

Content-Based Grammar Teaching - Topic: Love and Friendship

Stewart O'Nan, *The Speed Queen* (1997)

The Plot

The following excerpts are taken from Stewart O'Nan's novel *The Speed Queen*, which was published in 1997. It is about the American white-trash housewife and mother Majorie, who – together with her husband Lamont and her lover Natalie – becomes a drugstore cowboy, mainlining, robbing and dealing, and finally blazing a violent trail across south-west America which ends in mass murder.

After eight years on Death Row, Majorie is to be executed at midnight. Stephen King, her favourite author, has bought the rights to her story to turn it into a killer road movie. Majorie sold the rights to get enough money for her son who has to grow up without her. As she awaits her "Fry-day" she only has a few hours left to tell the truth behind the tabloid headlines of how an ordinary American woman became a Sonic killer.

Stewart O'Nan was born in Pittsburgh and now lives in Connecticut. His fiction includes *Snow Angles*, *The Names of the Dead* and *In the Walled Cities*. In 1996 he was named one of Granta's best young American writers.

Excerpts from Chapters 2 and 4

My family was my mom, my dad and me, and our dog, Jody-Jo. (...)

The house though. You ever see *Bonnie and Clyde*? It was just like that. The next house was a mile down the road on each side. This was right on Route 66, the old one. All day I'd sit on the glider and watch the cars come by; my dad taught me all the names -Chieftain and Starfire, Rocket 88. The nearest town was Depew¹. In back we had an old chicken house and back behind that a pond the dirt turned red. The house was yellow and had two floors. I don't remember any of the furniture except a piano that was always broken. You'd hit a key and nothing happened. (...)

There weren't any chickens left in the chicken house, just dust from the feathers that made you sneeze and a smell like ammonia. Behind the house was a little hill I'd ride my tricycle down. I'd pedal as fast as I could and then when the pedals were going too fast to catch up with I'd hold my feet out and let the pedals go crazy. I used to fall off a lot. (...)

When I was four I broke my wrist. I was riding down the hill when the front wheel hit this dip. The wheel turned and I went over the handlebars and the trike came down on top of me. I thought I was fine. I was used to that kind of thing. I got up and tried to pick the trike up, but my hand wouldn't do what I was telling it. I went inside and told my mom. (...)

My dad wanted to be a jockey but he was too tall. He was just over five feet, and by the time I knew him he was heavy.(...) He used to pick me up and swing me by the ankles. I'd ask him all the time. "Swing me," I'd say, swing me." He stood in the middle of the living room, spinning to keep up with me. One time he must of gotten dizzy because my head went right into the side of the TV console. I went right out, and when I came to I was on the couch with a towel under my head. My dad had ice in a washcloth. There was blood on it, watered down. He didn't seem worried. He'd probably done this a lot at work.(...)

Excerpt from Chapter 27

A typical day back then.

We were both on a swing, so we'd sleep in. We'd get up around ten, get showered, get dressed. I'd make breakfast and Lamont would go down and get the paper. He liked strawberries cut up on his Cap'n Crunch. We'd listen to the radio while we ate, then lounge around in the living room, moving around the rug with the sun. He liked to look at the classifieds.

This was right when he was getting ready to sell the 442 and buy the Roadrunner². The 442 reminded him of Alison, so it started reminding me of Alison, and it had to go. He was almost done with it, he just had a little detailing to do. He was going to use the money to buy five pounds of sinsemilla³ he could sell in half pounds around the college. That way he could restore the Roadrunner and still have some money in the bank. (...)

We cruised and maybe ate some cottage fries at the Kettle and then went home and got stoned and watched TV. Fooled around. Around two we'd move into the bedroom and get ready for bed. Brush our

1 Depew: small town in Creek County, Oklahoma

2 Baldwin Motion Oldsmobile 442 (Muscle Car) and Roadrunner/ Road Runner: performance car built by the Plymouth division of the Chrysler Corporation in the US between 1968 and 1980

3 Sinsemilla: highly potent marijuana

teeth, that stuff. Lamont used Listerine⁴. He was terrified of the dentist. You had to swish it thirty seconds for it do any good, and when you spit it out the whole bathroom smelled. I used to tease him about it. I set the alarm and got into bed first, and then he'd stand there wearing nothing and blow his nose. That was the last thing he did before he turned out the light. I'd hold the covers for him to get in. He was always warm, even his hands.

"Majorie", he'd say. "Majorita."
"What?" I'd say.
"You know what I love about you?"
"No."
"Everything", he'd say.

We'd talk after, and then he'd sleep, but something about it made me awake. I'd lie there listening to him breathe, watching his face change in his dreams. I was afraid it was love. I didn't know what to do if it was. It had never happened to me before. It never really has since.
That was back then, in the beginning. All that changed when Natalie came. (...)

Tasks:

Think-Phase (20 minutes)

- 1. Read the given excerpts. What do you think is the grammatical structure that is probably new or unusual to you? Give a few examples and write them down here.**

Example Sentences:

1. _____.
2. _____.
3. _____.
4. _____.

- 2. Do you also know when the "new" or unusual form is used? Make a guess and write it down below.**

Pair-Phase (20 minutes)

- 1. Get together with a partner and discuss your findings. Did you spot the same "new" or unusual grammatical form? What about its usage? Do you have similar guesses concerning the usage of that form? And can you think of another, maybe alternative grammatical form that is used in similar contexts but which gives the utterance a slightly different meaning. Come up with example sentences (from the text) and explain the differences in meaning.**

Here's some space for your remarks:

4 Listerine: brand of an antiseptic mouthwash

2. *Get prepared to introduce your findings to the others and think of an appropriate way to visualize your results.*

Share-Phase (20 minutes)



Discussion of results (plus additional input)

Follow-Up (30 minutes)



See Task Sheet