S2E10: Tidal Homeschooling

Julie Bogart with Melissa Wiley

Julie: Welcome to season two of the podcast: A Brave Writer's Life in Brief [theme music plays]. I'm Julie Bogart your host.

Melissa: What I started to notice was the comics would suck them in from an early, early age. When other sorts of books daunted them. Another way that I used to frame it for myself was that there was so much that we learn accidentally and then there are some things that we learn on purpose.

Julie: You're listening to season two of The Brave Writer Podcast. This season we're focused on what I call the Brave Writer Lifestyle. I'm not talking about lifestyles of the rich and famous. More like lifestyles of the underfunded and messy. You know, families like yours, like mine.

The Brave Writer Lifestyle is all about creating a language rich environment for your kids so that they're naturally drawn to not only writing, poetry, and reading great books but also subjects like Shakespeare, art appreciation, and nature journaling. Even beyond those, we like to add things like table top gaming, movie viewing, and television! Oh my! I interview Brave Writer parents each week who are just like you and we get to hear both their struggles and their creativity in providing a wonderful homeschool life for their kids. I can't wait for you to meet this wide array of moms, so let's get started with this week's episode.

Julie: Today is both a special and sad day on the podcast. Season two is coming to a close. I've had the privilege of interviewing nine Brave Writer moms, parents just like you, trying to do

right by their kids. Finding their way into an educational adventure that looks and feels like their own families'. Not a copy of mine or anyone else's. I have so enjoyed hearing their stories and learning about their challenges and triumphs. I've also been impressed by their creativity and innovation in problem solving. As I thought about how to bring this season to a close, I wanted to talk to another veteran mom. A home educator who manages a full blown career all while homeschooling her six kids, including her son with special needs. She's a giant in my world. Her name? Melissa Wiley.

Melissa and I first met on an email list for aspiring writers, nearly 20 years ago. And quickly became fans of each other's blogs. If you haven't seen Melissa's, go check it out. It's called "Here in the Bonny Glen." Melissa is also the author of many books, you can find a list of them on her website. Her most popular one in the Brave Writer world is called *The Prairie Thief*. We have an Arrow for it if you want to snag one. She is also the author of the *Inch and Roly* series level one readers. And *Fox and Crow are not Friends* level three readers. Melissa is married to a writer of comic books. Batman, anyone? Frankly, her family is just cool. When Melissa is not writing, she's learning to draw or taking her kids to the beach in San Diego, where she lives—so jealous. Or playing with words on the family whiteboard.

I invited Melissa to be our capstone interview for this series of the podcast because she's developed a theory of home education that dovetails beautifully with the Brave Writer lifestyle. She calls it Tidal Schooling—borrowing from the imagery of the ocean. She shared about this philosophy and practice at our most recent Brave Writer retreat. Today, I get to ask her about Tidal Schooling in action. How it looks in her family. You are in for a real treat. When this interview ends, I'll share a little about what's coming up next for the podcast. Season three, yippee! For now, let's get this delightful interview underway. You'll know, we fangirl over each other a bit at the beginning. Thanks for joining me! [theme music plays]

Julie: Welcome Melissa!

Melissa: Thank you Julie! With your kinds words about my blog. That's so funny because I started blogging because you were blogging and it was so awesome and I was like oh I want to do this [laughs].

Julie: [Laughs] exactly. Well isn't that funny? I know. I thought about that when I was preparing that even though you told me that my blog inspired you to start yours, it was your blog that inspired me to really think about my blogging voice because you are such a natural. And you're so funny! I don't know if people tell you that all the time but I find humor in writing challenging and you seem to make it look effortless.

Melissa: Aw, thank you!

Julie: Well I just wanted to start with our relationship. Can you tell me your memory of our first encounter because I think that you remember better than I do?

Melissa: Okay I remember that we were on some kind of big general Yahoo group for homeschooling moms and then—now the way I remember it, you were the one who started this spin-off side list for homeschooling moms who also write for a living. Do you remember if you founded that list?

Julie: I'm not sure I founded it but I do remember being on it.

Melissa: Okay. So I joined that list and I—you're the only person from that group that I remember. You really stood out to me. I loved your writing. I just liked getting to know you. Although, we—that list wasn't super active, probably because we were homeschooling and writing so we were all busy [laughs].

Julie: [Laughs] exactly.

Melissa: But—so your name stuck in my mind and I just enjoyed that discourse and then *The Writer's Jungle* came across my radar several years later and I was like "Oh that's Julie!" and I was so excited to read it and I loved it and I was reading pretty much everything you wrote that you were putting out in those days. So that's how I recall it.

Julie: Well the part that is fun for me is that you were my first professional review of *The Writer's Jungle* because here you were, this published children's author and you were saying "Yeah, this is how you should teach writing." And I thought okay then! That was the goal. If a professional recognizes what I'm doing, then they understand—you understand what the principles are behind writing. And that might be a fun place to start, let's just talk a little bit about what it is to be a professional writer teaching writing versus what it is to learn how to write in the traditional school model?

Melissa: Oh good topic.

Julie: Yeah so when you think about your children, what are some of the ways you've fostered the writing life in them?

