

## **Hustle & Grace with Hilary Sutton, Season 1, Episode 14**

### **Karen Swallow Prior, Author & Professor On Reading Well, Career Pivots, & What She's Learned Since Her Accident**

**Karen Swallow Prior, PhD, is Professor of English at Liberty University, where she has won multiple teaching awards. She writes frequently on literature, culture, ethics and ideas. Her writing appears at Christianity Today, The Atlantic, The Washington Post, First Things, Fox, Think Christian, The Gospel Coalition, Books & Culture and a lot of other places. She is the author of *Booked: Literature in the Soul of Me* (one of my favorite memoirs), *Fierce Convictions: The Extraordinary Life of Hannah More – Poet, Reformer, Abolitionist* and most recently *On Reading Well: Finding the Good Life Through Great Literature*, which is available now at booksellers everywhere. You can go grab a copy, it was just published in September of 2018.**

**Hilary Sutton:** Karen, welcome to Hustle & Grace!

Karen Swallow Prior: Thank you for having me!

**HS:** I'm so glad to have you! First of all congratulations on the new book! I think the day this will come out you will have had your pub date yesterday, so future us will be celebrating that. I was lucky enough to get an advance copy, and I have to say it's fantastic! For anyone who envies the students who get to sit in your English classes, this is definitely the book for them. It's so good. Speaking of teaching English, I would love to dive in to your career a bit and how you balance it all. You have done an incredible job of staying connected to your community online, you're prolific mentoring and teaching your university students, writing books, contributing articles, public speaking, and contributing boldly to cultural conversations. From over here it looks like you do a great job of maintaining a close relationship with your family and friends. You make time for hobbies and your health – it feels like you are able to pack in everything you want to, but obviously that can't be true, you must say no to something. So I want to hear a little bit about how you prioritize and manage your time, how you determine what is important, and how you figure out what is worth saying no to and yes to.

**KSP:** Well, I really wish I knew the answer to that question! It is an ongoing struggle, and as you mentioned all those parts, they're always shifting and moving, so it is something I have to think through almost every day with every opportunity. I think I have to begin with what things are first, and just in terms with my career, my first role and calling is being a professor. I have a full time job. At times when the university gives me release time to do more speaking and writing (which they have been generous to do) that obviously gives me more time to do that. When I don't have that time then my first focus is on teaching. But everything else that I have come to do, like the writing, the

speaking, even the social media, has all actually flowed out of that first calling that I have as a teacher. In fact, I actually first got on Facebook many many years ago, that first year whenever it came out, because back when it was just college students or anyone that had a college email address, I wanted to use it as a way to expand my classroom. I wanted to continue discussions we were having in the classroom about literature and life and God on Facebook. And so as social media grew and expanded and my presence in it grew, I have always continued that first mission of using it as an expanded classroom. And the speaking that I do grows out of my writing – it's actually probably my least favorite thing to do. I don't necessarily like speaking and I don't like traveling. I know a lot of people have the desire to do those things, but for me it comes with the package of writing (which I did not know when I first started). But if I want to write and have an audience that will read my writing, I need to meet that audience where they are. They want to hear me speak, and so I try to make decisions based on that foundation and the things that flow out of it. That means saying yes to a lot of things but it really means being wise to say no. I'm learning that and I'm having to say no more and more.

**HS: Yeah! So that's interesting that speaking does not appeal to you, because in my mind speaking publicly and lecturing in the classroom are kind of related or cousins. So that really feels different than being in the classroom?**

KSP: Absolutely! That is a good observation, and it may just depend on the style of teaching. I love teaching and you've been in my classroom, you know that, but there is a lot of give and take. I love that environment of standing up and talking informally and lecturing and discussing whereas I think with speaking, there are a lot of people who are polished speakers. They stand up and present something in a polished, prepared way, and that is just not me. It just feels very different. I'm learning, I think, to do it and get better at it, but I just like the engagement that takes place in a smaller classroom setting.

**HS: Totally! From my memories, your teaching style is definitely conversational with a lot of back and forth, so that makes total sense. So talking a little bit more about your career, we just kind of highlighted that you've had some substantial career pivots. You have been an educator for decades and eventually moved into some op-ed article writing, and then became a nonfiction writer and then obviously a keynote speaker, so I think it would be interesting to hear a little bit about if you've always had a dream or a goal of moving in that direction. And then what advice would you give to someone who might like to expand his or her career in a similar way, where they're not making a total pivot and leaving behind the thing that they've loved for so long, but where they're kind of expanding that? Any advice there about your own journey?**

KSP: I think what's really interesting is the way the things you begin to do when you're young and just starting out and having ideas about what you want to do – all of those pieces can fall into place in ways that are just surprising and you could never predict. I actually never wanted to be a teacher when I was thinking of career goals and direction.

