

Hooked on comics

I was the kid who couldn't read. Then Spider-Man and his pals let me in on the story.

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My trouble with words became a serious problem for me when I was in the third grade. The class had started reading aloud, and every day I was panicked that I'd be called on. I'd cower at my desk, hoping my classmates would finish the passage before it was my turn.

I didn't really know what I was experiencing back in the early 1980s, but now I know it was dyslexia. When I tried reading a paragraph, my eyes skipped whole sentences. When I wrote, I thought I was getting everything down on the paper – only to find that entire chunks and letters were missing.

Home was the one place I never felt self-conscious. As the son of musician Frank Zappa, I had anything but a normal childhood growing up in Los Angeles. Still, despite what people might expect from two rockers, my parents never did drugs, and they encouraged learning. Our house was always full of interesting people – artists, scientists, actors, musicians – with great stories to tell.

My mom, Gail, recognized that I didn't process information like other kids. When I was young, she read to me a lot. One story I loved was *Leo the Late Bloomer*, a picture book about a tiger cub who takes longer than others to read, write, draw and talk. I realize my mom chose that book for a reason.

Still, even with my family's support, school didn't get any better. After I was diagnosed with a learning disability, it actually got worse. In fourth grade, I spent most of the day in a portable classroom with a teacher, her smelly dog Nigel and other kids with learning problems. I started pretending I was sick so I could skip going, and completely stopped doing my assignments.

When I was in eighth grade, my parents decided to let me be homeschooled. They hired tutors to prep me for the GED, but when I took the test, I filled in all the bubbles randomly, thinking I was cool. My mom and dad threw in the towel and said, "Make yourself a diploma."

Life got pretty boring – until I discovered my parents' comic book collection. I found I could follow the story through the pictures without reading the words. I was hooked. I bought a Spider-Man compilation, and reading it felt like reading a real book. I've since learned that dyslexics are advised to limit the amount of information on the page. Comic books, with their short phrases in block print, didn't confuse my eyes the way lines of text did.

That summer I went to a bookstore and found myself drawn to a Terry Brooks fantasy novel about elves. I curled up with this book and didn't worry about scuffing it, unlike my comics, which I stored in polyurethane bags. I read slowly, using a piece of paper to hide everything on the page below the sentence I was reading. Finally I finished.

After that I started reading any book I could get my hands on, especially those with ridiculous titles like *Wizard Cats* – I'd always loved cheesy monster and magic stories. One of my hobbies was painting goofy monsters. I had so many pictures, I began giving them away.

Finally my girlfriend said, "You are such a dork! What are you going to do with all these paintings?"

Without thinking, I said, "Maybe I'll turn them into a children's book."

For two years I compiled wacky concoctions – wet dog hair and pickles, for example – that would ward off monsters. I dictated the words, and my friends wrote them down. I drew the illustrations. In early 2006, editors at Random House said they were interested in my book. But they wanted more of a story.

My instant response was, “No.” I didn’t think of what I was doing as writing. My book agent, behind my back, told Random House, “Yes.” She knew I was scared, but she hounded me relentlessly, telling me I could do it. I started to believe her.

Days later, I woke up with a novel in my head: *The Monstrous Memoirs of a Mighty McFearless*. Two siblings, Max and Minerva, set out to save their dad, a professional monster hunter. I wanted lots of illustrations, so that kids with learning disorders could follow along. I’d never typed before, but with coffee and determination I pushed through.

I used spell checker to help me, and sometimes I finished only one paragraph in a 17-hour day. When my editor threatened to abandon the book because I’d missed so many deadlines, I panicked and sent him everything I’d done. That’s when he said, “I think we have something.”

Just a week after I wrote, “The End,” Disney offered one of the biggest sums ever for an unpublished author’s film rights. Now, at age 32, I’m working on my second book. The writing hasn’t gotten any easier, but I love telling stories.

Having a book out there with my name on it has made me feel okay about missing out on some things in life – including school. The best part is that it might help a kid with dyslexia discover just how wonderful reading can be. For that, I’m 100 percent, blissfully happy.