time spent contemplating the what-ifs kept me from enjoying my children. In her book *Breaking the Fear Cycle*, Maria Furlough writes, "So often our fears take us inward. They suck us into the details of our lives, our homes, our jobs, and our futures, and we forget that God's plan is so much bigger than the minute details of our lives."¹ This was happening to me. I was being sucked inward and missing the beautiful big picture of what we were experiencing as a family. I was missing the growth and the character that was being developed because my vision was so narrow. And I was missing the joy. Instead of running through the woods with my children, I was inside feeling depressed and afraid. Instead of being thankful for the freedom and simplicity of that season in the trailer, I grumbled at the circumstances, afraid we were ruining our children by depriving them of my vision of a perfect childhood.

As I remained stuck, worrying about the future, these fears robbed me of many magical moments and nearly robbed me of my life. But I was a Charlotte Mason method homeschool

mom, so even though I was caught up in a swirl of fears that led me into depression, I was diligently reading aloud to my children. I'd sit with these children's classics, my own babies tucked in close, and as I read, these books saved my life. I read through *The Long Winter* while enduring my own long winter as a missionary in Mexico, and I was empowered to believe that my family would make it through. I read *Pride and Prejudice* while at war with my husband and was encouraged that if Lizzy and Mr. Darcy could overcome their difficulties, we could too. I read *Endurance*, a story about a feat of survival in Antarctica, and knew I could survive and thrive in my own survival story as a mom of many. I recaptured the magic of motherhood by fighting fear with stories and letting the truth of Scripture hammer it home.

I recaptured the magic of motherhood by fighting fear with stories and letting the truth of Scripture hammer it home.

Childhood Is Too Precious to Waste

Through this book, I want to help you recapture the magic of motherhood as well. Childhood is too precious to waste, and our children need us to be present so they can be empowered to kill their own giants. Fear keeps us in our heads, imagining the worst about ourselves and our circumstances, and fear is a slippery little demon that masquerades well. You might be bold as a lion when it comes to confrontation but cower in the face of sickness. You might be as calm as Clara Barton when dealing with a medical emergency but crippled with anxiety in social situations. Maybe you are in your element in a crowd but feel like a deer in the headlights when juggling the needs of

infants and toddlers—full of fears about future failure because of present inadequacy. One friend of mine is a bold performer, singing in front of hundreds of people, but the thought of having a fifth child caused her to stumble in fear. Another friend was afraid that homeschooling would cause strife between her and her children. Still another finds that worry about mothering through the high school years consumes her. Fear looms large in our mothering journey. It comes in so many different packages, but when we fixate on fear, we become blind to the beauty around us. Elizabeth Barrett Browning said, “Earth’s crammed with heaven, / And every common bush afire with God; / But only he who sees, takes off his shoes.”²

Here is what we will do to recapture motherhood’s magic: Instead of being blinded to the beauty of our own present life by the fears we believe about the future, we will learn to see. We will open our senses to the twinkle in our child’s eyes, the smell of fresh laundry on the line, the feel of a baby’s warm body pressed close to ours as they take their nourishment. We won’t squander this season with worry; we’ll wring every bit of joy out of each moment. We will learn how to take our thoughts captive and reject the lies that keep us afraid and incapacitated. We will learn how to be present and experience the presence of God. We will learn how to be free.

When we identify the fears that steal the magic from our lives, and even identify the trauma that originated those fears, we can tear them down. We can take up our trusty motherhood tools, our literature and our liturgy, the Word and the wonder, and be ready and able to savor this fleeting journey of motherhood. We will join the cloud of witnesses who have overcome fear themselves—Corrie, Ma, Harriet, and Shackleton—and let them lead us into freedom.

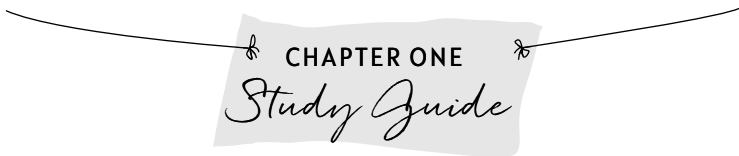
In *Mothering by the Book*, we'll look at classic stories that shape the libraries of our homes and identify the fears that steal the joy of motherhood. We will define the ways that we have lived as if these fears of the future were present reality, and then begin to rewrite that story. As we look at these classics and identify the traits of those characters who became heroes, and the tools that guided them on their journey, we will learn to put these tools into action in our own lives so we can live out a story of hope. With the truth of Scripture refining our character toward hope and heroism in the face of fearful circumstances, we'll learn to take our thoughts captive and soak in the truth until it starts to transform us from the inside out. And then—inspired by the stories and strengthened with the Word of God—we will rip up fear by its gnarly roots and learn to live joyfully and free. We will save childhood and freedom and fun, one read-aloud book at a time.

In her book *Awaking Wonder*, Sally Clarkson remembers a time when her four-year-old daughter, Joy, confidently waved her bubble wand over and over while saying, “I am putting beauty back into the mountains like God did with the stars.”³ Joy wasn't afraid to have fun, or to make the world a better place; fear had not yet stained her life. In *Mothering by the Book*, we are working our way back to that place of little-girl hope that empowers us to change the world and love our lives, instead of staying stuck in fear.

Introduction to the Study Guide

Each chapter of *Mothering by the Book* is about a story—the tale of a fight with fear—and about the stories and the tools that helped me overcome. My goal, however, is that this is

more than just a story for you. I want this to be a tool you can apply in your own life to experience more freedom and joy. For this to work, plan to set aside some time at the close of each chapter to ask yourself a few questions and let God illuminate the answers for you. As you take even a few moments to reflect and listen, God will meet you and begin to transform your heart. It would be helpful to have a special notebook for this purpose along with a quiet space. I realize that it can seem impossible to carve out quiet space and time in the busy years of motherhood, but the freedom and joy you will gain as you apply yourself to overcoming fear will be worth the energy. Stories saved my life, and my story can help you soar in your own life, and give your children wings in the process.



CHAPTER ONE
Study Guide

Circle your three favorite books from childhood (or write them on the following page):

*Little House on the
Prairie*

Little Women

The Boxcar Children

Winnie-the-Pooh

Charlotte's Web

The Railway Children

The Yearling

The Cabin Faced West

Indian Captive

Roll of Thunder, Hear

My Cry

The Lion, the Witch and

the Wardrobe

Betsy-Tacy

Anne of Green Gables

Ramona

Freedom Train

Little Britches

All-of-a-Kind Family

What is one lesson you learned from these books?

Circle two things fear says to you:

- I can't manage.
- My kids will get hurt.
- I'm afraid of failure.
- People don't like me.
- I'm not smart enough to homeschool my kids.
- I'm not lovely enough to keep friends.
- The future is frightening.
- I don't have what it takes.
- I can't handle more children.
- My marriage won't make it.
- My child won't love God.

Write down any fears you have that are not on the list above.

A VERSE TO MEMORIZE

Look up the following Scripture passages and write down the one that speaks most to you: John 15:13; Romans 5:8; Romans 8:32; Romans 8:38–39; 1 John 4:7–10. Memorize the verse most meaningful for you.