The first thing I ever thought I wanted to be once I was in college (I had a lot of things I wanted to be when I was little) and switched my major to English, I began writing for the student newspaper, and I wrote my first letter to the editor my freshman or sophomore year. I loved opinion columnists, and I used to read them in the newspaper and I wanted to be one. Writing that first letter to the editor was my first stab at it, and that was the direction that I went in to, and then when I went on to grad school in English I discovered teaching quite accidentally. Then I discovered that was what I loved to do, and I pursued that. After, I was a professor for a number of years, and the internet and blogosphere exploded. I returned with that platform I had gained as a professor, writing some longer op-ed pieces, which really are didactic. Op-eds teach, they give an opinion or promote a point of view, which is a lot of what teaching is as well, to educate and form and shape. So it's interesting how those little pieces that were coming together over many years came together and formed a complete picture. I am doing all of those things now in a more holistic way but I never would have seen them falling together the way that I did.

**HS: Fascinating! Remind me – that first tipping point of one of those major articles you wrote in recent years – did that originate from something someone saw you posted on social media? How did that first start – was that a letter to the editor?**

KSP: Let's see. I wrote a couple of articles that were opinion articles for a lesser known magazine geared towards the 18-30 year old age group, so I had a couple pieces that were published. And then I actually went to a small conference in Washington for a social activist type issue (it had nothing to do with my day job or writing). But there I met the editor of a major publication and we chatted a few minutes, and the next week I got an email from one of his assistant editors saying she was launching this new women's blog and she would like to get some pitches from me. Again, there were a lot of little pieces that fell together because I had written some things that she could read first. I went to this conference that had nothing to do with those things, but you make connections and then the body of work that you have, even if it is small before, makes a way for you when that connection happens. So I started writing for that women's blog and started getting contacted by other editors including one at the Atlantic saying "hey I've been reading your writing, would you like to write for us?", and so it kind of went from there.

**HS: Your story lends itself to great advice. Create a body of work so when you have the opportunity and you meet people in positions of authority that can grant you great opportunities you have something to show for it. It's also important to show up at things in real life and meet people in person.**

KSP: That's exactly it. If I could add one thing to that, because I recently got a message from someone asking me for some advice from an aspiring writer who was having trouble placing her work, and I didn't know anything about her, but I said "this publication or this publication" and she said "well, my work's not like that" and I finally

said “well, when you’re starting out you have to be willing to play by the rules of the other publications before you can spread your wings and fly on your own.”

**HS: Yeah! You have to be adaptive.**

KSP: When I was contacted by this women’s blog, my first thought was “I don’t write women’s stuff and I don’t want to write for a women’s blog”, but I did and I did it well and for a long time. Even though that wasn’t at first my ideal place, I became a better writer, I learned how to be edited, I became stronger, and it opened up doors to the kind of places I really wanted to be published. You really have to be willing to play by other people’s rules before you get to set up your own game.

**HS: That’s such good advice – play by the rules. Well, I would love to spend a little bit of time talking about the new book! It’s called “On Reading Well” and can you, just for the purpose of a bit of an introduction, talk about what it means to read well?**

KSP: Sure! My first book, which is similar in the sense that it talks about literature (*Booked: Literature in the Soul of Me*) is a memoir and it talks about the wide reading I did over the course of my life and how books shaped me. I really emphasize in that book the importance of reading widely. I think we should read widely! But in recent years, especially with the blogosphere and Twitter and social media, it seems like everyone’s reading all the time. We’re scrolling through the feeds on the palm of our hands and reading words, but we’re not reading well. We’re getting worse at reading because of the kind of reading that we do. So reading well means a number of things that I talk about in the book. Number one, it means reading with care and attention and focus, and reading things that require those of us as opposed to just the things we can skim over and read quickly. So reading as a technical skill and employing that skill well, but also reading well on the interpretive level, so reading with understanding (good understanding) and good application to your life. Ultimately, good books teach us how to live well. So reading well leads to living well.

