

# Well-Read Mom

Summer Reads 2023



READ MORE. READ WELL.

## WELL-READ MOM SUMMER 2023

Welcome to the Well-Read Mom Summer Reads!

Our official reading list for the year wraps up in June to give our members a chance to catch up on the reading of their choice.

However, if you're looking for something to read over the summer, a few of our Well-Read Mom members recommended the following books. They're typically lighter than our monthly choices, although still worth your time. Use the reflections and discussion questions on your own or share them with a friend!

03	Well-Read Mom Mission & Method
05	<i>A Tree Grows in Brooklyn</i> by Betty Smith
08	<i>Works of Mercy</i> by Sally Thomas
10	<i>The Bird in the Tree</i> by Elizabeth Goudge

If you enjoy the Well-Read Mom experience, we welcome you to join us for the 2023-24 reading year which begins in September (Registration opens in July).

Already a member? Invite a friend to read along with you.

We'll be reading books around the theme of the "Seeker."

Please join us!

Please note: The book titles in this document are links. By purchasing books through our affiliate sites not only do you get the Well-Read Mom suggested editions, but a small portion of the sale comes back to help financially support Well-Read Mom. If you decide to purchase through Amazon we ask that you thoughtfully consider using Amazon Smile and select Well-Read Mom as your non-profit of choice.

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# Well-Read Mom

## MISSION

## METHOD

## VISION

### Our Mission

Well-Read Mom accompanies women in the reading of great books and spiritual classics to encourage personal growth, friendship, and meaningful conversations in order to explore the human condition and reorient ourselves to what is good, beautiful, and true.

### Our Method

Women stay together in the reading as we compare and share literature.

- **Accompany:** As we accompany one another, there is accountability, support, and a sense of belonging that helps to foster the habit of regular reading. Staying on pace together and reading the same books across the nation facilitates awareness of a wider and deeper cultural conversation.
- **Read:** We give ourselves permission to find time and space to read the selected literature, allowing it to penetrate our minds and hearts.
- **Compare:** We enter into the drama of the story and examine our own questions as they come forth, asking, "What does this mean for my life?"
- **Share:** We first listen to the WRM prepared monthly audio and then discuss the book, offering something of ourselves through sharing personal insights and experiences, along with conversation and questions that arise from the text.

### Our Vision

In Well-Read Mom, women read more and read well. Our hope is to deepen the awareness of meaning hidden in each woman's daily life, elevate the cultural conversation, and revitalize reading literature from books.

### Our Goals

- To suggest works of literature that encourage women to grow intellectually, spiritually, and personally through deepened thought and conversation.
- To foster meaningful friendship among women and thus to counteract the increasing isolation characteristic of our culture.
- To deepen awareness of the immensity of meaning hidden in each woman's daily life.
- To build community locally and nationally through meetings and Well-Read Mom events.
- To provide original resource materials that illuminate the literature through the lens of Catholic tradition.
- To encourage intentional family life, reading in the home, and all mothers' awareness of their unique presence in the heart of the family.



# Well-Read Mom

## INVITES YOU TO RECLAIM TIME FOR READING AND FRIENDSHIP

It can be a challenge to make time to read in a world that never stops. Developing and maintaining the ability for deep reading isn't something we can take for granted. Millions of Americans won't read a single book this year. Don't let yourself be one of them.



### WHAT WE DO:

In Well-Read Mom, women read more and read well. We hope to deepen the awareness of meaning hidden in each woman's daily life, elevate the cultural conversation, and revitalize reading literature from books.

### OUR BOOKLIST:

We read books that encourage, enlighten, and motivate us to dive deeper into the plots of our own lives. Great writers become dear friends and we find ourselves seeing reality through their eyes, imbued with their insights.



### FIND YOUR COMMUNITY:

Join an existing group, start a group, or, if you're not ready for a small-group experience, read along with a friend. As we accompany one another, there is accountability, support, and a sense of belonging that helps to foster the habit of regular reading.



Let Well-Read Mom help you form beautiful friendships.

### A PLAN THAT WORKS:

There is no "failing" when you join Well-Read Mom. With our tips, support, and accountability, you'll read more and read well—whether that means finishing a heavy-hitter like *Crime and Punishment* or a few pages of a classic work like *To Kill a Mockingbird*. We meet you where you're at.

