



The Best Storybook Heroes for Dyslexics

by Don M. Winn

Everyone loves a good superhero. We love to see them display their superpowers, have adventures, and triumph over evil. It's escapism at its most glorious.

But here's the thing: None of us has superpowers at our disposal when we have to cope with the everyday matters of real life. Kids today have very few examples based on regular people like themselves learning to do their best with nothing more than a mere mortal's abilities.

Nowhere is this lack of role models more apparent than for kids who have learning challenges like dyslexia. Why is it especially important for kids with learning challenges to have stories about people like themselves? The principle is called a "hero of self-reference."

Heroes of self-reference are part of systems theory. Systems theory has at its core, the idea of self-regulating systems, or the human ability to self-correct based on feedback. Niklas Luhmann was a key thinker in systems theory, and he observed that hero narratives have the power to change our conscious belief systems—especially our beliefs about ourselves and what we are capable of doing (La Cour, Anders, and Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos. *Luhmann Observed: Radical Theoretical Encounters*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

When the heroes of a story have characteristics, feelings, or struggles like our own, we identify with them. Once that reader/hero bond is established and we see our hero accomplishing things we never dreamed we could, we can begin to feel curious and hopeful about our own potential. According to the reference work mentioned above, “through exceeding expectable achievements,” the hero is “able to fulfill his socializing-educational function.” The reference concludes, “The hero can do things differently than they have previously been done; he can do them better, and he can do both provided he finds some felicitous balance between originality and exceptional skill.”

Sadly, doing things differently is rarely recognized as a strength in current educational norms. Therefore, “expectable achievements” for dyslexic students are often low. This is something that can be changed for individual students by helping them find heroes who have issues like their own. Struggling readers know all about their weaknesses, but rarely believe they have strengths. However, dyslexics have many strengths, including dogged determination, an ability to see the big picture, being idea people, and having a talent for thinking outside the box.

With that in mind, I was thrilled to include Reggie Stork as one of the main characters in my four-book series of chapter books for middle grade readers called *Sir Kaye, the Boy Knight* series. I remembered the kind of heroes I longed for as a kid, and so in my books, Reggie represents all of us dyslexics. He is our hero of self-reference. He struggles with reading and writing, among other things, but through his determination,

curiosity, and fresh perspective, he plays a crucial role in each story.

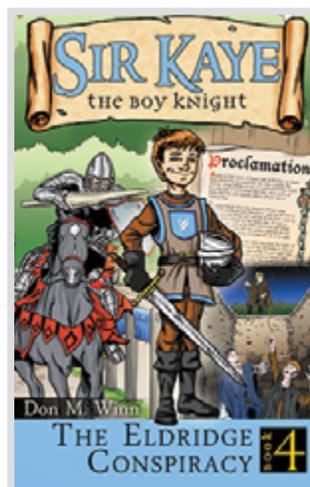
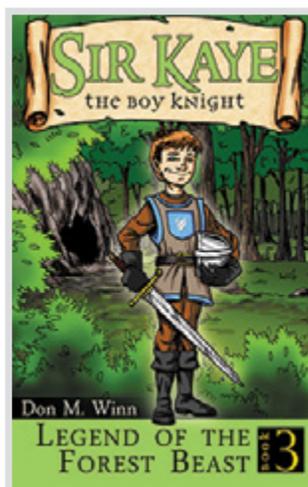
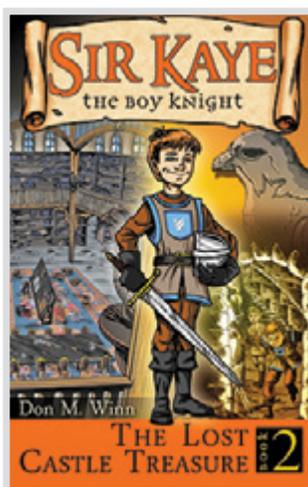
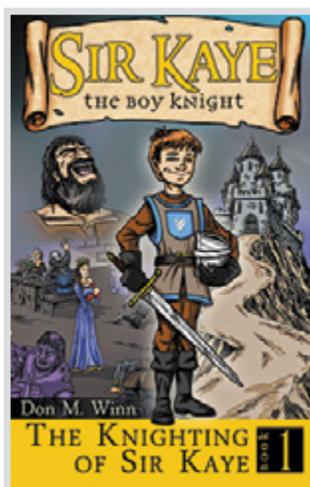
But there’s more—a hero of self-reference plays another important role, above and beyond helping children see themselves in a more positive light. When our hero is involved in engaging, fun adventures, we are motivated to keep reading, and that is priceless for the dyslexic student.

