

Language Arts Journal of Michigan

Volume 16
Issue 2 *The Use of Place in Writing and
Literature*

Article 6

2000

I Can Read

Jason Kane

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lajm>

Recommended Citation

Kane, Jason (2000) "I Can Read," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 16: Iss. 2, Article 6.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1351>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Language Arts Journal of Michigan by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

I CAN READ

Jason Kane

I remember the Letter People. For some reason, I can see some more clearly than I can see others. Mr. T, who I'm certain had big teeth inside a big mouth, and Mr. H, who had long green hair because he refused to get it cut after falling and cutting his knee; he feared that if he cut his hair, it would bleed and it would hurt. Of course, even as a scared kindergartner, I knew Mr. Hairy H's phobia was unfounded. Hair did not bleed. It was the only part of my body that didn't bleed. My brother, Eric, had taught me that. I remember the letter S the best. S stood for Supersonic Socks and wore a mask, a cape, and socks, all of which were blood red; I see a large red S on his chest and dish-soap-blue skin. Supersonic Socks was my favorite Letter Person because his special socks enabled him to fly. I'm not sure if at that time I had become obsessed with the TV cartoon the *Superfriends* and flying, and Superman and the Green Lantern my two favorite leaders because they too could fly, but I can only assume that I had since Supersonic Socks is the only Letter Person I can see as a shaped, blown-up figure like and about the size of a beach ball, sitting on the window sill in my kindergarten classroom. I know twenty-five others lived in the Letter People world, but I remember Supersonic Socks the best because he had the ability to leave that world when he wanted.

It's not surprising that my earliest "literacy memories" mix with early images of television. I'm certain I spent more time in front of the TV than I did with a book. However, I could rarely even

concentrate on the images of TV since Eric usually decided he wanted to watch whatever I didn't want to watch. He would sit on me, pin my arms behind my back, and force me to change the channel. Change—I feel as if my childhood reflected the disruptive and constantly shifting images of TV—commercial breaks, fade-outs, rapid scene changes, new and different channels. I don't know if it was due to my overly aggressive brother or natural tendencies toward pacifism, but I was a frightened and shy little boy. When people spoke to me, I would duck behind my mother and hold onto her leg, leaving only a few reddish brown toddler curls, my already longer than average for my age left leg, and my little hands and pipe cleaner arms visible to the speaker. So going to school, being away from my mother, and being with a whole room full of strange people trying to talk to me was not something that I looked forward to.

Lunch with Mom. Dad at work, Eric and my older sister, Kristen, both at school. Scrambled eggs, Campbell's chicken noodle soup, or maybe a grilled cheese followed by curling up on the couch and watching TV with Mom. Mom always lay on the inside of the couch, making a perfect space for me to lie down next to her, transforming herself into my couch. Her baby adequately fed and safely nestled next to her, Mom almost always fell asleep before the second half of *Days of Our Lives*. "We will return for the second half of *Days of Our Lives* in just a moment," the announcer would say, and I'd turn my neck and see that Mom's eyes had closed. I never got up to change the channel. I'd watch the

rest of the show and most of *Another World* that followed before Mom would wake up. I liked the routine. How many episodes of these soap operas did I see? I still know these characters and their stories. Have their stories become part of mine? Who is the author of our stories?

It's difficult to know if what we remember is actually what happened, or what we think happened, or what other people told us happened. Are these visions I have in my head actually pieces of my life? Or are they slices cut from the hundreds of television shows I've seen and pieced back together to form an illusory whole? Do I really remember the red blocks placed before me, mother at my side, strange woman sitting across from me on the other side of the table asking me to form the blocks into some kind of building? My memory is of a small room, what I would describe as institutional—no posters, no paintings, nothing at all on the dull-gray walls. Would they have tested a preschooler in such an environment? Did it resemble a police interrogation, or do I remember feeling how the thousands of suspects whom I've seen being questioned and blamed for terrible crimes they didn't commit have appeared to me to feel? Pleading to be listened to, let go, set free, free to return to the safety of their own homes, their own rooms which have color, sky blue walls, Spider-Man sleeping bag, stuffed Papa Smurf, and Blankie, my Dirty Blankie from Texas, worn and soiled to perfection, blue flowers indistinguishable, only dirt and saliva stains, only the smell and feel of familiarity. Surely, there was more color in the room than those little red blocks.

