

FOR ONE GRANDPA, READING ENTAILS
A LITTLE PHYS-ED

By J. B. Leftwich

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In a little one-room school near Ash Flat, AR, I learned to read by endlessly repeating “Baby Ray had a dog. The dog was little. The dog loved Baby Ray. Baby Ray loved the dog.

Reading was not easy for me. It remains difficult. I never learned to read phrases; I read words. For many years, my reading was slowed as I looked for errors in other people’s copy. Even today, I edit as I read – transposing, altering tenses, changing antecedents.

I am amazed at modern techniques used in teaching reading in good schools today. Second-graders are talking words and ideas that came into my reading vocabulary three or four grades later. A word such as “mystery” poses no mystery for good second-grade readers who may stumble but soon learn to place words in their proper context. Then they move on to master other polysyllabic words.

Furthermore, competent second-graders are reading much more than Baby Ray and his dog; they are learning grammar and history as they read. Even a little about the human body.

I know all of this because our second-grader, lured to our house by her grandmother’s biscuits, frequently stays with us while the rest of her family goes to out-of-town ball games. Jody brings her books and reads to us. And I have the privilege of listening and helping with words that temporarily baffle her.

Looking back on my own experience, I am convinced that one of the reasons I learned so slowly and never became a fast reader was because I was forced to remain in one position while I read my lessons. I sat in a chair with the book on my lap and struggled with Baby Ray and his fabled dog.

Such is not the case now. Hoping that I still am not too old to learn new tricks. I determined to follow Jody’s body motions with my own as she read. We started in sitting positions, Jody in one recliner and I in another. Then Jody put her right leg over the left arm of the recliner.

I had never tried that maneuver before, but I was game, and after some exertion, my right leg was over the left arm. Then she switched, left leg over right arm, and I followed suit.

Next, she folded her legs Indian fashion in the seat of her chair. My elderly legs moaned and creaked but somehow managed to fold. I was relieved that she seemed to anchor in this pose, although I was not sure how long I could hold it.

Her next position placed her chin over the back of the recliner, a position that I fell into rather easily. I was happy, chin over back, but not Jody.

She immediately transformed into a shape impossible for me. She stuck her legs up the back of the chair with her head hanging off the cushion while reading the book as it lay on the floor.

We then moved to the floor where she read flat on her stomach, chin in hand, elbows on floor, book between elbows. I think she did this because she knew I could follow. Often, I have read in the same position.

In her next phase, she was flat on her back, feet holding book somewhere in the vicinity of her knees while she read placidly as I tried to figure out how she did it. I managed to copy her pose, but I never tried to hold a book with my feet.

And now for the grand finale. She turned onto her right side, pointed her shoulders to the left, rotated her neck almost 180 degrees from the direction her knees pointed while stumbling only on the word “distortion,” which I thought was an appropriate word for her to miss in her current position.

I placed myself on my right side, pointed my shoulders somewhat toward the left and turned my neck until I heard a loud “pop,” where upon I started unwinding everything except my neck, which refused to return to its normal stance.

I should report that next day, Jody was still reading and writing.

As for me days later, the crick in my neck has almost vanished, my charley horse is losing its soreness, and the doctor reports I don't have a slipped disc after all.

(Leftwich of Lebanon, is a retired educator and journalist.)

(J.B. Leftwich is a veteran journalist and a columnist for *The Lebanon Democrat*.
Email: leftwichjb@charter.net)

<http://www.ajlambert.com>