Melissa: Well when I—before I had kids, I was working as an editorial assistant at Harper Collins and this book came across my desk—it was already published. I don't know, people would just leave out books in the halls all the time and it was like heaven. You could take whatever you wanted. And this book—I can't even remember the title of it but it was about how to, from a very early age, get kids feeling enthusiastic about writing by giving them supplies. Setting up a little writing kit. It was just a practical how-to of—so I remember I had a three year old niece at the time and I put together like this little kit for her. And that was definitely in my mind as my kids started to come along and I was—and we had decided to homeschool them. I wanted writing to be—well really like I want everything to be sort of fun, part of the fabric of our home life, so I did the same thing. I set up—you know, I just made sure that they always had access to fun writing materials and that we would play games together, both verbal and on paper. So that writing started to—when I think about it, I wasn't doing it like I had some kind of program in mind but just bringing writing into their world, into their day in a really organic way. And I have to say, when I later read *The Writer's Jungle*, that's one of the things that resonated so completely with me was how organic I think your approach is to recognizing that writing is something that we do in lots and lots of ways [laughs]. And it takes many different forms.

So when I teach it with my kids—also I start with narration. That's another big component of how we do things and so I don't require a lot of written work from them—or what you would think of as assignments until they're much older. We do so much oral narration and writing is more of a fun, side thing that we do, an activity. So that by the time they're starting to do more challenging written work, they've got some facility with language and they're feeling confident. I do—when I teach both my own kids and when I teach writing classes to kids, I like to separate out a little bit the act of creative writing can be so—like making stuff up is its own task and that can be hard for people. Thinking of what to say is hard. And then there's how to write it down on paper and for me that really comes from my publishing background where I think about when a book of mine is in the idea stage and the brainstorming stage, in the plotting stage, then when I've got a draft and the various drafts that I'll go through to en route to having a manuscript I feel like I can show my editor. And then she's going to do a substance edit and we're not even going to worry about mechanics yet, we're not there yet. We're just getting all the parts in place right.

And then comes the mechanics edit and the copy edit. You know where now we're into the nitty-gritty of polishing it. So knowing that that's how it works in my professional writing life made it very natural for me to kind of apply that same process with my kids. First, let's figure out things that we're excited to put down on paper. Then, now, let's worry about getting those ideas into some words but let's not worry if they're not perfect yet. We're not there yet.

Julie: Perfect. Well like you, I worked in professional writing for a number of years before I started Brave Writer and interestingly I was on the editor's side. And so what my experience was working with writers who weren't even necessarily authors or professional writers. They were people who were writing for magazines or were being interviewed and I had to take their raw copy and help shape it into something worth publishing. So I learned through that

experience just how valuable it was to focus first on the insight and the contribution the author wants to make. If you start out by analyzing every word they utter, they freeze up and they don't share and you can't get the information that you really want to provide to the readership. So in that way, I found myself wanting that same experience for children. You know and it's funny that school doesn't understand it that way. I find it surprising that there's this whole world of professional writing that knows this and how did education miss it? I don't know if you have thoughts about that.

Melissa: I don't know how they miss it. Was composition always taught in the academic manner that's so different from the publishing manner?

Julie: Yeah. Well it's been fun to watch that experience blossom for so many people and I love that you're an ally [laughs] in this crusade to get people to see writing through the lens of publishing rather than just through school. You've penned a phrase called Tidal Learning. And I think that would be fun for you to explain. You know, I talk about the enchanted education or the Brave Writer lifestyle and that's really what this series is about. But I feel like it has a relationship to the way you understand, which you call Tidal Learning and it's one of my favorite homeschool philosophies that I've read. Could you share that with us?

Melissa: Sure. The phrase developed just as a way for me to put language to what I was seeing happening in our home that was working already. And it happened—it grew out of homeschooling moms in the late 90s and early 2000s. I was reading everything I could get my hands on and there were these different schools of thought and several of them held a lot of appeal for me but there's unschooling on one side—not on a side like they're opposed but there's a school of thought that's unschooling. There's a school of thought that's Charlotte Mason method. There was the classical method. And I'm reading all these things and I'm seeing such great ideas in them and finding strong appeal in ideas from these different sources. But one thing that the sources had in common was most of them would say "you need to do it this way or our method isn't going to work." Like you're all in. And I couldn't get all in! I wanted to be. I wanted to be able to say "this is what I am and fly a flag" or something in those days.

But I just in reality I would find that I really liked this stuff I'm getting from over here but the way things were working in our home would sort of go in waves where there would be a wave that looked very much like a Charlotte Mason education and I was picking out the books and setting up a little morning routine for us for our lesson time and doing narrations and nature study and short lessons and really everything just like how Charlotte Mason lays out. But then we would have—the weather would change. Suddenly it's spring! And we want to be outside all the time and so now we're unschoolers. And we're living a very, very unschoolish life and each time I would think "this is us forever."

Julie: [Laughs] totally!

Melissa: Forever! And then guess what? Two or three months later, I would find that no, we were doing something different. But the new thing was working! The different patterns, which would be sometimes a return to more structure or a return to less structure. This was working. Like at the same time that I, in my homeschooling mom headspace was trying to figure out what my ideology was, I was also just having a lot of fun with my kids living this life of total immersion in a structured set of books. The pendulum would swing and we'd have a lot of fun being unschoolers.

