

## THE PURPLE READER

By Douglas Evans

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READING was difficult for Kenneth. Ever since first grade, teachers had tried to teach him the sound each letter made. And they tried to teach him how to put these sounds together to form words and how to put the words together to form sentences. But there were too many sounds for Kenneth to remember, and the words were too long for him to figure out, and the sentences were impossible to understand at all.

“Reading is screwy,” Kenneth often said. “What good is reading a book, anyway, when you can watch the same story on TV or rent the movie on video? What’s the point?”

As a result Kenneth was the poorest reader in the room at the end of the hall. His reading level was so low he didn’t fit into either of the two reading groups. Instead, he spent each reading period sitting alone in the reading corner until the tall teacher had time to read with him in an Easy-to-Read book.

“You have the ability to be a good reader,” the tall teacher often said to Kenneth. “But you must put in more effort in trying to improve.”

Still Kenneth spent many lonely hours sitting there on the reading-corner rug, day after day, week after week.

One morning the tall teacher leaned against his desk, looking over his class. Many students were sprawled out on the floor reading this week's Weekly Reader. Some stood by the classroom’s encyclopaedias, examining the pictures of the human body. Others had just returned from the library with books tucked under their arms and sat down to read about lions and space and whales and dinosaurs.

“OK, people,” said the teacher. “Please put away your books. It’s time for reading.”

Kenneth looked up from his desk. He raked his fingers through his shock of red hair and wiped his nose with the side of his hand.

“Will the Red Reading Group join me at the reading table?” said the tall teacher. “The Blue Reading Group should complete the next two pages in their workbooks. And Kenneth . . .”

“I know, I know,” said Kenneth, before the teacher had finished his sentence. “I’ll go read by myself in the reading corner.” And he rose from his desk, trudged to the back of the room and plopped down on the reading corner rug.

The reading corner lay under the windows. The windows looked out over the playground. The rug was thick and comfortable, and there were two large stuffed pillows to prop up your head if you wanted to lie down. Books filled three long shelves. Most were paperback chapter books, far too difficult for Kenneth to read, and the few picture books on the bottom shelf he had flipped through dozens of times already.

“It’s the same boring picture books day after day,” he said, scanning the bottom shelf. “I can recite every book on this shelf by heart.”

He opened a book about magic tricks and tossed it aside. He spent the next five minutes staring out the window at kindergartners having recess. He pulled his arms inside his T-shirt and pretended he was a seal. He spent the following four minutes unlacing his shoes and relacing them a different way. For the next seven minutes he blew saliva bubbles on the tip of his tongue. He checked the clock. Reading period was only half over.

“Will the Blue Reading Group come to the reading table?” announced the tall teacher. “The Red Reading Group should complete the next two pages in their workbooks.”

Kenneth looked toward the reading table. The tall teacher sat at one end with five students on each side of him. Howard was reading aloud from the third-grade reader.

“I wonder if I’ll ever be allowed out of this reading corner to join a reading group,” Kenneth said to himself. “Fat chance. If I can’t read by this time, I’ll never learn to do it.” And he lay on his back staring at a spider swinging from the fluorescent lights.

A minute later, Kenneth again scanned the bottom shelf. “Now where did I put *The Book of World Records*?” he said to himself. “I wonder if there is a record for the longest time spent in the reading corner.”

As he searched the shelf his eyes fell on the spine of a book he had never seen before.

“How screwy,” he said. “I thought I knew every book on this shelf.”

The book had a purple leather cover and was as thick as a dictionary. Ordinarily Kenneth would have ignored a fat book like this one, but the big golden letters engraved on the book's spine caught his interest. They read:

### **KENNETH'S PURPLE READER**

“This is screwy,” said Kenneth. “How did my name get on this book?”

With one finger Kenneth pulled the purple book off the shelf. It fell onto the shag rug with a thud. He grabbed the cover and flipped the book open.

The first page delighted him—one big picture without a single word to read. Leaning forward, he saw that the picture was a watercolor painting of a classroom.

“How screwy,” he said. “That’s the room at the end of the hall.”

Leaning farther still, he spotted a boy in the picture, sitting alone in the back corner. The boy had red hair and wore a white T-shirt.

Kenneth snatched the book in both hands. “That’s me!” he said, holding the book close to his eyes. “How did I ever get into a picture book?”

Quickly Kenneth turned the page. Page two revealed another large watercolor painting. This one showed a snow-covered playground. Under the picture were three lines of writing.

