

Homeschool Super Heroes

Speakers:

Gentry
Adam

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Gentry: Hi, I'm Gentry Beck of Homeschool Super Heroes and I'm thrilled to have Adam Andrews as our Super Hero guest today.

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Adam Andrews received his BA in Political Economy and Christian Studies from Hillsdale College in 1991. He earned his MA in History from the University of Washington in 1994 and is currently a candidate for his PhD in History. Both Adam and his wife, Missy, have long felt a calling to serve the home schooling community and have constantly been on the lookout for ways to make high quality education accessible to committed parents and teachers. Inveterate bookworms they have spent the past 12 years making booklists of great literature for students of all ages and trying to find a curriculum that is both accessible and substantial. Teaching the Classics is a result of their conviction in the best curriculum is one that involves both teacher and student in discussion of great ideas.

Thank you so much for joining us today, Adam. How are you doing?

Adam: I'm doing great. Thanks for the invitation.

Gentry: Good. Well, I'd like to go ahead and start with just having you tell us a little bit about your family and the way you've homeschooled your children through the years.

Adam: Sure thing. My wife, Missy, and I were married in 1991 and we have six children. We had six kids in about nine years early in our marriage and have been homeschoolers since the beginning. So I guess you could call our homeschooling kind of a chaotic situation with a house full of kids and we've had a great time homeschooling them. And it's been a wonderful journey.

Gentry: Just how involved are you with homeschooling the kids because I know a lot of moms usually say they take on more of the responsibility. Are you involved in the day-to-day homeschooling of the kids?

Adam: Oh, that's a good question. I help Missy out in a couple of areas. When the kids get a little older and they approach their high school years I give a hand in math and science. Those are not areas that Missy feels super confident in, but most of the humanities oriented subjects she does a real nice job by herself, so in the classroom I do a little math and science.

And then also we sit down together at the beginning of the year and periodically throughout the year and kind of have those conversations about overall vision and what we want the curriculum to look like year to year. So I give a hand in those areas as well.

Gentry: Okay. Well, I know that one of the first resources we saw from you was Teaching the Classics. What are a few of the strategies that our listeners could use in their homeschool this year from any of your products actually?

Adam: Well, Teaching the Classics is focused on reading comprehension and literary analysis. And those are the subjects that we're most interested in. And in terms of techniques from those products, from Teaching the Classics, that'd be helpful to parents, I think the major overarching technique that we would want to encourage parents to consider is the informal oral discussion of books that they're reading.

We've put a lot of faith in conducting a discussion and having students and teachers sit across the table from one another and talk about ideas that they encounter in their reading. We don't think enough attention is generally paid to that process and we think it really is kind of the heart of a good education.

So the first suggestion I would make is make sure that when your students are reading something that you take time afterwards to sit down and have a conversation about ideas with them, an out loud conversation, across the kitchen table type of thing.

Gentry: Okay. Well, one thing I know people, I mean you have kids, a lot of families are homeschooling more than one kid, so they have younger kids and older kids. How would you be able to incorporate all your kids into a discussion like that because I mean there are going to be different levels there.

Adam: Yeah, good question. Well, Teaching the Classics presents a method for discussing great books. And one of the key principles of our method is that children's stories, picture books, stories written for eight year olds and seven year olds have all of the same literary elements that stories written for grownups have.

So one of the things we encourage parents to do is to learn this discussion method on those children's books and then practice the discussion method with the kids regardless of their age with these children stories. So at least in the first part of

the school year when everyone is kind of learning the Teaching the Classics method everybody's going to be using the same books anyway.

When I give the Teaching the Classics seminar to a live group we always read a children's story, something like A Bargain for Frances by Russell Hoban, or The Biggest Bear by Lynd Ward. These are picture books and are written for second graders and first graders. And I take the class through a discussion of those things and the class is filled with parents and older students. We always have a great time and we end up talking about universal themes and great ideas.

So I think that really the reading level of the story that you're discussing is not quite as important as the technique you use to discuss it and the kind of discussions you can have.