VISIT [WELLREADMOM.COM](http://WELLREADMOM.COM) TO JOIN NOW, START A GROUP, OR FIND OUT MORE.

# A TREE GROWS IN BROOKLYN

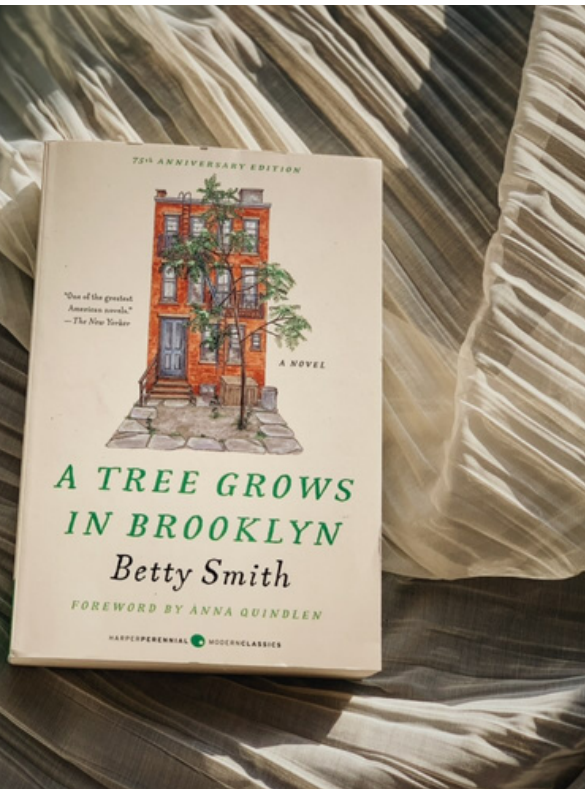
BETTY SMITH

## FRIENDSHIP AND HOPE

A Reflection by Jennifer Deslongchamps

When my daughter, Camille, was in seventh grade, she had the assignment to write a letter to any author, living or dead, about how his or her book had somehow changed her life. She knew immediately that she would write to Betty Smith, author of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*.

The book's protagonist, poor Francie Nolan, lives in the tenements of Brooklyn, often unsure about where her next meal will come from. Her father is an alcoholic. Francie also faces a number of other hardships, from lacking a formal high school education to surviving a rape attempt. My daughter, on the other hand, is growing up as a part of the upper-middle class in Midwestern suburbia with a large supportive family and a good education.



The lives of Francie Nolan and Camille Deslongchamps could not be more different. So what moved Camille to choose this story, this character? What resonated with my daughter, she told me, was Francie's prayer:

Dear God, let me be something every minute of every hour of my life. Let me be gay; let me be sad. Let me be cold; let me be warm. Let me be hungry... have too much to eat. Let me be ragged or well-dressed. Let me be sincere — be deceitful. Let me be truthful; let me be a liar. Let me be honorable, and let me sin. Only let me be something every blessed minute. And when I sleep, let me dream all the time so that not one little piece of living is ever lost (p.421).

When telling me about the book, she said, "Mom, I feel like Francie could be my friend." Funny, because Francie didn't have scores of friends lining up, especially when she was growing up. Admittedly, Francie's mother, Katie's insistence upon sending her to school reeking of the kerosene oil put in her hair to ward off head lice and the garlic bulbs sewn in her clothes as a prophylactic against the mumps doesn't do much for her social life. But even without these indignities, Francie is an "outsider." At the first poor public school she attends, she stands apart from her classmates for her desire to learn and to write. The rest of the students, it seems, are concerned only with how to inflict or avoid the brutality endemic among the students and the teachers. Francie knows she wants more than this from school—she wants a real education. Thus, she finds a different school in a good neighborhood.



Francie reveals herself to others only cautiously to share these “other worlds” and find a real friend, but often with heartbreaking results. The first such attempt is with her teacher Miss Garnder. Miss Garnder is initially encouraging to Francie, helping her to develop her talent for writing. A sort of ongoing conversation occurs through Francie’s stories, and she begins to share more and more of her heart through her writing. When Francie’s father dies and her mother insists, “You’re not to cry for him” (p. 282), Francie is desperate to commiserate with someone. Even more than this, she wants to “show that, in spite of his shortcomings, he had been a good father and a kindly man.”