And it struck me that those waves themselves were a description of how learning was working my house, that it was like the tide would come in and the tide would go out. So I started thinking it through. High tide is when we charter the ship and we map out a journey and that's the book that we've chosen to read and study together for the next few weeks or months and I'm the captain of the ship. I'm deciding the direction we're going to go. And we're all the crew working together. We're open to side trips and whatever adventures might befall us. But during high tide, really, that's when I'm the captain and I've mapped out a course for us for the next several weeks.

And then during low-tide as I now think of it and have for many years, in low tide it's more like we're at the beach and the tide is out and the kids are all wandering along the shore, exploring their own interests. And you can spin out the metaphor. Gathering seashells, or staring into rock pools, or lying on a towel reading. Those are all metaphorical ways of describing individual exploration that the kids might be doing in our low-tide times. Even though, in low tide, the kids are all kind of doing their own thing, I'm still involved. I am making sure that there's lunch and bug spray or sunscreen or whatever else you want to plug into the metaphor to describe the role of the mom even in low-tide times. It doesn't mean the kids are just out there on their own. I still have a job to do during those times as a facilitator. You could say I'm the one driving them to the beach during low-tide [laughs].

Julie: Yes, or even making them aware that a beach exists. One of the things that I found challenging when I was first exploring the unschooling thought process is I mistakenly took it to mean I was hands-off and it took time for me around people who believe in the un-schooling principles that they were actually involved, leading, exposing, introducing. Because our kids have limited experiences and they still need an adults' involvement to even know what they could possibly explore if they wanted to.

Melissa: That's right. I think to be a good, all-in unschooling parent, you're investing a lot of energy and time and being observant and being present to pick up on little sparks of interest. And then you're the one kind of figuring out what you can plant in the way of that kid to stumble over and get even more immersed in the subject. So yeah it's a—that's why I think the metaphor holds up when I'm thinking of the high-tide, low-tide thing because it's not like I'm

checking out during low-tide. It's just that my role shifts. I have a little bit of a different job to do during those times.

Julie: Well one of the things Melissa that I loved about the title metaphor of course is that I grew up in southern California and so I've always had this tender relationship with the ocean and I could immediately imagine those ships. The tide moving out, the tide rolling in, the way that waves come up on the beach in a routine way. I think one of the benefits of that metaphor is to recognize that we go through these seasonal changes. That tying ourselves to only one point of view about learning sometimes limits our creativity and makes us miss a natural ebb and flow of how learning gets expressed in our children and so we might panic when we see a child just pursuing their interests, we think what about all this dedicated study they should be doing. And when they're in the moment and they're doing the dedicated study we wonder well what happened to their personal interests, right? Does that ever happen to you?

Melissa: Yeah, yeah I used to worry about it a lot more. When they were younger—when the first set was younger and as they get older you start to get more confidence, I think, because you see how things are working. I would worry. Sometimes what I worried was that there was a chance that I could be teaching them that when things get boring you drop it and do something different. So I did put a lot of thought into is that what we're doing? Is that what's happening? And I would always see that no, we always would hold to our little plan, that course of study that I had charted. And of course, there's a lot to talk about even with what that means and what it looks like and how much of paying attention to what they're interested in and how they learn would go into the plan that I had mapped out in the first place. But I would see that no, we've come to the end of something and now everybody's ready for a change—it's like the wind changes, like in Mary Poppins.

Julie: [Laughs] yes!

Melissa: [Laughs] it shifted! It would shift and it would happen in the other direction. After a month or two of a low-tide lifestyle, I would notice that people would start to get restless. They would start to have—the energy level starts to diminish. People aren't as on fire for the things that they wanted to throw themselves into. There's a little more boredom, a little more quarreling. And that's my cue! The wind is changing. It's time for me to notice the tide needs to come back in.

Julie: I love that so much. I think one of the things that I noticed in all of these conversations that I've had with parents and in these podcasts is that we tend to assume that a change in season means something went wrong in the previous season. Instead of simply seeing it as sort of a moment. It's almost like the intermezzo in symphony or something. There's a pause before

we move into the next movement. And what we're really looking for is opportunities to keep ourselves involved. When I talk about the enchanted education, I talk about surprise, mystery, risk, and adventure. And it can be an adventure to go solo but it can also be an adventure to participate with a well-prepared lesson or plan. There is a certain sense of being nurtured or cared for when your parent or your instructor thinks ahead and offers you a course of study and you don't have to have it all fall on your soldiers to make yourself interested in life 24 hours a day. And then the opposite is also true. There are times when it is so nice just to have the freedom to go all in on that one interest without anything interrupting. So I love that you are showing us how that season-shift feels and when you notice it. Like quarreling! Restlessness. Good example. How do you know when it's coming to the end of this more planned high-tide season? Is it similar? Do you have the same signs on both ends?

Melissa: A little bit. Restlessness for sure. Or you know how when you're speaking to an audience and you can tell when you don't have them [laughs]?

Julie: Yes, yes!

Melissa: You know when you have them and you know when you don't and actually that's a thing that I work on with my kids sometimes and just how to have a conversation or tell a story. If you're telling a story that's a long story, you need to be able to know what it looks like when someone's eyes are glazing over.

Julie: [Laughs]

Melissa: That's a skill to practice, right? So in the broader sense, I know when I'm starting to lose them. The routine is getting a little stale. Or sometimes there are times when it might happen because a sudden interest has been sparked and I will see that this kid needs to be given time and space to go deep right now. I need to let other things go on the shelf because this is what this kid is burning up over and I need to allow that sort of whole 10,000 hours philosophy to play out. You know, immersion.

