

1-1-1968

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Recommended Citation

Marek, E. J. (1968). Has Anyone Seen Melvin?. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 8 (2). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol8/iss2/5

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HAS ANYONE SEEN MELVIN?

Emma Jane Marek

MUSKEGON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

“Hi! I’m Melvin. Miss Riley sent me to see you. Gosh, I was scared. I thought I was in real trouble this time. I thought she sent me because I knocked that paste jar on the floor. Boy, what a mess. Made a lot of noise, too. I don’t make much noise in the room. If you keep still, the teacher forgets you’re there. Jimmy says he acts up in reading class so Miss Riley will get mad at him, and then she won’t make him read. I like to have my turn, but I’m not very good at it. You know every time she calls my name, I can feel a great big ball right here in my throat—it gets stuck right here. Even the words I know don’t come out right. I guess I’m just too dumb to read right. My sister can read pretty good, but my mom says I’m just dumber than she is.

“Yes, I’m nine. My birthday is in November. November 26. My mom was afraid I wouldn’t be able to start school with my sister. You know what? She’s ten months older than I am, but I’m bigger than she is. Mom says the principal let me start though, ‘cause he said mom had enough to do all right with my three little brothers. No, she works at home. My dad didn’t like having my mother work at night in the factory. He said it was bad enough him coming home at midnight without having my mom leaving then. He made her quit right after Christmas.

“Yes, I liked kindergarten. My teacher was nice. She didn’t holler at me or anything. We played games and went for walks. She taught us some funny poems and things you do with your fingers while you’re talking. She let us have lots of music. I like to sing. My sister can’t carry a tune, but I’m the best singer in my room. It’s kind of hard, though, when you can’t read the words. The other kids by my seat get mad if I say the wrong words. They say I get them all mixed up. Miss Riley gives us those song sheets, you know. I just kind of mumble the words now. She thinks I can’t sing. I’ll bet she’d be surprised if I sang one of those songs I learned from W.T.R.U. You know, they play that one I like a hundred times a day. No, I don’t want to sing it for you.

“No, I don’t play baseball much. I like to pitch, but they won’t let me. I always bat pretty good but I can’t run very fast. They call me ‘fatso’ and ‘butter-fingers’ on the playground, but I don’t care.

“I like to jump rope with the girls, but they don’t want me to.

You know what I do? I run in and take a turn when the girls aren't looking. They get awful mad and tell the teacher 'cause I always get all tangled up in the rope. I never learned how to jump very well, I guess. My dad says that's for sissies anyway.

"No, I didn't like the first grade. I had a mean teacher. I just know she was mean, that's how. She never let me do anything. She made us sit still all the time. I guess maybe not all the time. We did get to go to the bathroom if we had to. Gee, I sure spent a lot of time in that bathroom. When the other kids were reading, you always had to sit still and be quiet. If you forgot to get your books and paper to start your work, you were in real trouble. I can't see why a guy can't have a little fun when he finishes his work. I guess I never did finish my work. Everytime I thought I was through, she would pass out another work sheet. I sure was a dumb first grader. She was a dumb teacher, too. She always pats me on the head on the playground and says I'm a nice boy, but she doesn't fool me.

"I sure was glad when they put me in second grade. Didn't look like I was going to make it for a while. You see I didn't finish that last book. You know, the hard one. The last day, after Mom went over and yelled at her, she put me in second grade. All those teachers are afraid of my mom when she yells.

"No, second grade wasn't bad. Not the first time. I got through that old first grade book and I read the two for second grade, too. My mom helped me every night after supper. I can remember—I didn't get to play outdoors or watch any T.V. until I finished the book. And then you know what happened. She didn't pass me. I flunked! She said that I didn't fail, but she didn't think I was ready to go into third grade. She said I wasn't a good enough reader and I didn't write very well. She thinks I'm not too smart, I guess. Well, I'm probably not; but I know some things I won't tell at school.

"I found a bird's nest this morning on the way to school. Well, I guess I didn't really find it. I climbed way up that old tree to get it. You know what Miss Riley said? Well, I'll just tell you what she said. She said, 'Melvin, put it on the table in the back of the room. We'll look at it some other time. I've got enough trouble with thirty children in this room without you and your bird nest. Now sit down!' Well, I guess she was pretty busy with all those lunch tickets and all that milk money. Every Monday morning she gets so cross.

"Gee, you ask a lot of questions!

"No, I don't mind talking. No one ever listens to me much. I guess it's because I don't talk very good. The speech teacher said that

he thinks I'm doing so good that I won't need to come to see him much longer. Mom says I talk worse than a four year old, but I can't help it.

"Say, if I don't have to go to the speech teacher, can I come in here and talk to you? Oh, you want to talk to me about my reading. Well you want to know something? I can't read. I don't tell everyone. Please don't laugh. I didn't think you would, but some of the kids do.

"Yes, sure I know my letters. Only thing is, I get the 'b' mixed up with the 'd.' Sometimes I'm not sure if this one is a 'p' or 'q.' I can say them though. I learned them in the first grade. Miss Riley says it's too bad that I can only say them if I start with 'a,' but that's the only way I remember.

"Well, I know the sounds some of the letters make, the easy ones, I guess. No, nobody taught me; I figured them out for myself. The vowels, now, I know the vowels all right. Miss Riley always makes us say 'When two vowels go walking, the first one does the talking.' I remember that all right. How do you know what the first one says though, is what gets me.

"You want me to tell you how many of those words I can read. All of them—I can read all of them! Well, maybe I'd better tell you the truth. I don't know anything at all about words. Well, yes, sure I know those you have. But they've got pictures. Anybody can tell those that are by the pictures. Sure, but that is not reading. It is? Well—you'd better not let Miss Riley hear you say that. Yes, I can keep it a secret. You bet I won't tell Miss Riley. She won't believe it anyway. If you can't do all her words and do them fast, you can't read! Wow! With pictures. You sure you are a teacher?

"Spelling! I can't spell a single word. I can write a few words but I can't spell. The ones I write all the time are the ones I found in my bird book at home. That's a good book—lots of pictures and the names of some of those birds. They sure have funny names. I can't tell them all, but some of those birds hang around right out there in my yard. I put oranges out for the oriole. My dad showed me his name in the book. Now every time I look at that picture, I see oriole. Want me to write oriole on the board for you? Yes, I know orioles have a pretty song. There. There's oriole.

"You think I write nicely? Oh, some of the kids do better than that in my room. Jimmy says I write better than he does 'cause I had two years to practice. It sure wasn't my idea of fun to stay in Miss

Handy's room for two years, but they didn't ask me. Yes, I guess I do write pretty good. My pictures aren't bad either. I draw lots of pictures. Just throw them away, why? You really want one? Well—I'll bring you one after school.

“If you're through talking to me, can I look at some of those things over there? Golly you've got a lot of books. No, I'd better not take one home. Last time I took one Mom said she wasn't going to pay any more fines. Okay, if you're sure. I guess I'd like this one. It's got such funny pictures. Look at this! Whoever saw green eggs and ham?”

“Yeah, I'll come back tomorrow. I guess I've got time. You sure are different. Are you sure you're a teacher?”