Francie writes stories about her deceased father without naming him. Francie’s usual A’s in Miss Garnder’s class are replaced by C’s, and the teacher expresses her contempt for the “sordid” subject matter. She explains, “Poverty, starvation, and drunkenness are ugly subjects to choose” (p. 321). She wants Francie to write “prettily” again about such “truths” as “the stars always being there and the sun always rising and the true nobility of man and mother-love and love for one’s country” (p. 321). However, the truth of Francie’s reality is comprised of these sordid and ugly subjects. Miss Garnder is incapable of seeing the goodness, beauty, and love that Francie wishes to show within the broken world that she inhabits. The depth of brokenness that Francie experiences in her life is profound. What is interesting is what this suffering does to her.

The wisdom of Gramma Rommely is a lifeline for all of the Rommely women, especially for Francie. Gramma Rommely insists—even though she is illiterate herself—that Katie read one page from the Bible and one page from Shakespeare to her children every day. In addition, Gramma encourages Francie’s mother to create a makeshift bank hidden away in a closet and save a few pennies every day to buy land someday. This plan seems absurd for folks like Katie and Johnny, struggling to find food for the next meal and to keep shelter overhead. Gramma’s prescription skips over several levels of Maslow’s hierarchy, to be sure! Wouldn’t finding a trade to put food on the table, for example, be far more important than reading Shakespeare?

What Gramma Rommely dictates for her children and grandchildren is more important even than having food or shelter. They provide them hope that there is a world beyond the tenements of Brooklyn that is accessible to them. As Gramma Rommely explains, “When the world becomes too ugly for living in, the child can reach back and live in her imagination. I, myself, even today and at my age, need to recall the miraculous lives of the Saints and the great miracles that have come to pass on earth. Only by having these things in my mind can I live beyond what I have to live for” (p. 84). Gramma Rommely’s wisdom passes through Katie but flourishes in Francie.

Katie is a survivor, and she perhaps best exemplifies that tree that grows so well in Brooklyn; the kind of tree that grows “in boarded-up lots and out of neglected rubbish heaps and it [is] the only tree that [grows] out of cement” (p. 6). Katie defies her reality by surviving. She dutifully saves her pennies with the hope of purchasing property, but the only property Katie buys herself is the burial plot for her “dreamer” and drunkard husband. While he was living, Katie let Johnny be the one to sing and dream of other, better worlds; she had work to do. After Johnny dies, Katie names her yet-unborn daughter Laurie after a girl “in a song that Johnny sang... a song, he said, that belonged to a better world” (p. 344).

Francie inherits both the hard-scrabble survival instinct of her mother and the hope for a better world from her father. She wants not merely to survive but to live every moment to the fullest extent possible. She lives the wisdom of Gramma Rommely, who says, “To look at everything always as though you were seeing it either for the first or last time: Thus is your time on earth filled with glory” (p. 476). What she lacks through most of the book, however, is a friend with whom to share the journey. Francie finds her closest friends in the books she loves so dearly. Not even her mother, who admittedly sacrificed so much for her children, could be considered a “friend,” especially after failing to see how important going back to high school was to Francie.

While more of a background, quiet character, Ben emerges towards the end of the book as a real friend to Francie. His affection for Francie reminds me of the Italian phrase “*Ti voglio bene*,” which is generally translated as “I love you.” The literal meaning, however, is much more interesting: it means “I desire the good for you.” I can think of no greater expression of friendship than this, to want the good for the other. Ben knows Francie; he cherishes her and wants her to soar. He understands that education, for Francie, is not a technical hoop to jump through to have a career. Education—especially reading and writing—is a lifeline for Francie that connects her to the “other, better worlds” that are the hope and meaning of her life. While the friendship between Francie and Ben is still developing by the end of the book, the expectation is that they will not only survive together, but also live to help each other “be something, every blessed minute” of their lives.

