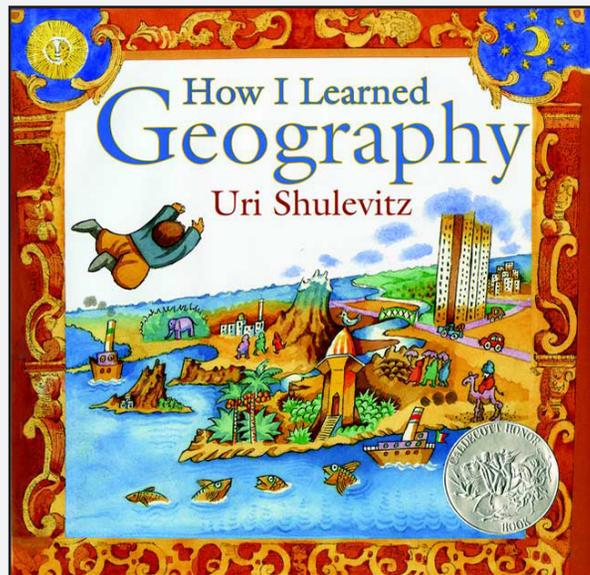


## Second Reaction: Globetrotting Poets

Shulevitz, Uri. *How I Learned Geography*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008.

Janet K. Tipton



My reaction to reading *How I Learned Geography* by Uri Shulevitz was first, to admire the cartoon illustrations, and second, to wonder how students would react to the story. Would they see the value of knowledge/adventure/imagination over food? Since the book is recommended for ages five to eight, and I teach eleven- to twelve-year-olds, I thought I would first introduce the book to my almost eight-year-old grandson Max.

Max first commented about the illustrations on the book jacket. He asked if the fishes in the picture were sharks because, "They are awfully big next to the boat!" That was the first time I realized that the drawings were definitely not in proportion to each other. While there is some use of perspective, the lack of dimension does make the illustrations appear childlike. Max noted the Caldecott Honor designation, and he knew that was for the illustrations.

As we read the book together, Max was engaged. He understood and could read most of the words, but there were a few new vocabulary words I needed to explain to him: dung, exotic, meager, morsel, and incantation. Otherwise, he seemed to enjoy the book and the illustrations. When we finished it, I asked him if he agreed that the boy's father was

right. He needed to go back and look at the last couple of pages, and I had to do a little explaining to him before he decided that the father was right. I said, "Have you ever had a time when you were so excited about doing something that you forgot about eating?" Then we both looked at the untouched pizza he had asked for earlier! We laughed when we realized that the story we read was similar to what had just happened in his own life.

When I asked Max what his favorite part of the book was, he said he liked reading the real story about the author. We then discussed the genres of biography and historical fiction. He said he likes reading "made up" stories too but that he really likes reading about things that actually happened. Some things he didn't like were the rhymes, saying the words in it were really hard to pronounce! I told him they were real places on the map, and he said he realized that because he knew that Pennsylvania was a real place. Had we had more time, it would've been fun to look up those places on the world map.

This book turned out to be a great introduction to general social studies and geography in particular for the beginning of a new school year with my sixth graders. They enjoyed having the book read to them with the aid of a document camera. It was also necessary to explain some of the same vocabulary words to them, which actually seemed to help them accept the fact that the book was not "too young" for them. While they initially said they would have been angry if their father had brought home a map instead of food, they did admit at times becoming so engrossed in an activity that they forgot to eat. They seemed to get the point the author was trying to make.

For the first activity to follow the reading of the book, I placed them in small groups and asked them to look up the real places mentioned in the book. They were to find the geographical coordinates, which gave them practice using the gazetteer in the atlases and locating the places on the world map. This turned out to be a challenge for them but one which they eagerly accepted. One of the problems they encountered was that the places mentioned by Shulevitz may have had different spellings than those in the atlases, so they weren't sure they were finding the correct locations. This gave me the opportunity to explain that foreign words, when translated in English, don't always stay true to their original spellings.

Next, the students planned a trip starting in Fukuoka and ending in Minsk, traveling through all of the places mentioned in the rhyme in the book. They were asked to figure how many miles they would have to travel to visit all of the locations. There were many opportunities, while the students were completing this activity, to informally assess their map skills. When one student told me there was "no scale on the *National Geographic* map," it gave me the chance to explain that there is always a scale on a proper map and to help the student to find it.

Finally, the students created a poem like Shulevitz's with places they thought sounded interesting or funny or would like to visit someday. They really enjoyed it and rose to the occasion with this assignment. Here are two examples:

Petrolina, Teresina, Roma  
Mildura, Medina, Kadoma,  
Mexicali, Cagliari, Zibo,  
Malakal, Homyel, Hilo  
~Sierra

Brussels, Berlin, Madrid, Moscow,  
Venice, Verona, Gary, Glasgow.

Shanghai, Singapore, Liverpool, London,  
Johannesburg, Jamestown, Lima, Lisbon.

Calcutta, Cancun, Omaha, Orlando,  
Frankfurt, Fargo, Sydney, Chicago.  
~Jimmy

Additional activities to include would be to have the students plan their own “round-the-world trips” with the places in their own poems and/or to set their poems to music.

Different criteria for the poems could then be used: pick at least one location on each continent, pick only countries, pick only cities, be sure to include places from at least four different climate zones, include different modes of travel (plane, train, boat, camel, etc.), include cities in Indiana (fourth grade), include places in the U.S. (fifth grade), etc.

While the book is intended for a younger audience, my two classes of sixth graders enjoyed using the book for creative assignments in geographt.

### About the Author

**Janet K. Tipton** is a sixth grade teacher at Happy Hollow School in West Lafayette, IN. She also teaches the Social Studies Methods course for pre-service elementary teachers at Purdue University. Dr. Tipton’s emphasis is on integrating lessons around the social studies curriculum.