Julie: So that just brings me to this question that I was actually about to ask you but perfect timing. Great segue! What do you do with six kids when you've got a couple that want to be in low-tide and the other need to be in high-tide and you're a one mom person? How do you juggle when the season shifts for one child and not everybody else?

Melissa: That is a really good question and I've had people say to me "Are you all in the same tide at the same time? And if you're not, what does that mean for you the mom?" because if you're managing two totally different types of tides, that is a lot. For us, it has tended to happen in groups so that we do sort of stay either we're in the more structured study phase or we're out of it. But it may be that one person is really on fire with an interest so that one kid, even though it's still high-tide time for the rest of the family, what that person is doing during our morning lesson time, would be a more—like being able to dive into that interest but with some structure I'm imposing a little bit more structure on it than I might in other circumstances. It's hard to describe a little bit because I think it's something that you feel your way through when it's happening.

Julie: That makes sense to me. I know in my experience with my kids that a child who is self-motivated and needs time, wants that time. So sometimes that takes less energy. You know it's not like you have to spend a lot of energy when somebody else is already motivated. Your job at that point is to unblock the circumstances. Make it possible. Give them some resources. Make them peanut butter sandwiches. Whatever it takes to help them sustain. So I know what you're talking about. I do think that some of what is complicated with a large family, you have six kids, I have five, is as they bridge into teen years, did you find it challenging with your younger children, to give them the experience the older kids had when they were similar ages?

Melissa: Oh I love this question and it's exactly where I was headed next because my kids fall into sort of three and three. Three older kids, three younger kids. So I had this little bit of a split and there did come a point where it would almost be like I was trading off. Like now is a period of time where I'm really giving the teens my full attention and working with them on stuff and my younger two, who are home, were just playing a lot more and having much more time to just play throughout the day and then there would be a point where the teens were—they had—they knew what they needed to do. They had the stuff that they were doing or they were on fire for a project and they were in it so now I have a little time to devote to my younger two and try to give them a really full throttle Charlotte Mason style—or inspired mornings that their big sisters got when they were little.

So it did start to separate into those two chunks as the kids got older. I do—I will sometimes talk with my older girl—actually! We just had this conversation. We just spent the past week going through every single one of our bookshelves. We handled every single book and made hard decisions about what to keep and what not to keep and in the course of it as we're pulling out, we're of course like "oh look this is that thing that we did when you were 8!" And I've got—"my last child is about to turn 8, it suddenly strikes me, he's never done this. He's never read this book. I need to—" right? And so I asked my 18 year old and almost 16 year old what did we do when you were little that you guys think I should make sure is part of the younger two's high-tide, because we're heading back into high-tide this week. And to my surprise both of them immediately said "Latin."

Julie: [Laughs].

Melissa: Which would have been the last thing I would have guessed that they would say.

Julie: [Laughs].

Melissa: And wasn't anything I had been planning to do with this set so that really shocked me and I'm trying to wrap my head around that information and think about it now [laughs].

Julie: That is amazing. I love what you're saying though because I went through a similar experience. My older kids as they kind of crested the 13 to 14, 15, 16 and I had these younger two, what I found myself longing to do with the younger two is return to those practices that I had done with the oldest ones but it was a different family. It felt different. And even though we still did read-aloud time and poetry teatimes, I also noticed that my own need to stay stimulated was a part of this journey and so we deliberately involved new books, some new practices. Even though they were in the same style, our lives changed.

I know with the youngest two we bought a zoo pass and we went every week for a year. We took up skiing as a benefit for being younger and me not having to pay for five kids [laughs] you know? I only had to pay for two. And we read books that I didn't read with the older kids because I had already read those books and I wanted to read new stuff. And so there was a certain sense in which I we reinvented what I knew they needed but we catered it to them being younger. And then of course, the part that you never realize when you're first raising kids is the younger ones are getting the drip down benefit of those older kids. Did you notice that happening with your kids, too? Like better vocabulary. More savvy about cultural touchstones. You know, all that stuff.

Melissa: Absolutely. The way the younger ones will discuss literary tropes [laughs].

Julie: [Laughs] exactly. Totally.

Melissa: It's so funny. In fact, I—last fall I started teaching a new literature class—I teach small literature classes to local homeschoolers and we just meet at a coffee shop and have a great time. It's very fun classes. But the first—the first week of my new class with 7th and 8th grade girls, my 10 year old daughter Rilla happened to be there and the girl—you know, the first week of class the students are often shy and they're not really speaking up yet, right? So I

would ask them questions and Rilla sitting there is just like jabber, jabber, jabber. Plugging in answers. And they were on point! She was right [laughs].

Julie: That's amazing.

Melissa: And that really got the older girls kind of opened up. They were not going to be outdone by this 10 year old. So it was pretty funny.

Julie: That's perfect. In fact, let's transition to your oldest daughter. One of the things that our audience doesn't know is that she was homeschooled all the way through high school and her first day of official school class was her first day of college and so can you reassure the audience of what the first of this homeschool journey can be how did she feel going to school? Did she practice taking notes ever? Did she use a Scantron at home with you so she'd know how to fill in those bubbles? How did you get her ready for the big day?