*Jennifer Deslongchamps is an erstwhile graduate student of Medieval Studies, and a wife and mother of six children ages 8 to 15. While domestic life has supplanted a life in academia after the doctor who told her she'd never have children was clearly wrong, she nonetheless finds reading to be her lifeline, much like Francie Nolan. For this reason she is grateful to Well-Read Mom and her friends in Milwaukee, Wisconsin with whom she is sharing this journey of discovering again and again the meaning of life.*

## Discussion Questions

- Consider the title of the book, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. This tree is described as a scrub tree, almost a weed, that thrives in the poor tenement, districts of Brooklyn. It can grow out of cement, without any tending or care, yet it lives to “reach towards the sky.” Why was this chosen as the title of this book?
- How does the relative material success Francie achieves with her job as a reader change Francie, Katie, and Neely?
- Consider the character Johnny Nolan. Is he a good father? What are his strengths? Flaws? Consider also Katie as a mother in the same way.
- Reflecting on the family life of all of the Rommely sisters, what is the most important gift one can give to one’s children? Stability? Moral virtue? Love? Something else?
- Consider some of these minor characters in this novel: Evy and Willie, Gramma Rommely, Mr. McGarrity, Mr. McShane, Miss Garnder and others. What purpose does each serve in the narrative?
- What prompts Francie to create a time capsule? Why does she do this?
- Who could be considered a true “friend” in this story? Why? What does this person reveal about the meaning of friendship? What insights does this book bring forth about your own experience of friendship?

# WORKS OF MERCY

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SALLY THOMAS

## CALLED OUT OF SOLITUDE

A Reflection by Janille Stephens

When I was in college, we often spoke of vocation in both classes and dorm rooms. Armed with Frederick Buechner's words, "Your vocation in life is where your greatest joy meets the world's greatest need," we tried to discern our joys and gifts as we chose majors and enrolled in classes.

Fifteen years later, though, I must admit that I have used my major very little. Where I found my joy at eighteen differs from where I have been needed or led since that time. After receiving a teaching degree, I taught for a mere three years and have since worked odd jobs while raising children with my husband. If I had to describe my vocation now, it would not be a job I chose at eighteen, but rather the various duties that I have sometimes submitted to (and sometimes rebelled against) since that time.

It is no wonder then that I was especially drawn to the topic of vocation in Sally Thomas's *Works of Mercy*. In this novel, we see two people at opposite ends of life, Kirsty Sain and Father Schuyler, grappling with vocations they do not necessarily want. Neither of their lives has turned out as expected. The desire of Kirsty's youth was to be united with Dermott, a dream that was shattered when he left her. Father Schuyler expected to be a monk. He excelled at life in a monastery but, just as Dermott dashed Kirsty's hopes, Father Schuyler's were dashed by his superior, who announced one day that Schuyler did not have a vocation and then sent him home.

Just as Kirsty longs for solitude, saying she is "in many ways a more contented widow than I had been a wife," Schuyler also longs for a more reclusive life. He often avoids his parishioners and carefully guards his days off. Once, he dismisses Kirsty from the rectory she regularly cleans because he is not in the mood for company. They make quite a pair, this priest who wanted to be a monk and this widow who wishes to have been an anchoress.

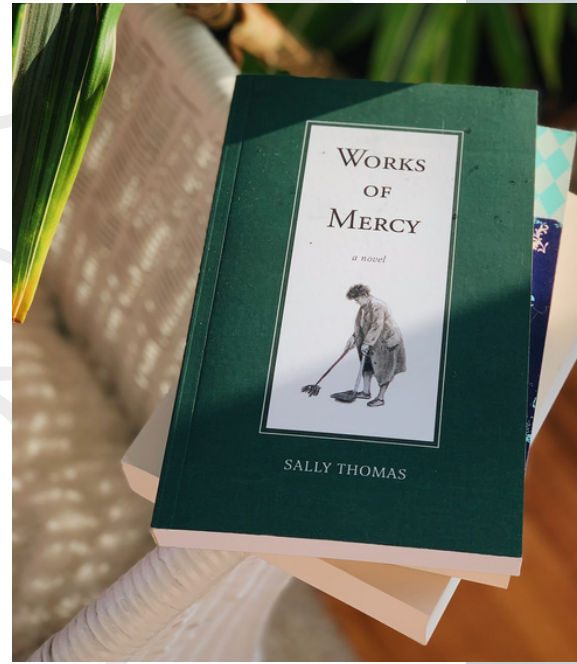
The action of the novel begins when Kirsty and Father Schuyler are called out of their solitude to their true vocations: performing works of mercy for their fellow parishioners. Kirsty is jolted from her quiet life first by Janet Malkin's conversation but increasingly by Janet's need for someone like Kirsty, someone who can care for her while she is in the midst of caring for her many children. At first, Kirsty only grudgingly involves herself with the Malkins. On one occasion, Kirsty even considers visiting Janet as a kind of penance. But during the visit, she changes her mind, "the longer I sat, the less like a reparation it all felt. It was pleasant to sit in the midst of that chaos which bothered nobody, apparently, but me." The more involved Kirsty becomes with the Malkin's intrigues and tragedies, the more we see how good this involvement is for Kirsty. The line between giver and receiver becomes blurry. Kirsty's acts of kindness not only bless the Malkins but also allow her to be blessed by the Malkins.