Gentry: Okay. Well, I know that some -- I mean not everyone is strong in all areas and you do have teenagers that don't have a strong literature background. I know a lot of moms will struggle with this if their kids don't learn to read when they're eight years old, or even five, six years old, they're wondering why their kids are struggling. If a teenager doesn't have a strong literature background what would you advise for the parents?

Adam: Well, I think the arrangement of our Teaching the Classics program around juvenile literature is a perfect solution for the problem of kids not being strong readers, or maybe being reluctant readers, or maybe struggling with dyslexia or other kinds of learning disabilities. The fact that students in our program are always reading books below their reading level really does set them up for success whether they're reluctant readers or struggling with learning disabilities. They can gain confidence in the fact that they can understand the books that they're reading and have profitable discussions of them.

And confidence usually leads to a peaked interest, if you will a greater interest in reading. The way we like to look at it is the books that a kid should be discussing with his teacher are always a little bit below his reading level. And as his reading level matures and grows then the books that he's reading will also increase in complexity and difficulty. But they'll always be a little lower than his actual reading level. So at every stage of the process he's set up for a successful discussion.

Gentry: Oh, that's very interesting. You also have parents use literature to analyze world view. What's the first step parents can take to analyzing world view as well as developing a strong Christian world view in their children?

Adam: Well, that's -- you know, you've asked two separate questions.

Gentry: Yeah, there's two questions in there.

Adam:

Right. And so I think the smartest thing to do would be to take them one at a time. The first question is how do we -- what's the first step parents should take in analyzing world view? We've taken some steps along that line by producing kind of a follow up seminar to our basic Teaching the Classics seminar and it's called The World View Supplement. What we do in that seminar is teach parents some techniques for exposing the world view of the author of a book that they might be reading.

What we do is we present them with something called the Socratic List. And this is a list of discussion questions that the parents can use to get a discussion going that are generic in nature, so they're not specific to any one book. And they cover a range of world view issues.

We teach parents how to ask these questions of the book that the students are reading and what happens is the questions are engineered if you will so that the book's answers to these questions kind of lay open the world view of the author so that it's plain in the eyes of the student, and he can see oh, I see.

The question what is a good love for example, as answered by the book I've just read tells me something very significant about what the author's perspective was on life. And so we've got questions like this that allow the student to come to an understanding kind of on his own as to where the author is coming from.

And in that way he really does come to an understanding of the author's world view and this is what we really think a world view education ought to be. Not quite so much imposing a Christian world view on the books that we read, but letting the books speak for themselves in making the world views of their authors plain to the reader.

That would be my answer to the first question. What's the first step parents can take in teaching world view? The first step they can take is teaching their kids how to see clearly what the author's world view is.

The second question that you asked is a different one. How can we teach our kids to have a Christian world view? And I really think that that is a subject that is -- I'm going to kind of go out on a limb here, but that's a subject that's not primarily a literary subject. That subject doesn't have as much to do with literary analysis as it does with theology.

And I think as Christian parents, Missy and I are Christians and we speak to a lot of Christians. And we sometimes even assume a Christian audience. One of the things that our Christian audiences have in common, in fact probably the thing they have most in common, is a deep desire to make sure that their kids know the basics of a Christian world view.

That's the kind of thing that they're taught from morning till night. They learn it in Sunday school. They learn it all day long. The elements of their parents' Christian world view are very rarely obscure to the students. They pretty much -- they imbibe their parents' Christian world view with milk so to speak.

I think the process of reading a book so that the world view of its author is plain makes the second step, applying a Christian world view almost automatic because a student looks and says "Oh my goodness! I just realized that Ernest Hemmingway is a nihilist atheist modernist and I can tell by reading the Old Man in the Sea that he believes that there is no such thing as God and that life has no meaning." And the average student raised in a Christian home is going to when he comes to that realization say "Oh, I don't agree with that at all."

And the second step, the second question that you asked me is already answered because the student being raised in a Christian environment is now confronted clearly with the evidence of a non-Christian world view.

Gentry: Well, it's very interesting. I like the way you approach that. My mom encourages moms to use literature to instill critical thinking and leadership skills. How do you feel that you're tied to critical thinking and leadership?