The motivation to put forth the effort to learn to read, and to continue to read, is in woefully short supply for the struggling reader. It’s human nature to avoid doing things that are either difficult or just plain monotonous. This is especially true of children. I had whole lists of things that I didn’t like to do when I was a boy, mostly because they were boring, repetitive, or frustrating. But there were also things I didn’t like to do because they were such a struggle for me—reading and writing topped my list of things to avoid whenever possible.

As a child with dyslexia, reading and writing were my Kryptonite. It took so much effort and nervous energy for me to try to do either. At times it was devastating. It seemed so pointless ... humiliating, even, to subject myself to that painful effort day after day when I never seemed to make progress like my fellow students.

But what most children generally don’t comprehend (I certainly didn’t) is that we don’t learn to read just for the sake of reading. First, we learn to read, and then for the rest of our lives, we read to learn.

Reading not only opens up our main avenue of learning—it also opens up a world of adventures



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through stories that teach us about life, help us recognize ourselves and our place in the world, and solidify abstract concepts.

Motivating the frustrated dyslexic reader goes beyond just teaching the mechanics of reading. The mechanical act of reading will never be fun or easy for the dyslexic student. So what can make the hard work of reading worthwhile for them? Love. Specifically, a love of story. Parents and teachers need to foster a love of story in children who struggle with reading. Since there is always a mechanical stress to reading, the goal is to separate the love of the story from the stress. That’s where an engaging hero and his adventures come in. There’s only one way to discover what fun and shenanigans the hero will encounter next, and that is to keep reading the story.

Picture a locked glass cabinet filled with all of your favorite desserts. If you want those tasty treats badly enough, you’ll work at unlocking the barrier until you reach your goal. You have to see beyond the lock, beyond the struggle, beyond your lack of tools to the end result. Keeping your eye on the prize will motivate you to put forth the needed effort.

Struggling readers are no different—the more relatable their hero is, the better readers feel about themselves. They feel less isolated or ashamed and develop a greater sense of their own potential.

Reading about their hero actually has the power to soothe their anxieties, at the most existential and unspoken level. And the more exciting the adventures their hero brings them along on, the more eager and motivated a child becomes to keep doing the work needed to read.

Here are some ways that parents and educators can help foster a love of story:

- » Invoke a child’s identity as a reader. Reframe the statement, “It’s time to read,” as “Let’s be readers,” to get these struggling students to begin thinking of themselves as the readers they are.
- » Provide children with materials and prompts to draw illustrations depicting story ideas.
- » Encourage children to make up their own plays and dramas based on beloved characters.
- » Read and/or listen to stories together regularly.
- » Ask the child to describe what they see in pictures in books, and have them guess what will happen next.
- » Develop questions around the main characters that the child can fill in from their own imagination: What would this character’s room look like, and why? What would his favorite hobby be? What is he most afraid of? What is he most proud of? Why?
- » Discuss ways the child may be like a character in a beloved book. Do they share feelings or experiences? Is there common ground in talents or gifts? Help the child to see that he or she is part of a much greater world, and that reading about the experiences of others helps us learn about ourselves.

Assignments like these help children use their own imaginations to become participants in the story. By helping them to imagine and enjoy the “worlds behind the words,” children can learn to see that the reward of reading is worth the extra work.

Fostering a love of story combined with relatable storybook character role models (heroes of self-reference) can go a long way toward helping struggling or dyslexic students to see themselves as readers. ●

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