It was the only test I have ever failed.

It was the only test I have ever failed. Poor motor skills was the evaluation. Combined with late October birthday—recommendation—wait another year until entering kindergarten. One more year attending Woodlawn Nursery School two or three days a week, climbing alone on the bee-hive shaped playground apparatus, waiting for Mom to come pick me up, waiting for Tigger to greet us at

the door when we got home. One more year with Mom.

Roman dies in an explosion. He comes back to life, or so it seems. He looks like a different man when they remove the bandages wrapped around his entire head. They say he has undergone plastic surgery. Plastic surgery must be like magic. Skeletor and Evil-Lynn sometimes turn themselves into different people in order to trick and defeat He-Man. The Sorceress can change into an eagle, and Orko, who wants to be a great sorcerer but isn't yet, sometimes performs the wrong spell and changes himself into weird creatures. Is this plastic surgery? Could I turn myself into someone new?

"You are not making your A's right. Your lower case "a" needs to be closed and should fit below the dotted line in the middle of the paper. You need to practice your A's. Look at the Ms. A on the windowsill. Write like that." Silence. No response. No speaking when I am spoken to. Evaluation: Poor motor skills. Evaluation: Poor social skills.

My dad took me to school on my first day of kindergarten. Kindergartners went to school half-days in those days. I can't remember if I was an a.m. or a p.m. kindergartner. I must have been an a.m. kindergartner because Dad took me. Dressed in his jacket and tie, he must have been on his way to the high school to principal. I suppose he could have come home on his lunch break to escort me to school. I lived five houses away from Valley View Elementary, so I was a walker. Actually, at that point I was not big enough to walk alone, so I had to be taken to school. I felt taken. I would not have gone to school if somebody hadn't taken me. I'm certain Dad won the job because he knew I'd never let go of Mom's leg. Mom says Dad took me because he knew that once I started crying, begging not to be left there with the strange people, that she'd pick me up in her arms and take me back home. I remember crying. Chocolate milk and rest-time after story-time on my brand new kindergartner rug wasn't enough incentive to want to stick around. But Dad had to either get to or get back to work, so he left me alone and crying.

In first grade the first thing I learned wasn't

addition or subtraction; it was division. "Jason, you are in this reading group with Susie, Brian, Mike. . . You all will meet at the back table together to practice your reading skills, or in your case, to learn how to read. The remainder of the class will read whatever their group has been assigned. You are all divided according to recommendations from your kindergarten teachers," said Mrs. Zielke. Divide and conquer? Divide and be conquered.

Toad made Frog a cup of hot tea. Frog drank the tea, and then he said, "Tell me a story while I am resting." "All right," said Toad. "Let me think of a story to tell you." Toad thought and thought. But he could not think of a story to tell Frog. . . . Then Toad began to bang his head against the wall. "Why are you banging your head against the wall?" asked Frog. "I hope that if I bang my head against the wall hard enough, it will help me to think of a story," said Toad. "I am feeling much better now, Toad," said Frog. "I do not think I need a story anymore" (Lobel 17-25).

I cannot imagine what it feels like not to need a story.

I am banging my head against a wall trying to remember if Frog and Toad were my friends before I became an official student, or if they became a part of my story when Mom read *Frog and Toad are Friends* to me at three o'clock in the morning when I refused to allow sleep to take me. Was I honestly frightened by the noises of night? The windows laughed at the wind who sought the aid of the oak tree branch to gain admittance into my room. The floor cracked its knuckles, working out its tired joints, preparing for another day of work. The hallway light shone in through the slightly opened door, but the closet was still dark. Was I afraid of the creature, green, red, and orange, hairy, clawed, and fanged, who lurked inside and would devour me if I fell asleep? Or did I want a story? Did I need a story? I cannot imagine what it feels like not to need a story.

