

Student Guide

for the novel *Muchacho*

by LouAnne Johnson



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INTRODUCTION

Hello! Welcome to the world of Eddie Corazon, the narrator of *Muchacho*. I hope you will enjoy reading this book as much as I enjoyed writing it. (*If you hate reading, hold on to your books. I'll talk about that in a minute*). First, I want to talk about writing in your journal. The students who were portrayed in the movie *Dangerous Minds* wrote in their journals every day in my classes. They had a good time writing about their thoughts and opinions, their hopes and their dreams; I hope you do, too.

YOUR WRITING VOICE

Have you ever answered the telephone and immediately recognized the voice of a friend or relative? That's because everybody has a distinctive voice. Your friends know what your voice sounds like when you talk -- high or low, loud or soft, fast or slow, throaty or nasal.

You have a writing voice that is just as distinctive as your speaking voice. You may write quickly or slowly. You may use lots of adjectives—or just plain, simple language that gets directly to the point. Writing a note to a friend is easy and feels natural. But when it comes to school assignments, you may not like writing. Suddenly it doesn't feel natural. It feels like work. You worry about writing correctly or writing in the style that you think your teachers will like.

DON'T WORRY

In your journal about *Muchacho*, don't worry about writing. Don't try to sound like a professor or a textbook – or the kid sitting next to you! Just write the way you talk and writing will be easy. It will flow out of you just as easily as conversation. Imagine that a friend asks you what you did over the weekend. You don't stop and edit your comments. You just talk. Do the same thing with your writing in your journal. If your teacher is using my teacher's guide, then spelling and grammar won't be the big issues. Your teacher will be most interested in your ideas and opinions. You'll have plenty of time to correct grammar and spelling later on.

READING READING READING.

Reading isn't supposed to be work. Reading is supposed to be entertaining, informative or thought-provoking. It isn't supposed to be a chore or a test. It isn't a competition, either. Some people read quickly – they also walk and talk quickly. That doesn't make them smarter. It just means that their internal motors are faster than some other people's motors. Faster isn't always better. In fact, some things are better enjoyed slowly -- like ice cream, kisses, and.....

Reading is a skill, just like playing basketball or piano or riding a bike or swimming or training a dog or skateboarding or skiing. You can't do any of those things well unless you practice. But after lots of practice, those things feel easy and comfortable.

If you hate reading, something made you hate reading. You weren't born hating to read. Little kids will eventually figure out how to read if we leave them alone with books because reading is like figuring out a secret code. It's interesting.

But, unfortunately, we don't let kids learn when they are ready. They have to go to school and learn to read whether they are ready or not. And then the problems start. You know what those problems are:

Everybody reads faster than you do, so you feel stupid.

Everybody else seems to understand more than you do, so you feel stupid.

You have to read books and stories that don't interest you, so you feel bored.

You have to take tests on the boring books and stories, so you feel angry or stupid.

The teacher makes you read out loud, and you feel stupid

Reading gives you a headache, but nobody believes you when you tell them –

so now you wonder whether they are mean or you are crazy. You avoid reading.

You think of all the years of school and reading ahead of you-- you feel depressed.

You start to hate reading and the more you hate it the less you read.

The less you read, the worse your grades get – because school revolves around reading.

Do any of those scenarios sound familiar? If so, then you need to back up and figure out where things went wrong with reading and you. There is nothing wrong with your brain or you wouldn't be reading this paragraph right now. You can learn. You are an intelligent human being. So, let's take a look at the way people learn to read.

YOUR BRAIN KNOWS HOW TO LEARN

How do you learn to ride a bicycle? First, you see other people riding bikes. You know how it supposed to look. It doesn't look hard. It looks like fun. You see that you have to hold onto the handlebars, push the pedals with your feet, and steer the bike. Then you try it. You fall down. You get on the bike again. You go a few feet. You fall down. Over and over again.