“Why, it’s the playground at W. T. Melon Elementary,” Kenneth said, putting his nose practically on the page. “Screwier and screwier.”

Studying the picture some more, he made out a lone boy standing by the slide. Again the boy looked remarkably like himself, although he wore an orange down parka much too large for him.

Kenneth’s attention turned to the four lines of writing at the bottom of the page. The first Word was easy enough to read—**Kenneth**.

He squinted at the next word. He always squinted while trying to figure out a new word.

“A... rrrrr . . . i . . . ved—Arrived, that’s the word”. He said. “**Kenneth arrived . . . Kenneth arrived at school.**”

Here he lowered the book and took a deep breath as if exhausted by all the reading he had done. He raised it again and tackled the next sentences.

**Snow covered the playground. Kenneth was mad because he had to wear an ugly coat to school.**

Kenneth set down the purple reader and rose to his knees. He looked out the window at the playground. Except for some brown leaves blowing across it, the asphalt was bare.

“What’s this book talking about?” he said. “Not a flake of snow has fallen on the playground all year. And that boy in the picture couldn't be me. I’d never be caught dead wearing an ugly orange parka to school!”

Again Kenneth turned the page, but page three was blank. Flip! Flip! Flip! The rest of the book was blank as well.

“Screwier and screwier,” he said, snapping the book shut. “Time to take a nap until the teacher calls on me.”

Kenneth forgot about the purple reader for the rest of the day. That night it snowed a foot and a half. When Kenneth walked down to breakfast he found an orange parka hanging on the back of his chair.

“I’m sorry, Kenneth, but your winter coat is still in the attic,” his mother said. “It is very cold outside, so you will have to wear your father’s down parka to school. I know it’s a little large on you, but it will have to do for today.”

As you might expect, Kenneth threw a major temper tantrum, but when the school bus pulled up in front of his house he had no choice but to grab the old orange coat and race outside.

The bus rolled up in front of W. T. Melon Elementary School. The second the door folded open, Kenneth bounded down the stairs. Overnight a thick quilt of snow had covered the playground. Icicles hung from the school's gutters like fangs. A layer of white sheathed the jungle gym, swings, and merry-go-round, and each tetherball pole wore a white top hat.

Being the first one off the bus, Kenneth got to make the first tracks across the snow-covered asphalt.

“I look like a giant pumpkin in this parka,” he grumbled, stopping by the slide. That's when the picture in the purple reader dawned on him.

Three snowballs whizzed past his head as he thought, “How screwy. It happened exactly the way the purple book said it would. The book said it would snow and it said I would wear this orange coat to school. And look, here’s the snow and here’s the stupid coat.”

The morning bell interrupted Kenneth’s thoughts, and he charged toward the school door.

Tramp! Tramp! Tramp! went the sound of rubber boots as bundles of wool and nylon marched into the room at the end of the hall. Marbles of snow clung to coats, mittens, and stocking hats.

“Please deposit all icicle spears and snow-balls into the sink,” ordered the tall teacher.

Tramp! Tramp! Tramp! Each bundle entered the coat closet and exited as out as a rosy-cheeked, red-nosed third-grader.

For the first time in his life Kenneth was anxious for reading to begin.

“I will meet with the Red Reading Group first,” announced the tall teacher. “The Blue Reading Group should do the next two pages in their workbooks. And Kenneth . . .” But Kenneth had already dived into the reading corner.

Now where was that thick purple reader? He found it on the bottom shelf and yanked it out. Lying on his belly, he reexamined the snow picture on the second page, then flipped to page three. To his surprise, he discovered a picture on it today—a watercolor of a snowman. He stood on the playground peering into the room at the end of the hall.

“What a strange-looking snowman,” Kenneth told himself.

Under the picture appeared six lines of writing, slightly smaller than the ones on page two. Squinting at the words, Kenneth began to read:

**A snowman stood outside the classroom window. The snowman had the usual round head and large round belly. A pair of glasses circled two rocks used for eyes, and an apple served for a mouth. But how odd! A black beard dangled from his chin. The snowman watched Kenneth read.**

“Screwy,” said Kenneth, shaking his head. “There’s no snowman outside the window.” Here he paused. He set down the book and looked up. “Is there? Could there be?”

Slowly Kenneth rose to his knees. There he was, all right, the snowman, exactly as he appeared in the purple reader picture.