Melissa: We did do some of that. And it was all in the final weeks before she was about to leave. I suddenly thought "oh there are things you don't know about being in a classroom that maybe you should know." And we did talk about—I guess when she took the PSAT was the first time she ever took a test where she had to fill in the bubbles. So we—she was all, I remember, when she took the PSAT she was worried about like what if I do it wrong? [Laughs] filling in the bubble.

Julie: It's a real thing. Yeah!

Melissa: It is, it is! So she had taken some practice tests to—and we laughed over—as much as we looked at her answers in the practice test to see what her score was, she was really more concerned with how did I do on the bubbles?

Julie: [Laughs] that's hysterical.

Melissa: Did I pass the bubble filling 101 [laughs]?

Julie: [Laughs] so how did she find school? How has she liked college? How has she done? Has that been a positive transition? Does she feel that homeschooling prepared her?

Melissa: Those are really good questions and the answer is yes for the most part. She definitely has had moments where she thought things were really challenging. It was a lot to contend with all at once because of course it's not just being in school for the first time. But it's living in a dorm for the first time and—so it was all these new experiences. She loves school. She loves where she goes to school. She's made wonderful friends. In her first semester there, she joined the *Doctor Who* fan club and connected with a really great group of kids so they're really tight. She lives off campus now but with some of those same kids. With her classes, she's had a whole range of experiences and I think she'll be fine with me telling this story. In her second quarter freshman year, she had to take a communications class and we had done lots and lots and lots of Shakespeare club and she liked to speak—or be up in front of groups. She wasn't self-conscious about it. But the professor of this class was—I mean he told the students right up front, I like to make you feel as nervous and anxious as possible because I think it gives an edge to your speeches.

Julie: Wow!

Melissa: I know. I totally disagree with his approach. He sounded kind of awful. And he really did have these kids ratcheted up to such a high degree of anxiety. I think it was completely counterproductive. But—so you know, a few tears were shed over that class. It was a very difficult experience and then I remember a conversation we had where she—she's like laughing through tears at the fact that she didn't have to experience a bad teacher until she was 18.

Julie: That's what I was just going to say. One benefit to that is that she at least was mature at the point that she encountered it. Right? So she didn't have to internalize at a young age some point of view about herself due to this over-arching authority. She was 18. I mean, I would cry, too [laughs].

Melissa: Oh yeah.

Julie: [Laughs] that's really incredible.

Melissa: She—you know, there was definitely learning curve for some things. She felt like—because I asked her when she came home for her first winter break. I said okay hit me. What should we have done more of?

Julie: Hmmm.

Melissa: And she said she could've used more practice doing timed tests—or tests with a time limit, which was a really good point! Except for the SAT and the ACT, she really hadn't had a lot of experiences where there was a clock ticking. So, even in math classes and she had always been really strong in math, she would sometimes not get the score that she thought she should've gotten on the tests just because she didn't finish it.

Julie: That makes sense.

Melissa: So that was a really good tip from her. So there were definitely places where she felt like she had a steep learning curve or some of that really school-y stuff. On the other hand, she told me that it's a hard school to get into and most of her friends and classmates there had been—they went through the whole AP high pressure, really since middle school. Those kids were working really, really hard to get here. And she said "Mom, I loved my high school years." [Laughs] in fact, freshman year she felt almost guilty that she had had great teen year experience in contrast to what she was hearing about from just the pressure and again anxiety that were experienced by so many of her friends.

Julie: That is a fantastic way to conclude that point. Because I think all of us will look at the school peer group, our friends who have public school children, our sisters, our brothers-in-law, whoever, and we suddenly think "My kids aren't working hard enough." And yet, they're working differently. It's not a question of if they're working hard. It's that they aren't under the same kind of duress that school often exerts. And it's wonderful to hear that she's able to be self-reflective that way and notice that that was a benefit to her [theme music plays].

Julie: The gateway drug to the Brave Writer lifestyle has to be poetry teatime. You can start that wonderful, soothing practice with your kids right now. Visit our website, poetryteatime.com for oodles of ideas. While you're there, download our free quick-start guide. It gives you all the information you need to begin. You can follow our poetry teatime social media accounts, too, while you're at it. We're on Twitter and Instagram under the account name @poetryteatime and on Facebook.com/poetryteatimefamilies [theme music plays].

Julie: I wondered if you would talk finally a little bit about how much comic books are a part of your family, a part of your value system, and put at ease some of our parents who are listening who have kids who'd like to do some deep diving into the whole world of D.C. Comics and Marvel and everything else.

Melissa: I would love to. So I married into comics, I didn't grow up on comics but when I started dating Scott in college he was totally into comics and I said okay, where do I start? What do I read—I'm always like oh, educate me [laughs]!

Julie: Yes [laughs].

Melissa: I don't know anything about this, I'm so excited, now I get to learn stuff. So I started reading comics in college and found that it was actually a little challenging for me to figure out what was going on sometimes on the page. Learning how to decode what's happening and that interplay between art and text, it's a skill. And for me, it was a little bit of a challenge.