You don't quit trying to ride the bike. You don't feel stupid. You know it's possible to ride a bike and it can't be that hard because so many other kids are riding bikes. So, you get back on the bike. You realize that you have to learn how to balance your body and the bicycle. You make some adjustments in the way you sit and lean and move the handlebars. You go a few feet farther than you did before – and you fall down again. Maybe somebody older helps you out by holding the bicycle upright. Maybe you just keep trying. But eventually, you ride for a while without falling down.

It feels wonderful. It feels comfortable. You are riding a bicycle. And then you fall down!

Now, your brain really goes to work. It says, "I know what riding a bike is supposed to feel like. I am going to keep trying different actions and making adjustments until I figure out how to ride a bicycle without falling down every time." And it does. It may take you 10 tries or 100 tries, but eventually your brain figures out how to ride a bike.

READING IS LIKE RIDING A BIKE

The same process happens when you learn to read. You hear other people read. Maybe they read you funny little books. Reading looks easy. You try it. You make mistakes. You make lots of mistakes. But you keep trying. Eventually, you read one sentence correctly. Your brain creates a picture of how that feels. It sets a standard for reading – and it makes adjustments until it figures out how to read properly. It knows that reading well involves three things – it sounds natural, it feels comfortable and it makes sense.

The problems start when people interfere with your brain and its learning process. They teach you how to sound out words. They try to make you read faster. They interrupt and ask you questions to make sure you understand what you're reading. Maybe they teach you phonics or some other method of learning to identify words. They tell you not to point at the words. Or they tell you to point at the words. They tell you to skip over the big words. Or they tell you to sound out the big words. Your brain gets confused. You start to hate reading. And then reading becomes a battleground between you and your parents, or you and your teachers, or you and yourself.

HOW TO BECOME A BETTER READER

Your school probably has a reading specialist who has been trained to help people who have reading problems. If you are working with a specialist or a tutor, and it is helping you, then just keep on with that program. But if you've been working and working and you still hate reading, then I have some suggestions for you to try.

#1. CHECK THE LIGHTS

First, ask your teacher for a transparency -- blue, purple, red, gray and yellow are good colors to try. If your teacher doesn't have any transparencies, use a clear tinted report cover that you can buy at any office supply store. Just make sure it's clean and there aren't any creases in it. Place the transparency over the page and see if it feels more comfortable to look at the words.

Yes? Then you might have scotopic sensitivity – your eyes are sensitive to light. Millions of people have light sensitivity and many of them have reading problems. Most schools have fluorescent lights and those lights are the worst for people who have sensitive eyes. Ask your teacher, your parents, or one of your school counselors to get you a transparency for reading. Or you can use the Internet to visit the websites nrsl.com or irlen.com where you can read about light sensitivity and find products that may help you. In the meantime, try wearing a hat or sunglasses while you're reading. Try to find a place that has natural daylight. See if that helps.

#2. FIND SOMETHING TRULY INTERESTING

Second, find something interesting to read. Go to the library or a bookstore and look. Take your transparency with you, if you need to. Nobody will notice and if they do, they will be interested. Maybe they have light sensitivity, too! So, you will have a chance to help somebody else.

Okay. We're looking for books. Don't give up. If you don't like the stories and poems that you read in school, then try looking in the nonfiction section. Fiction means made up. Novels and plays and short stories are fiction. The people in those books are not real and the events in those books didn't really happen. Maybe you aren't a fiction person.

Nonfiction means not made up. Maybe you're a nonfiction sort of person. Nonfiction includes thousands of subjects from auto mechanics to zebras, from basketball to outer space, from cooking to dinosaurs. You might enjoy reading biographies to learn about people's lives.

Take the time to keep looking, browsing for books. Ask other people what books they like and check them out. You might have to look at 100 books before you find one that speaks to YOU. But, eventually you will find something that you think is so interesting that you forget you are reading when you are reading it. Bingo! That's your book.

