

From The Fonz to The Hoove

Henry Winkler in conversation with Dave Chant

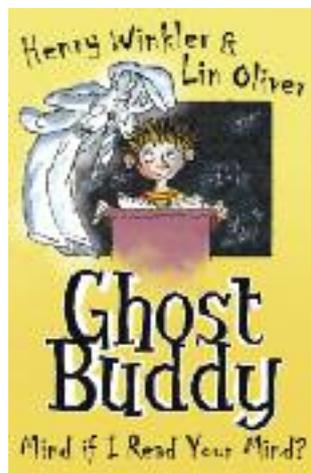
Some of our more mature readers may recall hurrying home from school to watch the latest exploits of the leather-clad bike mechanic, The Fonz, alias Henry Winkler, the coolest dude on TV. Henry still has a large cult following, due in part to the numerous re-runs of the popular American series *Happy Days*. He is a well-known film star who occasionally appears in cameo roles as himself – such is the popularity of the man. In more recent years, Henry has achieved recognition as a children's writer alongside his educational work for children with learning difficulties. In 2011, he was made an OBE for services to children with special educational needs and dyslexia in the UK. Henry is dyslexic, so his interest in this area is clearly heartfelt.

We met during Henry's whistle-stop tour of the UK to promote his new Scholastic series *Ghost Buddy*. It's a very unnerving experience meeting one of your childhood heroes but Henry's relaxed and sociable manner immediately put me at ease.

Our conversation began by discussing the range of his successful career. "Well, the fact is, there's a group of people who know me through *Happy Days*, a group of people who know me through the films *Holes*, *Click* and the Adam Sandler movies. Then there's a group who would know me through *Arrested Development*. They are like cult followers. And then children might only know me as a children's author, as we have sold over four million copies. I have been honoured by the Queen; I have been honoured by the Government of France; I have won the Italian Emmy twice. I've had the most wonderful career, for which I'm grateful."

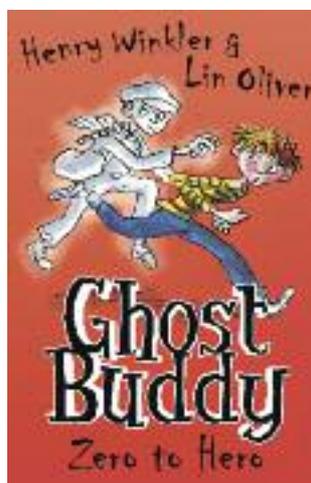
Yet Henry, who has read and written scripts, directed and produced movies, was categorised in the bottom 3% academically. How can this be? "First of all, dyslexia is hereditary. One out of five children has some sort of learning challenge and the severity completely varies with every child.

My dyslexia was diagnosed when I was thirty-one when my stepson was four and we had him tested. And everything they said to me about him was true about me! The first thing I got was very angry. All of those arguments, all that grounding, all the punishment at school was for nought. My parents called me 'Dummer Hund'. The German means 'Dumb Hound'. I admired my parents. They had escaped Nazi Germany but they didn't quite see the individual in their children. Teachers saw me as a disruptive student but I can make it perfectly clear that unless emotionally challenged, students don't wake up in the morning and think 'I am going to cause a problem at school today', or 'I am going to be a thorn in my teacher's side today'. People can learn to negotiate their dyslexia but can never get rid of it".



Henry inevitably struggled with reading as a child and he didn't read a book until he was in his thirties. "And now I read all the time. Every book has to be hardback and they are on my shelf so I can look at them everyday because each one is a triumph. My reading hasn't improved but I love reading thrillers. I taught myself to speed-read. I have to really concentrate. I heard that JFK could read five newspapers in the morning and I couldn't read one!"

Henry's success as children's writer stems from the bestselling series *Hank Zipzer The World's Greatest Underachiever*, published initially in America. "It's our 10th anniversary soon, and Walker Books has been publishing them here in the UK for the past three years or so".



Hank has certainly struck a chord with youngsters as one of only a handful of fictional characters dealing with a learning difficulty. "Hank is just a kid with his glass half full; he just keeps spilling it all over the place. But remember, the dyslexia *is*, he just happens to *be*. Hank is a regular kid who happens to have learning challenges and he has great friends. They try to take care of him. Readers love them because they don't judge him."