Kenneth smacked his mat of red hair and dropped onto his bottom. He grabbed the book and stared at the picture again.

“This book knows things,” he said. “It told me about the snow and it told me about the snowman. Could it tell me what will happen next?”

Kenneth gulped air. With one shaky finger he turned the page.

Page four held a smaller picture with ten lines of writing beneath it. The picture showed the room at the end of the hall empty and with the lights off.

Kenneth squinted at the words. Although some were long, he was determined to read every one of them. The last lines said:

**The lights suddenly went out in the classroom at the end of the hall. The teacher announced that the class could go outside and have a snowball fight . . .**

“Impossible,” said Kenneth. “That could never happen.”

But as Kenneth spoke, the room went dark.

“Well, people, I see our school has lost electricity,” the tall teacher called from the reading table. “But that snow looks inviting out the window. Let’s go outside for the first snowball fight of the year.”

Kenneth dropped the book he was holding. “It’s true,” he said. “It’s screwy but true. This book can tell me the future!”

From that day on, reading period was Kenneth’s favorite time of the day. Each morning when the tall teacher announced reading, Kenneth dove head-first toward the reading corner and pulled out the purple reader. Each day he discovered a new watercolor with sentences under it. Each day the pictures grew smaller and smaller and the words more plentiful, but Kenneth never failed to read every one of them.

A week after discovering the book, Kenneth turned to a picture of Emily. Recently Emily had been freed of the braces on her teeth and now wore a retainer.

Kenneth read that Emily would soon reach into the lunchroom garbage can and pick up the silver wiry object.

That afternoon Emily was in tears. “I lost my new retainer!” she said to the tall teacher. “My mom will kill me if I don’t find it.”

Kenneth’s hand shot into the air. “Emily, I bet you took your retainer out during lunch,” he said. “I think you threw it away with your lunch scraps.”

At once Emily raced to the lunchroom and retrieved her retainer.

“I never imagined reading could be this interesting,” Kenneth told himself.

On page ten of the purple reader Kenneth read that the fire alarm would go off at eleven-twenty, so he left his warm coat and boots on after the eleven o’clock recess. Sure enough, he was the only warm third-grader during the fire drill.

On page eleven he read that Frances would throw up in the afternoon.

“You better go to the nurse’s room right now,” he told Frances after lunch. “You might be embarrassed if you don’t.”

Frances looked at him with a green face and nodded.

“I never imagined reading could be so useful,” said Kenneth, watching Frances leave the room.

After three weeks the watercolors disappeared from the purple reader. From then on when Kenneth turned to the next page he found only writing. Still, each reading period Kenneth would sit cross-legged on the reading-corner rug and decipher every word on the page.

Finally the day came when he pulled the purple reader off the bottom shelf and flipped to the final page.

“I’ve read this entire book,” he said to himself. “I wonder what the last page could tell me.”

Kenneth placed the book on his lap. Although the page contained twenty-five lines of writing and dozens of tricky-to-read words, he squinted at the page and began to read.

**A big change came for Kenneth. He was no longer in the reading corner . . .**

Here Kenneth hesitated. A sense of dread past through him. “A big change?” he said. “What big change? Something bad, maybe. Why aren’t I in the picture? Where am I? What happened to me?”

For the first time Kenneth thought that knowing the future might not be so exciting. He smacked his mop of red hair and lowered the book. “I can’t read any more,” he said. “Something bad is going to happen to me. I’m such a crummy reader maybe they’ll send me back a grade. Or even worse. Maybe I will suddenly get sick? Maybe I’ll have a serious accident?”

At that moment the tall teacher stood up from the reading table. “OK, people,” he said. “Will the Red Reading Group do the next two pages in their workbooks?”

“This is it,” Kenneth said under his breath. “Here goes. Whatever is going to happen will happen now.”

“Will the Blue Reading Group come up to the reading table?” said the tall teacher. “And Kenneth . . .”

Kenneth couldn't breathe. His heart thumped hard under his T-shirt. “What?” he called out meekly. “It’s OK. I’ll stay here in the reading corner. No problem. I don’t mind. I’m perfectly happy here. I’ll just sit here quietly and reread one of these picture books.”

“Kenneth,” said the tall teacher, “in the past two months your reading has improved a great deal. I’ve been watching you. You’ve been making a big effort back in the reading corner. I always knew you had the ability. Why don't you put down that purple book and join the Blue Reading Group from now on? I don't think you will have any trouble.”