Adam: Well, I think that literature is intimately tied with critical thinking, especially if you approach it the way that we suggest in Teaching the Classics because really one of the things we're trying to teach is a certain habit of mind. And this is one of the reasons we start with picture books and books written for young students.

A certain habit of mind is necessary in order to get the themes and the structures and the internal components of a book out and in the open. And that habit of mind involves identifying parts of a story; categorizing those parts of a story, in other words assigning them to labels or assigning them to categories; and, then distinguishing those parts of a story from other parts of a story that are dissimilar.

For example, when we're analyzing the plot of a novel we divide the plot up into five sections; the exposition, the rising action, the climax, the denouement, or falling action, and the conclusion. Kind of a simple dividing up of a story. And we ask the students even when they're young, even when they're reading picture books to identify which parts of the story belong in those categories. And when it comes to say the climax of the story we make a big deal out of requiring the students to defend their choice. Why is this detail the climax of the story? What underlying conflict in the story does this detail resolve and therefore qualify as the climax of the story?

And it turns out that as the student answers those questions he's involved in those three things; identifying the parts of a story; categorizing them according to their labels; and, distinguishing those details from other details that are dissimilar. And we realize that those three habits of mind, identifying, categorizing, and

distinguishing are the real basic mental traits that are common to all intellectual activity. This is critical thinking, identify, categorize, distinguish. It's what philosophers do. It's what mathematicians do. It's what literary analysts do. It's what statesmen do. To be able to identify clearly what you're looking at, call it by its real name, and distinguish it from things that are dissimilar is the essence I think of critical thinking. And by extension, the essence of leadership because someone who can think clearly is going to eventually be the one who's making decisions.

Gentry: Now you're talking about these three aspects of critical thinking. What can a mom do this year to start developing this in their children? I know you're giving these three aspects, but I mean would you tell them to do this in the discussions or is there another way they can approach this also?

Adam: Well, the discussions of the books the kids are reading is the perfect place to do it. I would recommend starting with some very simple questions. Even with, like I keep saying, even with the youngest students and with kids just starting out in literary analysis whatever their age, who is the main character in this story? Usually a question that can be answered fairly quickly.

And then a couple of follow up questions really make it deeper in a hurry. What does this character want? And why can't he have it? Answers to those questions force the student to do the three habits of mind that we're talking about.

A follow up question to that little set is what category of conflict is going on in this story? Is it a man versus man conflict; a man versus nature conflict; a man versus God conflict; a man versus society conflict; or, is the conflict between the character and himself? Is it a man versus himself conflict? Boy those, you know, six or seven questions right there can get a great discussion started and force kids into these habits of critical thinking that we're talking about.

Gentry: One thing that I know a lot of new homeschooling moms always want to know, what is one thing you would have done differently? If you could do it all over again is there something that you would have changed or I mean do you feel like, you know, you just kind of had to go with it? I mean is there something that you would have done differently with homeschooling your kids?

Adam: Oh, yeah absolutely. Absolutely. Missy and I have come a long way in the last 15 years of homeschooling and if there's one thing I wish we had known sooner it would have affected a lot of the decisions that we've made and it's a little bit of a philosophical point, but I think it's a really important one. When we first started out in this project our goal was to make sure that our kids by the time they left our house had read everything. And I think that's kind of comical looking back on it now and the truth is however that that's really kind of what we thought. We wanted to make sure that they had been exposed to everything we thought was necessary for college prep for example.

And we had really an idea of education in our minds that education is the completion of a booklist. And that if you have the greatest booklist of all time and you work from beginning to the end of that booklist then you will have given your kids the best education of all time. We really considered it to be something of a math problem. You know, as long as you do this recipe then you will win.

And what we've learned along the way is that that's not really what education is at all. That you can complete the greatest booklist in the world and not have an education and it can do you no good. And so we've developed another conception or another idea of education along the way that I wish we'd really known at the beginning, which is that education is not the completion of a booklist, but it's really kind of a state of mind, a state of the heart.

