

INTERVIEW

with Children's Book Author Dav Pilkey

by Madison Mancini

Questions about Dav Pilkey

Are you married?

Yes. My wife, Sayuri (pronounced Sy-you-dee), and I got married in 2005.

Where do you live now?

We spend most of our time in Washington, Ohio, and Japan.

What is your favorite book that you have written?

I have two favorites: *Super Diaper Baby 2: The Invasion of the Potty Snatchers* and *The Adventures of Ook and Gluk, Kung-Fu Cavemen from the Future*.

George and Harold started out as characters in your Captain Underpants books. Why did you decide to make them "authors"?

A lot of kids had written to tell me that their favorite parts of the Captain Underpants books were the short comic books by George and Harold. To be honest, those are my favorite parts, too. I thought it might be fun to make an entire book by George and Harold, so I started a new series of Captain Underpants books called Tree House Comix in 2002. The first book was *The Adventures of Super Diaper Baby*, which was a huge hit with kids.

I love the fun and challenge of "ghostwriting" for George and Harold because they see things a little differently than I do. Often I'll have to abandon an idea or a joke because I know that George and Harold wouldn't have liked it or thought it was funny. It's OK, though, because it forces me to think of better ideas and better jokes.

What do you prefer: illustrating/painting or writing?

Illustrating is definitely easier than writing, but I think I prefer writing because it takes less time.

Is it hard being your own boss?

Yes.

How would you describe your fans?

Incredibly smart children with excellent taste.

What was your favorite book or author as a child or teenager?

When I was a kid, my favorite books were: *A Fish Out of Water* by Helen Palmer and P. D. Eastman (illustrator), *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak, and *Georgie and the Robbers* by Robert Bright. Those were the books I remember reading over and over, and I would often grab a stack of paper and try to draw the characters.

The book that influenced me the most as a child was *The Children in the Jungle* by Leif Krantz and Ulf Lofgren (illustrator). It's been out of print for a long time, but this book had a direct influence on many of my books, from *When Cats Dream* to *The Adventures of Ook and Gluk, Kung-Fu Cavemen from the Future*. There's even a three-word sentence from *The Children in the Jungle* that I have used in every Captain Underpants epic novel.

As an adult, I fell in love with the books of James Marshall (George and Martha) and Arnold Lobel (Frog and Toad). I owe so much to the influence of these two wonderful artists and their gentle humor.

Did you have a role model as a kid?

Not really, unless you count the Six Million Dollar Man.

What is your favorite book now?

I really don't read many books these days. The last really great books I read were the Frannie K. Stein books by Jim Benton.

Who is your favorite author and/or illustrator now?

Don and Audrey Wood.

What is your favorite thing to do as an author?

Swim.

What is your favorite color?

Phthalocyanine Blue. I can't pronounce it, but I like it.

What inspires you the most?

I think most of the stories are inspired by memories from my childhood—by the feelings of helplessness and frustration I felt (and I'm sure most kids feel) when I was constantly surrounded by adults who were either mean, dumb, or unfair (and sometimes all three). "Kid empowerment" is a very strong theme in my books.

Which character(s) from your books are the most similar to you?

George and Harold are both based on me when I was in elementary school. Like George and Harold, I was always getting in trouble with one authority figure or another when I was a kid. My troubles usually came from trying to entertain the classroom (with either my comics or my silly behavior).

But unlike George and Harold, I don't think I actually saved the world very often (maybe just once or twice).

Do you think you prefer working with a deadline or is it better to go at your own pace?

Right now I work best with deadlines. I was always one of those students who wasted tons of time, then "crammed" for my tests at the very last minute. I do my books pretty much the same way (although I'm trying to change that).

Can you give us a hint on what your next book will be about?

Yes.

Did you ever do well in school?

I did OK in school. I could have done much better if I'd really applied myself, but where's the fun in that?

When you were little, did you get along with your sister, Cindy?

Yes. We got along twice.

Do you get along with her now?

We get along much better now because we have more in common with each other. First and foremost, we're both crazy about her three kids.

Do you spend time with her and her family?

Yes! In fact, we all made a movie together. It's a very silly thirty-five minute comedy/action/musical/monster movie called "F.A.R.T.S. The Major Motion Picture." It will be part of an upcoming book called *F.A.R.T.S. The Major Motion Picture*.

Why do your books usually include potty humor?

I think potty humor is an essential part of any good book.

Questions about *Super Diaper Baby 2: The Invasion of the Potty Snatchers*

Recently you stopped writing Captain Underpants novels and began making full-length graphic novels by George and Harold. Why?

While I LOVE Captain Underpants and his many friends and enemies, I sometimes want to write about new and different things. The Tree House Comix books (starting with *The Adventures of Super Diaper Baby*) give me a chance to tell new and different stories, while still keeping these adventures “grounded” in the Captain Underpants universe.

Don’t worry, though... Captain Underpants will be back. My next two books will be about him.

Why do you write from the perspective of George and Harold?