#3. PRACTICE READING BY YOURSELF

Now that you have something you enjoy reading, you can focus on learning to read well. First, read a few sentences out loud. Do they sound like normal conversation? Does it feel comfortable? Does it make sense? Do you see a movie in your head of what you're reading? If so, then keep on reading. Don't worry about how fast you read. Don't worry about memorizing everything. Just read. The more you do it, the easier it gets.

#4. PRACTICE READING WITH AN EXCELLENT READER

(This advice is from a book called *Read Right* that has helped a lot of kids.)

If it doesn't feel comfortable and doesn't sound like natural conversation when you read, then ask an excellent reader to read a sentence for you. Listen to how they say the words. Read that same sentence out loud yourself. Ask your good reader whether you did a good job. *Ask them not to lie to you.* If your reading is not really excellent, the person should say so. They should read that sentence again. Then you read it. Don't just mimic, look at the words as you read them.

Eventually, you will be able to read that sentence well – and your brain will now understand what excellent reading feels like! It will start creating the process that will eventually help you become a good reader. This may take some time, but it will happen.

If you don't have a friend or family member or teacher who can sit down and read with you, then go to the library and find a book on tape. Get the book itself and sit down someplace quiet where you can listen to a professional reader read the book to you. Play the tape and listen to a sentence. Read that sentence yourself, trying to sound like the professional reader.

If you can record your own reading, that would be even better. If not, just keep practicing until it feels comfortable and easy to read that sentence correctly. Don't give up!

If one method doesn't work for you, then try another. Everybody has a unique brain, and a unique learning style. **Just because somebody can't teach you doesn't mean you can't learn.** It may mean that you don't learn that way that person teaches. But eventually you will find a match for the way you learn – or you will create your own way.

RIGHT BRAIN? LEFT BRAIN?

One more thought about thinking and then I'll shut up, I promise. Most people tend to be right-brain or left-brain dominant. That means they think more often with one hemisphere of their brain. School is a left-brain kind of place: analytical, logical, orderly. Art studios and music shops are right-brain kinds of places: creative, intuitive, imaginative. If you are a right-brain kind of person, you might not feel so intelligent when you are in school, unless you have learned to switch on your left-brain thinking.

Here's an example of a right-brain word game:

Look at the words *eye, you, sea, tea*. They all have something in common NOT their meanings. There is something similar about all of them.

Only one of the following words shares that same common trait: *them, can, jay, dew*. Can you figure out which word from the second list has the same trait as all the words in the first list?

The answer is "*jay*" because it sounds like a letter of the alphabet (j). *Eye, you, sea,* and *tea* also sound like letters of the alphabet when you say them (i, u, c, t).

Here's another example. Look at the boxes below. Each one of them represents a common phrase or familiar saying such as "flat broke" or "dead wrong." The location and size of the words may give you clues.

A	B	C
five	pigs pigs pigs	cof fee

Did you figure them out? If it was easy for you, you may be a right-brainer.

(The answers are on the next page...but don't peek!!)

Answers: A. high five B. three little pigs C. coffee break

GOOGLE IT

You can read more about Right-Brain Left-Brain dominance on the Internet. If you are a right-brainer, you may be having trouble with subjects such as math and science. You aren't dumb or weird. You just need to learn how to turn on that logical part of your brain. There are breathing exercises and other things you can do. Research this – I think you'll find it interesting.

And if you are a right-brain person, chances are high that you will blossom after you graduate from school where your creativity will be a huge plus instead of a problem. In the meantime, good luck! And, as Eddie Corazon would say: *Ay te watcho!*

Follow your dreams. If your friends don't support you in that -- get new friends!

Miss J



Just for fun - here's a photo of Bogart the Wonder Dog reading *Muchacho*.

He thinks it's a doggone good book.
Yuk yuk.

Visit www.louannejohnson.com for links to more information and to find out about the kids who were portrayed in the movie *Dangerous Minds*.