

# Action! Pranks! Laffs!

Dav Pilkey, creator of the Captain Underpants books, is on a mission to inspire young readers everywhere

BY ANDREA BARBALICH



**DAV PILKEY HATED READING WHEN HE WAS GROWING UP.** In fact, he was a poor student, and his teachers considered him so disruptive in elementary school that he was banished to a desk in the hallway. But luckily he put his time in exile to good use: That's where the Cleveland, OH, native created a book about the adventures of a superhero named The Amazing Captain Underpants. A couple of decades and nine bestsellers later—his latest, *Captain Underpants and the Terrifying Return of Tippy Tinkletrousers*, just hit stores—the author/illustrator spoke to *Scholastic Parent & Child* about getting kids like him excited about books.

**You had reading difficulties as a kid. How much impact does that have on your work now?**

It has everything to do with what I write about now, as well as how I illustrate my books. I hated to read because I learned at a different pace than my classmates. I'll never forget how humiliating it was to have to get up in front of the class and read aloud. The other kids would groan when it was my turn to stand and stumble my way through

## DAV PILKEY'S FAVE READS

WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE

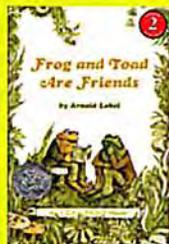


STORY AND PICTURES BY MAURICE SENDAK

**WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE**

by Maurice Sendak

"My mom thought it'd give me nightmares, but I'd find it at the library. To this day, I still find it thrilling and delightfully taboo."



**FROG AND TOAD BOOKS**

by Arnold Lobel

"I've read them more than a hundred times each and always feel like I'm right there in their little village."



**BOOKS WRITTEN AND/OR ILLUSTRATED**

by James Marshall

"His stories are as funny, elegant, and deceptively simple as his illustrations. He was a true genius."



**ACTION! PRANKS! LAFFS!**  
(continued)

a paragraph. I felt like a failure, especially since none of the other kids seemed to have a hard time with reading.

I designed the Captain Underpants books so they would appeal to all kids—but especially to kids who learn differently. I think it's important for kids to have a positive experience with a book as soon as possible. That's why my books have short chapters and funny pictures. The comic books and action scenes (Flip-O-Ramas) take up at least 25 percent of each book. Kids who are frustrated by reading find that they can breeze through them. And they laugh, too! For some kids, it might be the first time they realized that a book can be fun. That might be all they need to get them going on the road to literacy.

There's even the bonus that they're not just books—they're novels. It says so right on the front cover! Imagine the feeling of accomplishment at having read your first "epic novel" at a very young age. It's empowering.

#### What do you think kids love most in your books?

The pranks, the comics, and the mild naughtiness—but I also think they respond deeply to the empowerment fantasy. Kids typically don't have a whole lot of power: They can't vote or drive, and they're supervised by grown-ups most of the time. They like to immerse

themselves in books where kids are in charge.

#### What advice do you have for parents of reluctant readers?

Let them read what they want, even if it's comic books or teen magazines. Try to avoid the temptation of steering them toward more substantial literature. The goal is to make sure they connect reading with fun.

#### How did you get to be so funny?

My sense of humor was cultivated through a steady diet of *Mad* and *Cracked*, newspaper comics, Wacky Packages stickers, and joke books. They inspired me.

#### If you could be any superhero, which would it be?

Underdog, from the 1960s cartoon show. He's funny and powerful. Plus, he's got the greatest theme song ever!

## Read On!

Sometimes just a few minor tweaks can get a reluctant reader excited about books.

**LISTEN IN.** Ask your child to read aloud to you. Does he read with expression? Is he reading accurately? If not, he may be struggling with confidence issues. Try an easier book.

**TALK ABOUT IT.** Engage your child in a conversation about what he's reading and why. Providing background about the story's topic and why it's cool can get him juiced to find out more about it.

**TRY NONFICTION.** What is it that your child enjoys talking about or collecting? Many reluctant readers thrive when they find a niche nonfiction topic that interests them.

#### UNDERDOG TO THE RESCUE!

(Thanks for the shout-out, Dav!)



Andrea Barbalich is a mom as well as a writer and editor living in Westchester County, New York.

Source: Angela Bunyi, literacy coach and Scholastic Parent & Child advisory board member