**HS: Reading well leads to living well. One thing you talk about in the book is the importance of reading promiscuously – I would love for you to unpack that concept and why it’s especially important for people of faith to do that.**

KSP: This is, again, something I talk about in *Booked*. I borrow the phrase from the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Puritan poet John Milton, who wrote an essay written to his own fellow Puritans who were about to approve a licensing act that would require any printed material to get prior approval from Parliament before it could even be published. Milton argues to his fellow conservative Christians that it’s a very Christian thing to read widely. He talks about books promiscuously read. The original and literal meaning of promiscuous is “to mix things up”, and to not just read the things you always agree with like just one author or a certain genre, but to mix things up in your reading. In Milton’s context he was specifically talking about ideas that you not only disagree with but that you also might find heretical. He was saying that’s how we discover what truth is – by trying it against

error. We have to expose ourselves to error in order to understand truth. This is especially important for Christians to read promiscuously because otherwise we just assume somebody else's beliefs and they aren't really ours if we don't understand how or why they are true.

**HS: It's the whole thing of read and think for yourself. You mentioned earlier that we're all constantly reading – we're reading in 280 character bites on our phones. I'm curious to know if, and you've been teaching for a long time, as a professor, have you seen a difference in how students approach reading since the advent of mobile web and social media? Have you observed a change in attention spans? I feel like you're kind of like "boots on the ground", you could give some qualitative observations there. Do you feel like students read differently than they did 20 years ago, in your observation?**

KSP: Let me first say that I read differently. I find my own attention span much shortened and my own need to grab for my phone every few pages when I'm reading a book impossible to conquer. My expanse is probably a little bit different because I lived before the Internet and Twitter and Facebook. I lived during a time when you could sit and read a book for hours without those kinds of interruptions. So now I'm teaching students who never even knew that kind of immersion experience in books existed because we're constantly distracted. Yes, I'm definitely seeing a change. Part of what I'm seeing, even in the past couple of years on the part of students, is that recognition that they do want more. A few years ago, a lot of students wanted eBooks and e-readers. Now, my students don't want those. They actually are starting to realize the way that reading on a phone or computer is different from reading the physical book. I teach mainly English majors, but still, I'm encouraged. We will never do away with these tools, I wouldn't want to, but I think we're maturing in our understanding that we really need to use them virtuously and to cultivate at the same time our ability to read longer things to hold our attention. It's a constant process I think and I don't want to be the one to say, "this generation is so much worse than the previous generation", as things are always changing, and overall my challenge is still to help readers read better and to hopefully help people fall in love with reading more. I think we're reaching a saturation limit with social media and I think people are ready to fall in love with something like reading right now.

**HS: Its obviously nobody's fault what generation they were born into. I'm on the cusp – there were always computers in classrooms I was a part of, but you would have to go and sit in this one spot to look at a screen. I remember a time before I knew what the world wide web was, I didn't get it, and then Facebook came out when I was in college and a few years later, iPhones came along and really changed things forever. So your advice for reading better in this world that we live in full of distraction and clickbait – you mentioned being intentional about reading more challenging work. Any other advice for becoming better readers?**

KSP: Yeah! I think a lot of people are intimidated by great literature and great books, and I understand that. They are hard, so I just want to encourage people, as I say in the

book, to read books that make demands on you and be okay with the fact that it's challenging. You will get more out of a difficult book that you feel like you can only grasp 10 percent of than you will some blog article you would get 100 percent of. Be okay with reading something and feeling like most of it is going over your head or it's just hard, but then you get this sentence or this thought or this well-crafted phrase delights you – just keep going, and it's fine if it's slow. I still pick up books that take me a long time to get through and read, but I know it will be worth it in the end, even if it's not the greatest book in the world, but just because of that practice of training my attention and my focus and knowing I don't have to conquer the whole thing to get a great deal out of it, even if it's a small percentage.

**HS: It's almost like showing up at the gym every day – that daily conditioning.**

KSP: Perfect analogy!

**HS: Cool! I have a confession to make – I am a person that reads a lot more nonfiction than fiction. I want to be one of those people that reads 50/50, but I'm not. I haven't been since college, I've just been reading more nonfiction. I would love to hear you talk about the benefits and the differences between reading fiction and nonfiction. In this book you really talked about how if you're a person who likes a takeaway and a lesson learned and something you can apply to your life, there is certainly a place for that within fiction. Would you mind placating me and making a case for fiction writing for a person who likes to read for personal development?**

KSP: Okay, so that's a great question – especially for a person reading for personal development. Reading nonfiction communicates ideas and concepts and information, and that is great. I have to read a lot of nonfiction as well, even though I don't enjoy it as much. Fiction does shape you and teach you, but it's more in an experiential way than an informative way. Think of it in terms of if you have a friendship, if you're enjoying the company of someone, that shapes and forms you in a way that asking someone for information doesn't. Reading a book is like having an experience. There are also many recent studies showing what the ancients knew a long time ago, beginning with Aristotle, that reading literary fiction actually does increase reader's empathy or their ability to understand an experience, to assess it and judge it. One of the things I say in the book is when we learn about characters, we shape our own character. So we are being formed as well as being informed when we read fiction, but it's a very indirect way, in the same way that sitting on a porch and chatting with a friend for an hour will shape you and form you – fiction does that.

