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Oh Boy!

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“Oh Boy!” by Kristen Laaman

Instructor’s Note

In her literacy narrative, Kristin Laaman successfully uses detail, dialogue, and description to tell a story about her road to becoming a literate person. Her journey through time ends in the present day, helping to tease out the significance of her story. It can often be difficult to convey critical thinking through story telling. If you were peer reviewing this essay, what advice might you give Kristin to increase the evidence of critical thinking in her story?

Writer’s Biography

Kristen Laaman is a freshman Molecular and Cellular Biology major hoping to go into medical missions. She is from New Hampshire and loves running for Cedarville’s cross-country and track programs, as well as being barefoot and spending time with her family.

Oh Boy!

We don’t have TV in my house. I watched *Arthur* or *Blue’s Clues* on occasion if we got a video from the library, but reading has always been my family’s pastime. To be entertained, you also had to work—you had to read.

If you were to visit us on a weekday morning when I was little, you would find most of us in the room that my family has branded “the school room.” My older brother and sister and I spent a lot of time in this room learning. It has white walls. Most of the rooms in our house have white walls because my mom, though an artist, never spent time with interior design while we were growing up—she was too busy teaching us or drawing paper dolls for me to make dresses for. When I was little, the top of the walls around the room were covered with sheets of paper. On each sheet was a letter of the alphabet and a picture. The picture for E was an egg, but my mom turned it into an Eskimo face.

“The e you say in the word Eskimo is more typical of an e sound than the one in egg,” she explained.

My mom taught us phonics using “sing-spell-read-and-write.” It was fun. We learned rules of the English language with songs. “Mr. Gh is a funny little man. He silent in the middle but goes ff at the end.” That demonstrated the difference between how you pronounce the word “thought” compared to “enough.” There were also twenty six thin paperback books. The first one was green, and it had a red apple on the cover. It was the A book. Some of the books didn’t focus on a single letter, but instead on certain sounds. They were phonetic books. Book 13 was blue with a red boot on the cover. It introduced –tion and –oo sounds. I lay on my stomach in the middle of the school room and labored through each of these books. Reading was fun, and a challenge for me to strive to overcome, and I wanted to learn to read because everyone in my family loved it. I’m the youngest child, so I couldn’t wait to be able to read for myself like the rest of my family could. My life has often been spent trying to catch up to my siblings, trying to get to the experiences, which they had already gone through, trying to one day find something that I knew, but they didn’t.

My mom read to John, Reina, and me around the kitchen table. At breakfast, we read the Bible. When we studied first and second Kings, she created an outline of all of the kings on a blackboard and when each of them reigned, comparing Israel to Judah. At lunch, she would read *Little House on the Prairie*, or *Treasure Island*. Her pirate voices were fantastic. “You need to be recording books on tape, doll,” my dad told her. He pronounced the o in doll like an a as in apple—maybe it was because he was Estonian. He needed to learn phonics too. Listening to my mom, stories came alive, and I was part of the adventure.

In the evening, my dad read us *Lord of the Rings*. He lay on his stomach in the middle of the living room, like I did when I read, and I sat on his back. It was the perfect perch to look around the room. I didn’t understand everything that was happening in J.R.R. Tolkein’s masterpieces, but I enjoyed listening. I pictured Gollum to

look like Sebastian from *Little Mermaid*. The Ents were my favorite. They had deep, slow, calming voices. “Much too hasty,” they said, and I smiled at their thick wisdom.

Even John, the oldest, read to Reina and me. We sat up in his room, the only room on the third floor of our house, under the skylight with its patch of blue, and he read *Wizard of Oz* to us. It took years, but he made it through all fourteen books with us. The series was funny and odd. It presented crazy ideas and silly characters. It was another adventure that I fell into while listening.

I wanted to read too. The books I read weren’t exciting, though. They were the colored paperbacks in the cupboard of our school room—the A book, and the I book with an American Indian on the front, and the Truck book, which talked about all the different vowels. The stories were about kids playing together or finding a cat and playing with the small cat, the kitten. If the stories were going to be interesting, I had to find something to make them interesting. Then I discovered the exclamation mark.

“The exclamation mark is kind of like saying ‘oh boy’ at the end of a sentence,” my mom explained to me. When I read aloud to my mom, I read, “The cat is black. He likes to play! Oh boy! He likes to play with a ball! Oh boy!” Exclamation marks made me read eagerly. I could not wait to get to the next point in the story where I could exclaim, “Oh boy!” It became a favorite expression in daily life. Reading was an adventure with “Oh boys” to find. I read to Toffee, my own kitten about the cats in the story. I alerted him about the good parts of the story by proclaiming, “Oh boy!” when I saw the exclamation marks.

The exclamation mark was my friend. It called, “Hey there! I make things interesting around here! I just pop into a story every now and then to make sure that you’re still having fun with this book!” And then I would see another one, and it would blurt, “Hi again! Things are pretty exciting right now, aren’t they?” How could one line and a dot say so much? It was magic. Sometimes, though, when I came upon an exclamation mark, it would say nothing to me except the familiar, comforting, “oh boy!” I liked those ones the best.

“Read this page out loud, Kristen,” my mom instructed me.

“What is at the door? It’s a dog! Oh boy! The dog is big and red. The dog runs with Tim and Pam. The dog is fast! Oh boy!”

I loved to read! I loved oh boys! I loved my friends, those dear exclamation marks!

One day my mom broke the news to me. “When you see an exclamation mark, you don’t actually say ‘oh boy;’ you just know that the sentence is excited.”

“Oh.”

I think a little part of me died that day.

If you saw an exclamation mark, weren’t you supposed to exclaim something? Why else would it be called an exclamation mark? Reading was still important to me and exciting. But it was just silent exclamation mark exciting, not “oh boy” exciting. If I came to an exclamation mark in my reading, I could still feel my spirits rise, but they were not allowed to rise enough to spill over into a whole expression of delight. The exclamation mark and I were just old acquaintances now; we were no longer close friends. I could be happy for the dog if he ran fast in the book. I could even add a little pleasure to my voice if I was reading aloud, but I was not allowed to add my own two cents to the story. I was not allowed to say “oh boy.”

Somehow, I survived this setback to my reading education because I still love to read. I wanted to be able to do what my big brother and sister and my mom and dad could do. I knew that someday the stories I could read would be as exciting as those they read to me, and it was true. Over winter break, one of my biggest joys was getting to read just because I wanted to, not because it was assigned. We still read as a family when we’re all together, but now we read something that my sister, the aspiring published author, has written. I love it, and I love her. Occasionally in my reading, I’ll come across the exclamation mark. He’s like a childhood friend. He is a childhood friend, an old, familiar, comforting sight. He’s a

reminder that things are still okay. Unless, that is, he ends an angry sentence and not a happy one.

I still say “oh boy.” It’s no longer after I see an exclamation mark. I do say it when I’m excited, but it’s different now. The exclamation marks in my life don’t always shout out at me like they used to. But I remind myself what I knew as a child: sometimes it’s the little moments that are the most “oh boy” worthy— and each day is an adventure, a search party, as I seek out my exclamation marks and celebrate them.