So okay, so Scott is a comic book writer. He writes Batman. He has written lots and lots of Scooby-Doo and other kinds of stuff and our kids grew up on comics. What I started to notice was that comics would suck them in from an early, early age when other sorts of books daunted them. So I know that Beanie, my third daughter, she learned to read on the Tin Tin comics because she would just stare at them, pore over them, and bit by bit. She had so much motivation to decode those words in the bubbles, in the balloons, because she wanted to have the whole story. Not just the half that the art was telling. And I'm seeing it with my youngest child, with Calvin and Hobbes.

When you start to look at what is going on the page in a comic strip or a comic book, what you realize is they are really sophisticated vehicles for story telling but they offer a lot of assistance at getting the full story, as well. So if you have a child who's struggling with reading, well there's art! There are pictures to help them make sense of the story and they are learning about how to decode context clues for meaning.

Julie: So what you're saying is: the images support the text and the text supports the images and so kids have multiple shots at decoding instead of it just being symbol—you know letter-symbols to sound. And so comics are actually inviting them in to take decoding risks, does that sound right?

Melissa: Yeah, I think risk is exactly it. It gives them some courage to venture forth into a place where they might feel much more intimidated. Just with a wall of text.

Julie: I love that.

Melissa: For me, you know, coming to comics as a college-aged student was that the art was the intimidating part and I had to learn how to read it.

Julie: [Laughs] that is so true for me even now!

Melissa: Right? It's another skill but because we as a society have sort of prioritized words over pictures—at least we say we do. I don't think we really mean it because we all love to watch TV and movies, right? [Laughs] but we say that if you're reading something that's all words, I don't know, we ascribe some kind of value to that that we don't give the same value to a comic.

Julie: You know, it's funny—right when you said that, I immediately thought about when you said television and movies. We aren't really given the opportunity to read. We're only hearing words and seeing images. But when we are put in a context where there are both words and images, don't we sometimes inadvertently prefer the words? So if I go to an art museum, I have to choose to look at the painting. The temptation for me is always to walk over and read about the painting that is right in front of my eyes and I see everyone do it. There's this default that says language is how I understand the visual. Whether it's spoken or written. And so here, a comic strip with images or a graphic novel, especially when there isn't any language on the image, especially an Ikea direction sheet without any words, we feel lost! We're like how is this image telling me what to do? I think it's a really interesting thought that there is a literacy for images. That's great.

Melissa: Yes. It's true! And when you look at a page of a comic book, there's a whole language there that you're learning as you read them. You're learning what sequence to read these panels in. You're learning the difference between dialogue and captions and what's happening in the captions? Is it somebody's thoughts or is it exposition? And is it a character or is it a narrator? You're getting—and comics will sometimes use different lettering styles or balloon styles to convey who the speaker is. So you're absorbing—without really thinking about it—you're absorbing a lot of sophisticated information.

Julie: That's amazing.

Melissa: And it improves—so now, okay. We're in a place now where comics and graphic novels for kids are having their hay-day. 20 years ago, there were floppy comic books. That's what there was. You know? And you couldn't go into the library and get those. They don't hold up on a shelf. But now, the book publishers—it took them a long time but they finally realized that comics—hard bound or print—trade bound graphic novels are awesome reading material for kids and they started publishing them. And now there are some of—we're in a golden age, right now. The stuff that is being published these days is amazing. It's so good. And there are digital comics! So you can read all those old Batman issues on your iPad now and they look phenomenal, by the way, like the backlighting, woo, the art just sings. It's beautiful.

Julie: That's amazing.

Melissa: Our kids have access to stuff that is really literature and is fun. It's appealing to them. Draws them in. And yet, if you look at the vocabulary. I've done this exercise, as you know, where I like to take—I asked my daughter—my 16 year old to go through one Calvin and Hobbes book and just pull out—I said pull out about 30 good vocabulary words for me and she came to me with 68 words on a piece of paper. She said Mom, I'm sorry, I couldn't stop [laughs].

Julie: Wow.

Melissa: And these were amazing words! They're like SAT vocabulary and this is what my 7 year old is reading. And grappling with!

Julie: Yes, exactly. And because they want to get the punchline. They want to understand the joke. They actually care about finding out the meaning of these words. That's the part that I used to love about Calvin and Hobbes. My boys would bring it to me and they would want to know the meaning of this one word "Anarchy", you know [laughs]? And—because they didn't get the joke without it! But once they knew it, then that would become a part of their daily use because they felt really smart and sophisticated being able to quote these Bill Waterson captions freely with each other. You know, it happened with television with us as well. But comics are absolutely such a source of rich vocabulary because these writers are so deft with language. They have to pack a lot into a very small space.

Melissa: When you were talking about your boys and Calvin and anarchy, I was thinking about how much my 7 year old uses Calvin uses as a way to sort of understand the world now. He really—Calvin translates a lot of human experience to my son. And right before Christmas, I was in the car with him and I was singing "Better watch out…" you know, "he's making a list and checking it twice," right?

Julie: Yes.

Melissa: In the backseat. He says "I know who's on the naughty list."

Julie: [Laughs]

Melissa: And I said "Who?" And he said "Calvin and me and Rilla" [laughs].

Julie: [Laughs]

Melissa: And I said "wait a minute, you and Rilla aren't on the naughty list!" And he said "we're naughty sometimes." And I said "yeah but you try to be good." And he said "Do we? Do we?" [laughs].

Julie: [Laughs]

Melissa: "Do we really, mom?"