**HS: I love that analogy. In *On Reading Well*, you examine the virtues through the lens of several different classic novels. I would be curious to know, if you could pick a favorite, which has had the most lasting impact on you, and how is it transformational for you?**

KSP: Oh that's a good question! In this book or ever?

**HS: Ever!**

KSP: Okay! So the book that has had the most impact on my life, which I wrote about in my first book that I've talked about a couple times called *Booked*, is *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert. It's the story of a young woman who reads too many novels, ironically, but they're the trashy romantic kind. She gets these ideas in her head about what life and love and marriage are supposed to be like, and because her ideas are romantic and not realistic, she ends up letting life pass her by because she doesn't take any joy in the everyday and the ordinary. Reading that novel when I was in college for the first time made me realize how wonderful everyday ordinary life is, and that's where we can find our joy, not in the daydreaming and fantasies and idealism. *Madame Bovary* is the book that most changed my life.

**HS: Wow – I have to put that on my list now officially! I would love to wrap up by talking about something that happened in your life recently that had a huge impact. Earlier this year, you were in a bus accident and it was awful. Beforehand you were a daily runner, an active writer and teacher and all these things, and all of a sudden your life came to a screeching halt and you were trying to survive and recover. You've made huge strides in your recovery, but you haven't even been cleared to walk without a walker yet! So as the dust settles, what have you learned? I would be curious to know what life has been like for you these past couple of months.**

KSP: Well, that's a good and big question. I am told by people who know more about trauma than I do that these are the questions that you will continue finding answers for two years, ten years down the road. I can say that what's really ironic is that I had just finished this book *On Reading Well*. I had turned in the last edits and it was getting ready to go to press and be printed when I had this accident. I wrote a book about virtue, and some of the virtues that I write about are patience and humility and love. I write about exhibiting these virtues in all kinds of circumstances. The virtue of patience is by definition "the habit of bearing suffering well". So here I had written this whole book about virtues, I had studied them and applied them through literature, edited this manuscript, thought about it and tried to weave in life examples and then all of a sudden, in my whole life I was in a situation where I found myself having to practice these virtues. What was amazing was that because I had studied and written about them, I felt like I knew what it was I needed to do. I knew when I was suffering I needed to bear it well, I knew when I had to undergo a lot of degrading, humiliating procedures and attention in the hospital to be humble enough to accept that and to not be demoralized by it and to receive the love that was being poured on me by my family and friends. I think I would never have been able to do those things as well if I didn't understand what they were and what they would require of me before writing this book. That was a great mercy, but on the other hand it was humbling because I thought "Wow, I thought I knew these virtues before, but living through this I think I understand a lot of it better."

**HS: So you kind of had the theory and all of a sudden one day you were faced with applying that.**

KSP: I was tested, tested big time.

**HS: It's crazy because I got to be on your street team that got access to your book early, and I think I got the book in the mail the day before the accident, and I had just posted that morning a picture of the book and you even replied. Little did we know! I think I saw you at a play a couple weeks before! It's wild, you don't know what it brings.**

KSP: No you don't! I always knew that theoretically too, but now I know it for real. We just don't know how our life could change in a split second.

**HS: I have to ask – do you foresee a book in the future about the lessons you've learned during this time?**

KSP: You know, a lot of people have been asking that and I was resistant to it at first. I've been thinking more about it and there are definitely some lessons to be learned but I think I'm thinking of something that might be more meditative and reflective, and it would probably be something I would work on over a long period of time I think. Yeah, I am thinking and praying about that.

**HS: That's exciting! Well for people who aren't already connected with you online, could you share where people could find you on the Interwebs and on social media?**

KSP: Sure! I have a website that is [karensallowprior.com](http://karensallowprior.com), and the easiest place to connect with me on social media is on Twitter, and it is [ksprior](https://twitter.com/ksprior).

**HS: Awesome! Thank you so much Dr. Prior, this has been amazing.**

KSP: Thank you for having me! I enjoyed the conversation.

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***Recommended Reading from Karen:***

*Madam Bovary*

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