Well, George and Harold are both based on me as a kid, so I’m really just trying to write from the perspective of myself—*as a kid*.

Also, writing under pseudonyms is a great way to avoid criticism. For example, if someone says they really like that new book by George Beard and Harold Hutchins, I can say, “Actually, *I* wrote that!” But if someone hates the book, I can say, “Who’s George Beard and Harold Hutchins?”

Did you make spelling mistakes on purpose or are you just really bad at spelling?

Both.

What do you say to adults who complain about the bad spelling?

Actually, I rarely get complaints like that. Most parents and teachers write to express their gratitude because these books were the first books their children ever read—or wanted to read.

If somebody does complain about the spelling, I point out (as politely as possible) that these “mistakes” occur in my books for a reason: I’m secretly trying to inspire kids to write, and to create their own stories and comics.

Unfortunately, there are tons of kids out there who feel stifled, creatively, because they’re afraid of making mistakes. I want to show kids that they can be creative without having to worry about being perfect. My hope is that they’ll be so inspired by George and Harold’s wildly imperfect (but still fun) stories that they’ll pick up a pencil and start creating their own stories “just for fun.”

So far I feel like my plan is working. Each year I get hundreds of original comics and stories sent to me by kids (or their grateful parents or teachers). And yes, many of the stories have misspellings and mistakes. But these stories weren’t homework assignments—they were made for fun. And for many of these kids, it might be the first time they ever realized that writing could be fun. And who knows? That very thought could inspire a lifetime of creativity!

What was the inspiration for the villain, Rip Van Tinkle?

He is actually based on a superhero I created when I was a kid. His name was “Water Man” and he was made completely out of water. Rip Van Tinkle is a lot like Water Man, except that he’s a bad guy and he’s made out of pee-pee. They both have the same powers and abilities, though.

You can read all of my Water Man comics (which I made in 1977 when I was 11 years old) on my website at http://pilkey.com/waterman_intro.php.

How many Super Diaper Baby books will there be?

I only have three planned, but I’m sure I’ll think of more some day.

What age group is this book for?

The reading level is “officially” ages 7 to 10, but I’d like to think the interest level would be more like ages 4 to 140.

Is it easier to draw as George and Harold (since their drawing style is more primitive than your style)?

Actually, I find it more challenging to draw in the simplified, childlike style of Harold than it is to draw in my own, more professional/refined style. Harold can't draw as well as I can, but his drawings still have to be very expressive and they must convey the proper emotions and actions. I constantly find myself having to erase and re-draw things because I accidentally drew it "too good."

Do you think the book will be a big hit?

Yes, I think this new book is even funnier than the original *Super Diaper Baby*.

Do you have any advice for aspiring writers?

Just write. Get it out on paper and don't worry about being perfect or profound. That stuff can come later when you edit.

How long does it take to do each page?

About four to five hours of work goes into each page, although most of that work is never seen (I spend months on the writing, sketches, and various drafts, which only a handful of people see).

Questions about *The Adventures of Ook and Gluk, Kung-Fu Cavemen from the Future*

How did you come up with the story of Ook and Gluk?

I was inspired when my editor, Bonnie Verburg, told me about something she had witnessed while visiting her son's kindergarten class several years ago. She was impressed by a little boy who made up a very tall tale—on the spot—during *show-and-tell*. This boy had brought a little toy ambulance to show his classmates, and somewhere during his presentation, it must have occurred to him that his toy wasn't very impressive. So he tried to spice things up by telling the class that his toy was actually a prehistoric ambulance that cavemen used to drive when they took sick dinosaurs to the hospital.

The funny thing was that none of the other children were sure if he was telling the truth or not (after all, they were only five years old).

I liked the little boy's tall tale so much, I drew a sketch of two cavemen paramedics and named them Ook and Gluk. I carried that sketch around with me for two or three years as I developed the plot and the characters. I still have it, actually.

For more details, check out the video "Ook and Gluk: Behind the Blackbelts" on my website (www.pilkey.com).

Do you think your new book *The Adventures of Ook and Gluk, Kung-Fu Cavemen from the Future* will be as popular as your world famous Captain Underpants books?

I think so. It has all the same elements as Captain Underpants (wild adventures, silliness, action, laffs, Flip-O-Rama, etc.), so I'm not surprised that the same kids who love Captain Underpants also love Ook and Gluk. I'm so used to everybody asking when the next Captain Underpants book or the next Super Diaper Baby book will be out. Now everybody's asking when the next Ook and Gluk book will be coming out.

Which character do you think you are most like in Ook and Gluk?

Probably Ook.

Where did you come up with the names for the story?

I didn't really put too much thought into their names. They were just the first cool sounding names I came up with.

Are you happy with the way the book came out? If not, what would you change?

I'm very happy with the way the book came out. It's one of my top two favorite books. If I could change one thing I would have made it sixteen pages longer so I could have added more "Cavemonics" pages, and a bunch of "How 2 Draw" pages (these things can all be found on my website). Maybe some day we'll do a "Special Edition" and add that stuff.