The Letter People also had their own TV show on PBS. I only seem to remember one scene. Supersonic Socks soars out his window and flies ef-

fortlessly over the houses in the neighborhood. So, do I remember the blown-up Supersonic Socks on the windowsill in my kindergarten classroom or the puppet-like Supersonic Socks from the television show? Does the source of the image matter?

Don't judge a book by its cover. I did not speak much to Ms. Sandy, my kindergarten teacher, perhaps not at all. Could I have refused to read to her? Could she have mistaken poor penmanship for poor reading skills? On the outside I may have appeared illiterate, but on the inside? Did Ms. Sandy try hard enough to read inside the words I was already writing? Perhaps what I wrote was simply illegible. Whatever the reason, I was recommended by Ms. Sandy not to get my own book at the start of first grade. The other groups had convened previously, received their books, and returned to their desks to read when Mrs. Zielke called me and a few others to the table in the back of the classroom. We received no books of our own, but simply watched as Mrs. Zielke pointed to letters and words printed on a rather large pad of paper set up on an easel. *See Spot. See Spot run. See Spot run fast. See Jay. See Jay fly. See Jay fly far away.*

I tried to leave the world of the Letter People once. I flew out the door of my first grade classroom, glided down the school hallway, burst through the school doors, and soared across the playground, leaving the strange substitute behind me. Oh, the freedom of flight. To be flying across the playground knowing that everybody else was trapped inside the school of cinderblock walls and tile floors—students shackled to metal-barred desks, perfecting their lower case A's. To be free. To fly. To be taken back by your mother who refused to harbor her fugitive son. To be grounded.

"Mom, I don't even have a book," I remember saying. I know I had been reading on my own before entering first grade, so I didn't understand why I didn't get my own book. I ask Mom when I first began reading on my own. She can't remember. She thinks I couldn't read before the first grade because she remembers that I was initially placed in the lowest reading group. But I know I could read. I remember feeling bored, misunderstood,

misread, as I sat at the table in the back of the classroom and easily repeated the phrases Mrs. Zielke pointed to. My Kindergarten Evaluation: Poor reading skills. My Evaluation of Kindergarten Evaluation: Poor reading skills.

I know I must have stopped watching *Days of Our Lives* and *Another World* when I went to school full time in the first grade. Mom went back to work full time then too, teaching English at the high school, teaching others to love and understand the significance of stories, so I know she no longer lay down on the couch after scrambled eggs and grilled cheeses and quietly fell asleep as I lay next to her, wrapped tightly in her arms. I know Hope, Beau, Marlena, Roman, Patch, Kayla, Kimberly, Julie, Cass, Felicia, Rachel, Mack, Matt, Amanda, and the other characters and their stories no longer could have been a part of my life, yet I remember their names. I remember watching Hope fall into the pool of acid as her husband, Beau, screamed in pain and the evil Stefano disappeared into a cloud of smoke. I remember quickly looking to see if Mom had seen Hope fall to her death and Stefano get away. I remember seeing that her eyes were closed. I remember the soap opera stories and how they entangled with my own.

Reading groups. I began at the bottom but finished on top. Looking back, I am appalled at the concept. We immediately divide the children into groups, and although we do not give them official uniforms or name tags, we do give them labels. *Emblems*, *Banners*, *Dinosaurs*—we are labeled by the title of the books we read. We are ranked by the books we read. We know who belongs where. We see them carry their books to the back table. We can see that they are bigger than ours. More words. More pages. More intelligence. We see the group watching the teacher point to the words on the easel. We can hear the kids struggle to pronounce cat and dog; we hear the ensuing laughter; we hear the kids read fluently, no stuttering, no pausing, no mispronouncing; we feel the envy. We learn division.