Julie: So cute.

Melissa: So someone's absorbing a lot of Calvin attitude.

Julie: But isn't that wonderful? You just can feel how we are shaped by the literature we read and that's so beautiful. Yeah oh that's awesome. That's a great story.

Melissa: Because picture books work in the same way and I have many times in my life been in a situation where I have seen a mom try to steer an older—like a kid who is reading. Like say, a 2nd grader, away from picture books by saying "Honey, that's too young for you. Why don't you go for something that's more your age?" And I always wince and it depends on the situation whether I say anything in the moment or not because I don't always want to be interjecting to strangers but really, a picture book is written for adults to read to children so the vocabulary is much more sophisticated than you will in find say, a beginning reader like my *Inch & Roly* books, which are written for the child who is just learning how to read. When I write an *Inch & Roly*, I have a very limited range of vocabulary that I can use and there's pretty tight parameters for what I'm allowed to do when I'm writing an early reader. Whereas a picture book, it's presumed that an adult will read it. Think of like Beatrix Potter and perambulate and all the amazing words that she uses. So I think you find this in picture books and in comics.

They're much more sophisticated linguistically than people assume because we think of them as for very young children or too simple or too pop culture or something.

Julie: Right and too few words on the page. Somehow, the lack of words means that the ones that are present are not sophisticated but my argument always has been, because there are fewer words, the author has to be that much more selective and each word has to carry a kind of power that you don't need when you're writing a whole paragraph. So that's a fantastic insight and I really hope that that helps parents who've got kids who are obsessed with batman feel a little more relaxed about indulging that excitement. Let's conclude then, there is something that you have said before when you talk about your relationship to Charlotte Mason. You know I'm a huge fan of Charlotte's work as well. You see it incorporated throughout the Brave Writer lifestyle. But you talk about three things that should fill every child's day, and I think this would be a great tip to leave our audience with.

Melissa: So Charlotte Mason said that every child, every day should have something to do, something to think about, and something to love. With my kids, when my first three were really little, there were times where you know how a day can be? Especially when you have a house full of little kids. You feel like nothing gets done where you're at the end of the day, where did it go? And I would think, okay. What are the most important things that I want to make happen for my kids today? So I thought good books. You know I want us—every day to be filled with reading good books together or by ourselves. Imaginative play, meaningful work, like I want them to have work that they feel is making a contribution to the family, to the household, to the world somehow, so that's how I would think about meaningful work as opposed to say busywork. Encounters with beauty through art and music and nature. And then taking Charlotte Mason's something to think about, I phrased it as ideas to ponder and discuss.

Julie: Ah. Wow!

Melissa: And that was helpful for me, too, to think: have I had—have I given my kids opportunity to talk to me today? To like open up and say what they're thinking about so that ideas to ponder and discuss was to help me remember to be a listener and a conversationalist, for those ideas to have room.

Julie: Such a foundation for a fabulous education. If people could implement those five things. I think it moves us away from the content driven viewpoint about learning, where we're—how do I cover early American history. How do I cover experimental science in the kitchen with kitchen chemistry? Or what about fractions? If we think in these more contextual ways about learning, the subjects get thrown into the bargain for free. But when we think about subjects only, we sometimes miss the properties of learning that we could be accessing. We end up in

rote work, which doesn't cultivate a sense of beauty or a sense of meaningful thought or active work or all those beautiful things you just shared.

Melissa: Yes. I think another way that I used to frame it for myself was that I—there's so much that we learn accidentally and then there are some things that we learn on purpose. Learning on purpose—I mean there are some things that you acquire the knowledge better if you're doing it bit by bit. Like learning a foreign language, sticking at it over a period of time. Learning a musical instrument. Some people, pick up those things totally accidentally but for most of us to learn to play an instrument, we go through a process of learning to read music and take lessons. So I would look at what my kids were doing and think about okay, here's all these things that they're learning by accident and that's what I sort of put into the content area of history and literature and it feels to me easy to fill our home with opportunities to interact with those content areas. Things that—

Julie: Poetry!

Melissa: Yeah poetry, right? Yes exactly. But if we're going to learn a foreign language, for that we probably have to be a little bit more on purpose in our approach to it. Unless we can go somewhere and immerse in it and then it'll be accidental.

Julie: That is so beautiful. I love that dichotomy, I think that's a very, very helpful construct for people. And it sort of relieves some of that pressure when you think: well, I need my child to make some incremental progress in phonics or in math principles and we feel guilty that we're not just letting it happen accidentally. And so there's this held breath feeling that comes over the mother like "I'm afraid to interfere but what if they don't do it in a systematic way?" But if you can even use that language with your child, you sort of let them in on why we're doing this in an incremental way versus why this other thing doesn't need that. Do you do that? Do you let your kids in on your sort of theoretical constructs?

Melissa: Yes, I do.

Julie: I do too.

Melissa: I do and it helps that they see me doing it in my own life. I have my whole life long wanted to learn to draw and two years ago I decided to learn to draw on purpose. And they see me practicing every day just 15 minutes a day. They see that I've gotten better. They like to look through my sketchbooks. They see my progress. They know I—I didn't learn to draw

accidentally. Some people do [laughs] but I wasn't one of those people and I was never going to learn unless I took an on-purpose approach to it.