It is striking that Kirsty's ability to serve the Malkins, despite her temperamental inclination to leave them alone, stems from her other vocation: marriage. After Dermott abandons her, Kirsty becomes the subject of Ranse's unwanted attentions. Theirs is not a whirlwind romance. When Ranse proposes, Kirsty's response is reasonable but unenthusiastic: "I didn't mind the idea of marrying him. I thought him kind and honorable. If I could manage some semblance of kindness and honor in return, then we might both do worse." And it seems they both live up to this simple standard. While Kirsty never claims to be in love with Ranse, they still enjoy a marriage marked by honor and kindness.

Just as Kirsty's marriage drew her out of her thoughts in order to meet the needs of Ranse and his mother, she is also pulled out of her solitude to serve both Father Schuyler, as he settles into the parish, and the Malkins, as they grapple with tragedy. Kirsty answers, however begrudgingly, the call to serve; in doing so, she helps Father Schuyler do the same. The final scene of the novel is ambiguous about the future of the Malkin family, but it shows a clear transformation in the characters of Father Schuyler and Kirsty. Initially, they were both insular and wanted little more than to be left alone. The conclusion finds Father Schuyler counseling Janet outside his scheduled hours and Kirsty—the same Kirsty who asks, "Have I mentioned that I do not love children?"—holding an infant and looking forward to the day when the very same infant might be old enough to converse with her, as yet another Malkin come to disrupt her solitude.

*Janille Stephens is a native Texan who now lives in Dublin, Ireland. Her husband is a Christian minister, and they have two children. Her fiction has appeared in Fathom Magazine, and her nonfiction has been published in Dappled Things.*



## Discussion Questions

- Both Father Schuyler and Kirsty are pulled out of themselves by the needs of others. When does this happen to you? Do you resist this pull at first, like Father Schuyler and Kirsty?
- Often Kirsty does things out of a sense of duty. For example, she cleans the rectory because she isn't "contributing" to the parish in any other way. What role does duty play in this novel? How do Kirsty and Fr Schuyler feel about their duties, and how do these feelings change throughout the novel?
- Name the specific works of mercy that are included in the book. How does performing or receiving these acts of mercy impact the main characters?
- How does Kirsty's marriage prepare her to assist Father Schuyler in his new duties? How does it prepare her to care for the Malkins?

# THE BIRD IN THE TREE

ELIZABETH GOUDGE

## LUCILLA'S SPIRITUALLY AND WISDOM

A Reflection by Ana Braga-Henebry

In a divorce court in England, a judge, after hearing both parties, ordered the couple to go home and read *The Bird in the Tree*. After the appointed time, the couple dropped their petition for divorce—they had reconciled. I am certain that after reading *The Bird in the Tree*, the Well-Read Mom reader will smile and nod with me!

In *The Bird in the Tree*, Elizabeth Goudge reminds me of Rumer Godden, especially in her novel *The Battle of Villa Fiorita*. As with Godden, Goudge is a paradox of sorts, a mix of old-fashioned English manners and a modern viewpoint about societal life. They are both grounded in lovely British prose and the era when they wrote. Above all, in these novels they share the cleverness of a plot centered on a married couple who are brought to their senses.

For a few years now, I have enjoyed being a grandmother. The introduction of this author, and specifically this volume, to my library has been timely. I appreciate the wisdom the protagonist—a grandmother—has garnered through the years and how this wisdom now comes to aid her love for family members. Lucilla's wisdom and spirituality, freed from the constraints of youth and embedded in love of God and her family members, shine in her thoughts and actions. Lucilla sees the younger generation as one needing help from their self-induced, periodic misery, and she boldly acts with mercy in mind.