And we want our kids to be humble before the text that they're reading. Want to be humble in their minds and humble in their hearts. We think humility is the key to a good education and that can be arrived at without finishing the booklist. That can actually be arrived at in reading just a few books if they're read properly and discussed properly.

So I think if we'd known that and if we'd been shooting for that goal a little bit more explicitly all along the way we would have saved ourselves a lot of time and saved ourselves a lot of worry and a lot of anxiety because we deal, and I think all homeschoolers do this, we deal with anxiety all the time. Am I doing as well as I could be? Am I doing as well as the government school down the road? Am I doing as well as my homeschool neighbor? And I think moms in particular struggle with that.

And this idea of education that we've come to recently that education is a state of the mind that doesn't take a giant booklist to accomplish really takes a lot of that anxiety and pressure away. So it would have been great for us to know that 15 years ago, but I'm glad that we're sort of learning it now and I like to tell people about that everywhere I go.

Gentry: Yes. One thing I know that ya'll created your own curriculum. How do you as a dad balance being with the family, being involved with the homeschooling, but also I mean creating curriculums and having your own business?

Adam: Well, it's a busy day that's for sure. I start early and quit late. We've had a wonderful time together over the last 15 years and we just manage to shoehorn everything in. I wouldn't change a thing.

We don't have a lot of free time necessarily, but you know I often think about that subject. If I had a lot of free time what I'd want to do with it is find a family, so what's time for if not to spend on the people that you love. It's a balancing act. There's no question about that, but I always try to keep a priority list in mind of

taking care of my wife and kids first and sometimes that involves leaving them for a while to go make a living, but the Lord seems to have worked things out okay for us so far.

Gentry: Great. I know we've mentioned both your Teaching the Classics and The World View Supplement. If our listeners wanted to purchase these or find out more about you where could they go to find that or how could they contact you?

Adam: Oh, sure. We have a website. Centerforlit.com, C-e-n-t-e-r-f-o-r-l-i-t.com. And all of our products are available on the website as well as a lot of free resources for lit teachers and reading teachers. You can also contact us by phone or email. Email is Adam@centerforlit.com . And Missy's email is just Missy, M-i-s-s-y, Missy@centerforlit.com. And we're also available on the phone. Area code 509-738-6837.

Gentry: Okay. You mentioned having a lot of free resources for literature. Could you just kind of talk about a few of those just to give our listeners kind of a preview of what they would be able to find?

Adam: Sure. One of the main questions we all encounter at the end of a Teaching the Classics seminar, which again presents the method for discussing the books, is I like this method, but what books should I use? You haven't made a lot of specific suggestions. You've just given us kind of a technique. All right, do you have suggestions for the books that we ought to be applying this to? And we do have an annotated booklist in the back of our seminar syllabus, but on the website there are suggestions of books that Missy and I like and have used with our own kids for all grades, K-12. And so people who are looking to apply the Teaching the Classics method to specific stories can look and find them on our website.

We also have some reproducible story charts and teaching aids that we use in the classroom that people can download and print off on their own computers. We also have some essays and some kind of encouraging articles for parents that might be a shot in the arm, a lecture or two that's downloadable, one of my convention lectures is downloadable for free.

And we also have a free teacher guide available on the website. And what a teacher guide is is just a list of discussion notes that a teacher would develop in preparation for a class. Missy and I have gone and developed those ready made for several dozen titles and we offer a couple of those for free as well.

Gentry: Wow! Well, it sounds like ya'll have a lot of resources on your website. For our listeners out there make sure you go and check out all these resources at centerforlit.com.

Adam, thank you so much for spending time with us today. I know I've learned a lot from just talking with you and have been encouraged. And I'm sure our

listeners have also been encouraged and walked away with some great ideas that they can implement this year in their homeschooling.

Are there any last words you'd like to share with us?

Adam: Well, I really appreciate the invitation. It's been great being with you, Gentry. And I am happy to talk any time. If anybody has any questions about reading comprehension or literary analysis Missy and I love to talk on the phone with people and love to answer email, so please do get in contact with us. Thank you very much.

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