Julie: That's—ah gosh, that's so true. I've been the same person. That is so funny. I had—I taught myself to draw in an incremental way. I learned how to play guitar in an incremental way. I learned to be a distance runner in a committed, incremental way. And it's true! When you live that in front of your kids that creates sort of the meta-message without you having to explain it. They get to see what self-discipline in action can mean. That's lovely. Perfect, perfect, perfect.

Melissa: [Laughs]

Julie: My gosh, Melissa, this time has flown by! You are always my favorite person to talk to. We need to do this more often!

Melissa: We really do! It's so energizing to me. I just love you to pieces.

Julie: Oh likewise. This was so much fun. So tell everybody where they can follow you and find you because you have so many great resources online for them to explore.

Melissa: Okay, well my blog is melissawisley.com. W-I-L-E-Y. And I've been blogging—it'll be 12 years this month.

Julie: Wow!

Melissa: Yes! And you, too? Even longer?

Julie: Yeah longer.

Melissa: This year I've just started really pushing to return to old-school blogging. I'm calling it blogging like it's 2005.

Julie: [Laughs] I noticed that last week, I loved it.

Melissa: So I've been putting a lot of new stuff up. And mostly I like to talk about books and our family's reading life. And other things, art a lot. A lot of our drawing adventures as well. And then I'm @melissawiley on Twitter. On Instagram I'm @bonnyglen, which is the name of my blog. Bonny Glen. So B-O-N-N-Y-G-L-E-N. And I'm on pretty much every form of social media because it fascinates me.

Julie: Yeah, Melissa's awesome on social media and we will include all of these in the show notes so that people can go there directly. Give me a quick catalogue of books they can buy that you've written. I'm curious about which ones are in print and you would like to promote. So tell us which ones right now are hot off the press or your favorite ones to recommend.

Melissa: Okay, well I have a series of early readers that I mentioned a little earlier. It's called *Inch & Roly* and they're published by Simon & Schuster—it's an inchworm and a roly-poly. There are three of those right now. And those are like level one readers, so they're really for the very beginning, emergent reader. I have a book called *Fox & Crow are Not Friends.* Published by Random House, that's a level three reader. And then a middle grade novel called *The Prairie Thief*.

Julie: Yes *The Prairie Thief*—

Melissa: Oh yeah that's in Brave Writer!

Julie: That's right! *The Prairie Thief* is especially important to us because when Melissa wrote it I asked her if we could use it for an Arrow, which is our language arts literature guide that teaches copywork and dictation. And she said yes and we absolutely love being able to feature one of her books in our lineup. So we'll put a direct link to that in the show notes in case people would like to purchase that.

Melissa: It was really fun for me Julie to get to read the issue of the Arrow that you wrote for *The Prairie Thief* because when you write children's books you very seldom read about your own work in the context of somebody talking about your use of language and that's what the Arrow was. It was really fun for me.

Julie: One of my favorite funny things about the book, and I'm—and we'll end on this but this is just classic. It's sort of a full circle moment with the opening of this podcast. So the very last line of the book is our fourth week passage and it doesn't have a period on the page. And you told me that you caught that in the galleys and they still didn't correct it and so I actually write about that in the Arrow because I found that fascinating. Here we're all worried that our children will not have perfect grammar and punctuation and even in a professionally edited book, where the author caught the mistake, they still didn't fix it before the final print. Was that amazing?

Melissa: It also went into the paperback edition. We had the opportunity to correct it between the hardcover and the paperback and it still got missed and so it's there forever [laughs].

Julie: It's just amazing. So silly. But it is a wonderful book and I love our Arrow that goes with it so thank you Melissa so much for joining me today and we will do this again. There are so many topics we can talk about but I feel like you just gave everyone a huge boost in their imagination for how they can create a custom-designed homeschool that suits their family. And that's what this is all about [theme music plays].

Melissa: Well thank you Julie. This was a lot of fun.

Julie: Now that you've had a chance to get to know Brave Writer a little through the podcast, feel free to head to bravewriter.com and download our free writing frenzy guide. This is a 17 page guide that enables you to dive right into writing with your kids. You'll find all kinds of prompts that work with all levels of writing. That's Bravewriter.com, click on the button, and download Free Writing Frenzy for your family as a gift from us.

Wow. So that's it. We've reached the end of our Brave Writer Lifestyle journey together. Thank you for listening, for sharing the podcast with your friends, and for writing such wonderful reviews. From the bottom of my heart, my team and I thank you. You are the reason that we even created a podcast.

Season three will start in September. I'm going to keep the theme a secret but you can bet it will be packed with resources, good information, and a lot of support for creating your best life in home education.

If you're looking for specific support, you can join our coaching community: The Homeschool Alliance. Find out more about that at coachjuliebogart.com. If you aren't following me yet on Facebook or Instagram, now's a good time. Facebook.com/bravewriter and on Instagram, @juliebravewriter and @poetryteatime. These are the places I like to play the most. I would love to see you there.

And now, I send you back into your life with renewed energy, optimism, and hope. I wish you all the love, all the joy, and all the peace you seek. But when those fail, I send you oceans of grace for you and for your kids. I look forward to meeting again. Until then, live honestly, write bravely and live your best life. You only get one. It ought to be good. Thanks for joining me this season. I'm Julie Bogart, from Brave Writer [theme music plays].

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