But where would I be without reading groups? I cannot reflect and critique without ac-

knowledging what reading groups did for me. I began with no book, but Mrs. Zielke somehow realized that I could read. I don't know why she was able to read me when Ms. Sandy was not. Perhaps she was better trained to read the stories I wrote. Perhaps I spoke. Perhaps she heard me. She gave me the next reading group's book. I breezed through. She gave me the next. I sailed. I simply read the last story of the next book. I was flying. I was flying into the very top reading group where I was the only member. My own book. My own group. The beginning of confidence. My beginning flying lessons.

I was a writer of stories before I ever went to school.

I was a writer of stories before I ever went to school. But I rarely wrote these stories down. I performed these stories as I composed them in my mind. Bath time was not a dreaded moment where I had to be scrubbed raw and clean. Bath time was story time, and I would compose for hours. My wrinkled, water-soaked skin made me believe I was magically aging, changing, only to magically change back to my normal self after leaving my created world, after wiping the magic water from my body. It was plastic surgery. Cookie cutters, a rubber ducky, rubber Smurf figurines, He-Men action figures—anything could be a character for my stories. Their lives came together in the water world of the bath; I created their lives; I created their stories. I made them strong if I wanted to. I made them weak. I made them evil and good. I made them great swimmers. I made them fly. Storytelling allowed me to be in control, to have power, to go anywhere I wanted to go, to be the hero, to be He-Man, Superman, Supersonic Socks. Storytelling allowed me to fly.

I never have to bang my head against a wall to think of a story. My life is a story. Our lives are stories.

Frog said, "Would you like me to tell you a story, Toad?" "Yes," said Toad, "if you know one." "Once upon a time," said Frog, "there were two good friends, a frog and a toad. The frog was not feeling

well. He asked his friend the toad to tell him a story. The toad could not think of a story. He walked up and down on the porch, but he could not think of a story. He stood on his head, but he could not think of a story. He poured water over his head, but he could not think of a story. He banged his head against the wall, but he still could not think of a story. Then the toad did not feel so well, and the frog was feeling better. So the toad went to bed and the frog got up and told him a story. The end (Lobel 25-27).

My mother, my family, and school have taught me how to read—not just books, but myself.

Frog knows what Toad did not; our lives are an amalgamation of stories. What happens to us, what we make happen all becomes story. The stories we read, the stories we see, the stories we are told, and the stories we write all bind together to become our own books. But they do not have definite beginnings, middles, and endings. They are not stories that are always read the same. The plots, the climaxes, are never the same. At least not for me. I have learned to choose how my story goes. My mother, my family, and school have taught me how to read—not just books, but myself. I read to a certain point in my life, the bottom of a page, examine my options, and choose where I want to go next. *If you want to open the door and investigate the scream you heard, turn to page 42. If you want to leave the house and explore the outside gardens, turn to page 27. Choose Your Own Adventure.*

Don't judge a person by the cover of his book. I say this, but do I truly believe it? How can I when I have been so judged my entire life? It began in first grade by being labeled and ranked by the books I read, and then continued throughout my schooling. Top reading group. Advanced math classes. AP British Lit. AP Calculus. TAG—talented and gifted programs. Straight A student. Math award, English award, History award, Science award, Spanish award—they are all capitalized subjects to me. Valedictorian. Scholar. Graduate Assistant. Teacher. The labels provided not only a convenient way to be read by others but also a way to read

myself, to determine how I would be read. Where would I be without reading groups?

