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The Reading Lesson



NARRATIVE BY **SHIRLEY NEITZEL**

I am an elementary teacher. Each year I nudge children to make the leap from decoding print to understanding. The struggle of how the reader *constructs meaning through the dynamic interaction of existing knowledge, the information suggested by the written language, and the context of the reading situation* was brought home to me by this incident.

One night I went to a meeting in Jenison. It's not like Jenison is so far away, only twenty or thirty miles, but it is in the next county and further west than I had ventured since I'd moved to Grand Rapids. Not wanting to wander about the city late at night, I studied my map carefully.

Jenison's streets are well-marked with easily visible signs and I found the meeting place without incident. Pulling into the parking lot I mentally reversed my route. Two left turns would take me back to a main artery and the freeway home. It seemed simple enough.

I enjoyed the meeting, then confidently set about following my pre-determined plan for not getting lost. Two blocks, left turn, no problem. Six blocks to main artery, deserted now except for a single car.

I read the sign on the corner. **RIGHT TURN ONLY**

Oh, shoot! I wanted to go left here. Change of plan. OK, three rights equal a left.

I waited for the single car, a patrol car, to cross the intersection and proceeded with my new plan. Straight across the intersection, right at the next corner, WHOA! What's that? A police car

with its lights flashing. Who do they want to stop? I'm the only one on this street. I pulled over.

"May I see your driver's license, Miss?"

"Yes, Sir." I was perplexed but fumbled in my purse for my wallet.

"You know where you crossed Chicago Drive?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Did you see the sign on the corner?"

"Yes, Sir. It says 'Right turn only.' I wanted to turn left, but I didn't." I handed my driver's license to the officer.

The corner of his mouth quivered. Looking at the change of address on the back, he asked, "How long have you lived in Grand Rapids?"

"About six months, Sir."

He took my license to his cruiser, presumably to do whatever it is officers do to find out if they have just apprehended one of the ten most wanted. It took forever. While he was gone I pondered. Right turn only. I wanted to go left, but I hadn't, I'd gone straight ahead. Oh!

The officer reappeared at my window. "Here you are. Have a good evening, and remember in Jenison, when we say 'Right turn only,' we mean it."

"Thank you, Sir." I retrieved my license, grateful it was not accompanied by a ticket, and very grateful it did not divulge my university degree, Master in Reading.

A member of the Kent Reading Council, Shirley Neitzel is a third grade teacher in the Caledonia Community Schools and a facilitator for the Peninsula Writers Writing Project at Aquinas. She is author of the picture books, The Jacket I Wear in the Snow and The Dress I'll Wear to the Party.