Do you think Ook and Gluk would rather live in the past, present, or future?

The past.

Would *you* rather live in the past, present, or future?

I'm pretty happy in the present.

Are there going to be more Ook and Gluk books?

Yes. I have at least two more books planned (but there will probably be more than that).

Did you invent Cavemonics when you were a little kid or when you wrote the book?

I came up with the idea when I wrote the book. I was just planning to call it "How To Talk Like Caveman," but my wife thought up the name "Cavemonics," which is WAY funnier!

Questions about Captain Underpants

Where did you get the idea for Captain Underpants?

Elyria, Ohio.

I mean, what inspired you to write about Captain Underpants?

He was a character I created in 1974 when I was in the second grade. I got in trouble constantly for making Captain Underpants comic books at school and disrupting the classroom with them. One teacher, after angrily ripping up one of my comic books, told me I'd better start taking my studies more seriously because I couldn't spend the rest of my life making silly books!

Why did you decide to make Captain Underpants into a children’s book?

After my first silly book came out in 1988, I did a lot of “author visits” at schools. These were basically forty-minute presentations where I would show slides and draw huge pictures on a giant tablet of paper. During these presentations, I told children about my childhood, and how I invented Captain Underpants as a second grader. As I told this story, I would draw a giant picture of Captain Underpants, in all his “underpantsty” glory, and the room would EXPLODE with laughter and excitement.

At the end of my talks, during the “question and answer” section, the first question I would ALWAYS get was, “Are you going to write a book about Captain Underpants?” I’d scratch my chin and say, “Well, gee, I never thought of that. Do you think I should?”

Again, the room would explode with cheering and clapping—even standing ovations sometimes. I think it was then that I first realized that Captain Underpants might be popular with kids.

Did you like to read as a kid?

Actually, no. I had a lot of reading problems when I was a kid. I still remember feeling dumb because I couldn’t read very well, and I’ll never forget the torture of having to look through hundreds of library books trying to find ONE that seemed interesting to me. I usually settled on a book that had lots of pictures (more pictures equaled less text), and short chapters (I was such a slow reader, and would often feel discouraged when I’d spend an hour suffering through a book without even finishing a whole chapter). When I began writing the Captain Underpants series, I tailor-made these books to suit all of my childhood “requirements”:

- 1) They had to be funny.
- 2) They had to have either robots or monsters in them (preferably both).
- 3) They had to have TONS of illustrations (I made sure there was at least one on every page).
- 4) They had to have short chapters (many of them are only one or two pages long).
- 5) They had to be at least 100 pages long so they would qualify for book reports.

Has anyone ever asked you if they could make a live-action Captain Underpants movie?

Yes, I’ve had some attractive offers in the past, but the timing has never been right.

Who do you think would make a good Captain Underpants?

Hmmm... Maybe Jack Black or Zach Galifianakis. They would also make very good Mr. Krupps, too!

Why did you decide to put comics and Flip-O-Ramas in Captain Underpants?

It just kind of happened naturally. When I originally came up with the idea for Captain Underpants, I just made drawings and comics about him. Since he was a superhero, comics seemed like the best way to bring him to life. Also in elementary school, my friends and I constantly made "Flip-O-Ramas" (we called them "Flip-Actions" back then). We even made them in high school.

When I started working on the Captain Underpants series as an adult, I based the characters of George and Harold on myself, so it was only natural that they would make their own comic books and their action scenes would be portrayed with Flip-O-Rama pages.

How did you get Scholastic to publish Captain Underpants?

I only had to convince one person: my editor, Bonnie Verburg. Bonnie is both my editor and also the publisher and founder of The Blue Sky Press, an imprint of Scholastic Inc).

So one day back in 1995 or 1996, Bonnie and I sat at a table in the cafe of the Art Institute of Chicago, and I pitched Captain Underpants to her. I told her the story, showed her some sample comics I had made, and then I pulled out a sketchbook that included a hastily penciled story called "Furious George." Furious George was designed to showcase the wonders of "Flip-O-Rama." Each page of text was followed by a ridiculously violent "flip-action" scene of a gorilla beating the tar out of someone. (The original "Furious George" story, complete with Flip-O-Ramas can be found on my website at www.pilkey.com.)

Bonnie flipped through the story, smiled, and said, "OK. I'll publish it".

How did you come up with the idea for Professor Poopypants's Name Change-O-Chart 2000?

I think it sprouted from my childhood when I was teased because "Pilkey" was an easy name to make fun of. Here are a few examples (please use sparingly): Pukey, Pickle, Pilkweed, Pilk-Dud, etc. It was always frustrating when the person teasing me had a name like "John Smith" or "Billy Jones." Those are hard names to make fun of, so my chances for sweet revenge were sometimes diminished.

The Name-Change-O-Chart 2000 was my way of "evening the playing field." With this chart, EVERYBODY'S name could be changed into something ridiculous. No longer would the John Smiths and Billy Joneses of the world have anything over on the David Pilkeys or the Jimmy Fadbutzes.