



*I've always loved stories and writing, but for a long stretch in elementary school I absolutely hated reading.*

# Take Another Look

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When I was in fourth grade, I found myself with a big red F on my report card. It stood out against the line of As that surrounded it, and I can still remember the sinking feeling of dread it gave me, knowing the trouble I'd be in at home when my mother saw it.

It wasn't the first or the last F in that little slot on my grade card. Every six weeks it made an appearance, wedged between the A in math and the A in science. But no number of As could erase the existence of that F, always in the subject of reading.

You might be surprised to learn all of this. I'm a writer, after all. Not only that, but I sold my first novel at the age of seventeen. Often, when people learn that I got a book deal at such a young age, they assume that I must have always loved books, that reading has been a passion of mine since I can remember. But this is far from the truth. I've always loved

stories and writing, but for a long stretch in elementary school I absolutely hated reading.

If that doesn't make much sense to you, you aren't alone. My mother really didn't understand it, either. Part of her was angry with me—she knew I could do better—but more than that, she was confused. She'd been reading aloud to me since I was an infant. She read me everything from picture books to the newspaper. Sometimes she found herself reading magazine articles aloud to me in public without even intending to do so. She loved to read, and she had worked so hard to instill that love in me as well. And for a while, she thought she'd been successful.

I was the sort of child who demanded more and more books be read to me before bedtime, the sort of child who sat at a typewriter long before I actually understood

how to spell and pretended to write books of my own. And in years after, I actually did try to write my own books, both on paper and at the computer. Poems, too. How could I be *failing* a reading class?

The answer is both extraordinarily simple and incredibly complicated.

I was born legally blind, which made reading on my own difficult. That in and of itself wasn't the issue, though. My teachers and librarians tried to provide books in large print for me. But no matter how hard they tried, I just couldn't make myself read more than a couple of them without getting bored. I blamed it on reading as a whole. Reading was boring. Writing was fun. End of story, in my nine-year-old mind.

I want to be clear that my teachers and librarians did try to help, but even they became frustrated with me. They worked to find me the

easiest, shortest large-print books they could, but I just wasn't taking to them. I was frustrated, too. I didn't like making Fs. I was a good student otherwise, and I hated feeling like I was disappointing my mother and teachers. The whole situation caused my anxiety disorder to emerge. Soon, I was falling ill, horribly sick to my stomach, unable to keep down food every six weeks when those report cards were due.

One of those nights, while I was lying on the couch with my stomach aching, an ad for the first Harry Potter movie came on television. My mother, knowing this was based on a book that many kids my age seemed to like, instructed me to check it out from the library once I got back to school. I sighed, because *ugh, books*, but my mom knew how to play this game.

"You don't have to read it," she said. "I want to. Check it out for me."

But of course I read it. Or, more accurately, she read it to me. And when she couldn't read it to me, I would pull out my magnifier and read on my own. This was tiring and slow going—even now, in my twenties, the idea of reading that much with a magnifier makes my eyes glaze over—but I was obsessed. I had to keep going.

I devoured the first four books in the series, and then I went looking for more. My teachers and librarians were thrilled...but confused. The books I began reading were far more challenging—on a much higher reading level—than what they thought I could handle. I'd gone from reading nearly nothing to gobbling up books that were well over three hundred pages.

Eventually, one of these educators put it together. The books they'd been providing me, the ones that



were in large print so I could read them with ease, were also on a lower reading level. Because I'd been failing reading classes, the assumption was that my reading skills weren't great. They were looking for books that were easy, but in reality,

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what I needed were accessible books that were also a challenge. In fourth grade I was reading on a seventh-grade level. Of course I was finding those easy books boring.

Once these more-challenging books were provided in an accessible format, either in large print or on audiobook, my reading grades went from Fs to As. And by the time middle school rolled around a year or so later, I was placed in the Advanced Reading class. It was a huge shift for me and one that, I'm sure, led to my career as a writer.

Many years have passed since I rediscovered my love of reading, but it's a story I reflect on often. And it's an experience that, in many ways, informs how I write characters like Bo and Agnes in *Run*, characters whose strengths and weaknesses aren't what those around them might expect. Mine is also a story I try to share, particularly with teachers, librarians, and parents because sometimes, when working with children who have disabilities, the solution to helping them may not be what you initially expect. Sometimes you have to take another look.

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**Kody Keplinger** was born and raised in a small Kentucky town. During her senior year of high school she wrote her debut novel, *The DUFF* (Little, Brown 2010), which was a New York Times bestseller, a USA Today bestseller, a YALSA Top Ten Quick Pick for Reluctant Readers, and a Romantic Times Top Pick. It has since been adapted into a major motion picture. Kody is also the author of *Lying Out Loud* (Scholastic 2015), a companion to *The DUFF*; *Shut Out* (Little, Brown 2011); *A Midsummer's Nightmare* (Little, Brown 2012); and *Run* (Scholastic 2016), as well as the middle-grade novel *The Swift Boys & Me* (Scholastic 2014). Kody is the cofounder of *Disability in Kidlit* <[DisabilityinKidlit.com](http://DisabilityinKidlit.com)> and lives in New York City, where she teaches writing workshops and continues to write books for kids and teens. You can find more about her and her books at <[www.kodykeplinger.com](http://www.kodykeplinger.com)>.

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