Satisfying? Yes, I realize that this feeling is something I look for in my reading, and perhaps more so now in my golden years. Elizabeth Goudge is known for writing stories on the importance of doing what is right in life; and she was high church Anglican, almost "indistinguishable from Catholic." This story includes the spiritual life, prayer, an exemplary, loving priest, and Marian references.



From the very first pages, the book enchanted me. Lucilla is a matriarch and a grandmother like me. She loved flowers and gardens, which spill out from the pages of her beautiful, thoughtful prose! Another satisfying aspect of Goudge's prose is her careful descriptions of everything—garden, houses, and landscapes. She writes as someone who has not only been there but also observed and loved each setting she brings to her stories. In Goudge's fiction, it is as if settings become characters.



In conversation, Genevieve, a fellow Well-Read Mom member, told me that in Goudge's work, "there is such a deep sense of rootedness in a place that I miss tremendously, both as an American and someone who has moved many times. It makes me wonder what it would be like to live in a place with deep history, with people who had lived there for generations." This book is no exception. The large manor where Lucilla lives, cares for her grandchildren, and visits family members is almost like a family member itself. Genevieve added this, and I found myself nodding as she said, "Elizabeth Goudge makes me see the world more carefully and appreciate people more deeply, even those I might initially find irritating or shallow. She has a beautiful vision of the meaning and depth in the world that helps me catch a glimpse of the real—to see with the eyes of heaven."

Lucilla's common sense, boldness, and creativity, all anchored in a sound spiritual life, crown the plot in *The Bird in the Tree*. The book is light and pleasant, and it will be a good summer companion for Well-Read Mom readers, garden trowel and lemonade in hand.

*Ana Braga-Henebry has a Master's Degree in Humanities from The University of Texas at Dallas. She is the author of the upcoming Word on Fire/Stark book for children Jerome Lejeune, Father of Modern Genetics. Ana writes on culture and Catholic family life. She and her husband, Geoff, live in East Lansing, MI, with their youngest (of seven), where they wait eagerly for the monthly letter of their cloistered daughter.*

## Discussion Questions

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- How well does Elizabeth Goudge bring the reader into Damerosehay? Consider the physical aspects of the manor, its history, how it came to be in the Eliot family, and its role in the story.
- There are many minor characters in the story. One is Hillary. Do you like him? What are some of his personality traits, and what does he bring into the plot?
- Discuss the protagonist Lucilla. She is a multi-faceted character! Look back at her relationship with Hellen. What interesting paradoxes do we find in her personality?
- What claim does the author make about marriage? The author was known in her time for the theme of doing one's duty and what is right. There is no "follow your heart" message in Goudge's oeuvre. Sacrificing one's own feelings for a greater goal; being faithful to one's promises; and finding happiness through doing so, in the end, is the author's constant message.





## WE INVITE YOU TO JOIN US

We want all women who participate in Well-Read Mom to enjoy our beautiful materials. When a woman joins Well-Read Mom, she is not just purchasing a booklist or product; she is joining and supporting a movement of women who want to read more and read well. We are so proud that we are a part of deepening the awareness of meaning in women's daily lives, elevating the cultural conversation, and revitalizing the reading of literature. Well-Read Mom couldn't exist without the financial support our members provide. We are proud to say that, due to the generosity of our members, no woman is turned away due to financial need.

### HOW TO GET STARTED

Ready to start a group? Contact us at [info@wellreadmom.com](mailto:info@wellreadmom.com).

We'll add you to our Leader Roster and send you our free Leader Training Materials that will get your group off to a great start. These include resources for hosting an informational meeting, a Well-Read Mom brochure, and an editable flyer to publicize your group.

### REGISTER AT WELLREADMOM.COM

Once you have a group of interested women, each one will visit [WellReadMom.com](http://WellReadMom.com) to register and select the membership level of her choice. She will also note you as her Leader.

### ACCESS OUR MATERIALS

After she registers and pays the membership fee, she'll have immediate access to our online materials, including our current and past booklists, monthly audios, podcasts, and video resources. We'll mail her printed materials beginning in late July for the membership year starting in September and within 7–10 business days for anyone who joins during the year.



**JOIN TODAY**

[WWW.WELLREADMOM.COM](http://WWW.WELLREADMOM.COM)

*"Well-Read Mom takes the guesswork out of what to read and shares tips to make reading possible - even when the kids are young." - Lisa (WRM member)*

### LET'S GET IN TOUCH

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