An ending to an early story:

. . . The weird man was really a strange 4-eyed creature. He told our friends that he was going to change them into creatures just like him. John and I saw a potion, it read *Creature Destroyer*. John and I grabbed it and threw it on the creature. The creature dissolved into liquid. We freed the others, and started to leave. Just then I noticed a whole bunch of money in a corner. We took it home. When we got home all of our parents were at my house. They were all mad at us, but when we showed them the money they hugged us and kissed us. *THE END.*

Treasure, medals, awards—things to add to my cover. This was a story written during my fifth-grade year, the year I became known as Kane the Brain. My fifth-grade teacher, Mr. Williamson, returned it to me years later when I was in high school, and I saved it. But I didn't read the story when I first received it. Of course, I read the words, laughed at my adventures, my misspelled words, how I "freed" the others, but I didn't read my story and see anything more significant than humor. I could not look beyond my own cover. Mr. Williamson also told me a story about how I once intentionally failed a test so the other students would stop picking on me. I didn't believe him and still don't. My grades were my only medals, my only treasures. In a sense, they made me the hero I thought I wanted to be. But what I didn't realize then was that nobody knows the hero. They know his accomplishments. No need to know anything else. No need to speak when not spoken to.

Hope has come back to life. She has been a regular and integral character on *Days of Our Lives* again for years now. She originally came back to the show as another person who had simply been made to look like Hope. She didn't remember anything about her past, amnesia as a result of the evil Stefano's brainwashing. Amnesia, forgetting who we are, forgetting our mothers, our loved ones, our pasts, is a common soap opera story line. Hope came back to the show, but she didn't really come back to life until she remembered her stories. It's

funny. I no longer watch *Days of Our Lives* and haven't for years, yet I still know its story.

"*Frog and Toad Are Friends: An I CAN READ Book.*" An "I CAN READ Book." Can I read? Can I be read? Do I let people read? If the person cannot be read, read his writing. Read my stories from fifth grade. Read this poem I wrote as a junior in college:

*When I was in elementary school,
I used to dream I could fly.
I didn't care to see if the clouds were
Made of cotton balls, or if
I could communicate with bald eagles.
My destination was not
The Moon—I knew it wasn't made of cheese.
I had no desire to see
Far off places like China, Timbaktu
Or Indiana. Saving
Pussycats stuck in the branches of trees
Was not my motivation,
Although I would have gladly set them free.
And the top of the Empire
State Building was of not interest to me.
But I did want to fly.
I wanted to fly more than anything.
I thought everybody would
Like me then . . .
No more lonely days leaning against the
Side of the wall at recess;
No more solitary days of lunching;
No more birthday parties where
Nobody saw me blow out my candles.
They'd all want to be my friend.
And if they still made fun of my Cabbage
Patch Kid or my Care Bears, and
If they continued calling me sissy,
Nerd, faggot, dork, braniac,
While chasing me around the playground, at
Least they would never catch me.*

But don't stop reading here. Don't assume this is the end of the story and let me fly away. Choose Your Own Adventure.

Mom read this poem when I came home from school for Christmas. She cried. She, my protec-

tor, had no idea that I was obsessed with flying, that I was obsessed with escaping my world. She didn't know my story, but she does now. She knows how alone I felt. She knows that she has even more reason to be proud of her son, more reason than the awards and academic honors. She is able to revise her reading because I decided to tell more of my story, and her reading will likely be revised further when she reads what I have written here. She can be proud because I have learned to take control of my life, my story, through the power of reading and writing, through the power of story.

Choose Your Own Adventure. In order to choose, we must have options. In order to have options, we must read. We must read our lives and tell our stories. We don't have to bang our heads to think of a story to tell. We must simply remember and choose. If the green, red, and orange, hairy, clawed, and fanged creature lurks inside the doors, use the Creature Destroyer or put on your Super-sonic Socks and fly away. Remember lying next to your mother, safely in her arms, safely watching the stories of TV. *Life is not linear. Education is not linear. Story determines our place in the world.*

If you want to learn who you are, turn back to any page, read, choose, and then follow that story until it takes you to a new one. If you want to learn who you will likely be, turn back to any page, read, choose, and then follow that story until it takes you to a new one.

Works Cited

Lobel, Arnold. *Frog and Toad Are Friends*. New York: Harper Trophy, 1970.

About the author

Jason Kane teaches composition courses at Central Michigan University. He plans to pursue a doctorate in rhetoric and composition in the fall of 2001.