



Henry Winkler

**TeachingBooks.net Original In-depth
Author Interview**

Henry Winkler, interviewed from his home in Southern California on December 15, 2010.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You are world-famous for your role as “The Fonz” in the hit 1970s sitcom, *Happy Days* and you have starred in dozens of other roles on television, in film, and on stage. Now, you are a successful children’s book author. Your many roles show you to be someone who loves humor. Were you funny as a kid?

HENRY WINKLER: As a child, I was outgoing but also pretty shy. I covered my shyness with humor and became the class clown—which did not please my teachers. Since I was seven, I wanted to be an actor, but my parents were not very supportive of that idea. They escaped from Nazi Germany, and they wanted me to go into the family business of buying and selling wood. I was not very confident as a child; I didn’t have a great self-image. It took me a long, long time to get that in gear.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What was school like for you?

HENRY WINKLER: I grew up in New York City and went to school at The McBurney School for Boys. School was difficult for me because I had learning challenges (dyslexia). Unfortunately, I didn’t know it during my school career, so I just listened to everybody and thought that possibly I was stupid. That feeling affects your self-image.

I went to Emerson College in Boston, then the Yale School of Drama, where I narrowed in on my profession and had many wonderful teachers who were very knowledgeable. Finally, I had the courage to go to California.

TEACHINGBOOKS: It sounds like you forged ahead despite your learning challenges.

HENRY WINKLER: I have learned that new adventures can be scary, but what makes life exciting is when you put one foot in front of the other, and you are not paralyzed by your own fear.

I see myself as one of those clowns with sand at the bottom. You punch it, and it goes over, and then it flips right back to center. No matter what happens, you cannot define yourself by the fall. You can only define yourself by getting up, dusting yourself off, and continually walking toward your dream.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Did you ever imagine you would become a book author?

HENRY WINKLER: Never in a million years, given where I grew up and how difficult school was, did I ever, ever conceive that I would write anything—except for my name on a contract. Now it turns out that Lin Oliver and I have written 17 Hank Zipzer novels and we have just finished the first 40 pages of a brand-new series. Next up is my book, *I've Never Met an Idiot on the River: Reflections on Family, Fishing, and Photography* that features 60 photographs that I took while fly-fishing for trout in Montana.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did you come to create *I've Never Met an Idiot on the River*?

HENRY WINKLER: In 1993, I bought a photograph in Wyoming for about \$300. I thought to myself, “God, this is beautiful. Could I ever take a picture that was beautiful enough to hang in my house?” So I started taking photographs. I’m so dyslexic that I never turn a knob on the camera, except the on-and-off switch. I just point and shoot.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What did you do when you arrived in California at the beginning of your acting career?

HENRY WINKLER: When I arrived in California in September of 1973, I got off the plane and took a taxi right to my agent’s office thinking that he would send me on an audition that afternoon. I didn’t want to waste any time; I wanted to start working. Within a week, I got a role on the *Mary Tyler Moore Show*, which was a very successful and well-written situational comedy at the time.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What part did you play on the *Mary Tyler Moore Show*?

HENRY WINKLER: I played Rhoda’s date. I had four lines. Two weeks later, I went to Paramount and auditioned with six lines for a brand-new show that they were going to do on ABC. One of the lines was, “Next time, Richie, let me do it.” I was able to get the part, and I played “The Fonz” for the next 10 years.

TEACHINGBOOKS: So your method is to have courage to try and then just do your best.

HENRY WINKLER: It is scary to walk into those rooms in front of all of those directors and producers and casting directors. But, they need somebody or you wouldn’t be there. Instead of using up my time being worried and tight, I just throw caution to the wind and use my imagination and fill the room with that. A lot of times, it works.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How do you reconcile your reading struggles with your acting craft?

HENRY WINKLER: I did not read a novel until I was in my 30s because I was so intimidated by all the words. Now, every novel I've ever read is on a shelf in my office. I like to see them, because each one is a triumph.

With reading being so difficult, I have to get the script for whatever I'm auditioning for way in advance. I go over it and over it and over it, and I read it very slowly, one word at a time. Otherwise, my eyes play tricks on me, and sometimes I put words in that don't actually exist on the page.

Sometimes, if something is really well written, I'm able to memorize most of it before I go to the audition. Sometimes, I just ad-lib. I know 90% of what the character is trying to say, and the rest of it I ad-lib and pray for the best. That has seemed to work pretty well.

TEACHINGBOOKS: And you're writing books. What is that process like?

HENRY WINKLER: I learn a lot better through my ear than through my eye, so I listen very carefully. For me, the center of a relationship with anybody is the ear, not the heart or the mind. It is hearing what's being said—hearing and watching how what you say lands on the other person.

When working with Lin, I walk around her office, and I become the character, and she types. We read it back. We edit it. She has an idea, and she types. She reads it back. We edit it. We have written more than 17 novels that way.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How do you develop characters as you compose your stories?

HENRY WINKLER: Sometimes it's very easy for me. I knew Hank Zipzer because Hank was me; I knew the emotion of failing all the time. With the new novel I hear the voices, and we start talking. Lin has her version, too. The writing technique is intertwined. It is a challenging process, but we seem to do it really well and enjoy it.

TEACHINGBOOKS: It's a brilliant workaround.

HENRY WINKLER: The way I see it, there is more than one way to get to where you want to go. There is always a way to accomplish your dream. It doesn't always have to be the most orthodox way.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You are not a stereotypical celebrity children's book creator; a celebrity who just decides to make a children's book.

HENRY WINKLER: No. The first time I was encouraged to write a book for children about my learning challenges, I dismissed it. I thought, “There’s no way I could write a book. I don’t know how. That is the silliest thing I ever heard.” It was only when I met Lin and we tried to create Hank Zipzer and his life that the book started to flow like a river out of my experience.

TEACHINGBOOKS: The Hank Zipzer books contain a message that’s very positive.

HENRY WINKLER: The humor in the Hank books is funny for everybody, not just kids who have a challenge. One out of five kids has a challenge of some kind. I want to tell teachers that most of those kids don’t wake up in the morning and say, “Wow, I think I’m going to be disruptive today.” A lot of them absolutely cannot help themselves.

I love that kids with learning challenges ask me how I know them so well. Kids who typically don’t enjoy reading say that my book made them laugh so hard. Others say, “Oh my gosh, that’s my best friend. That’s my sister. That’s my dad.” I get letters that say, “Henry, don’t worry, you’re not alone. My dad is just like you. He can’t spell either.”

And, the humor works well outside of the United States. Lin and I were told that the Hank Zipzer books wouldn’t work in England—that the humor would be too American. But I just kept at it and found a publisher who believed they would sell well there, and we just published our 11th Hank Zipzer book in England.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What is your new series about?

HENRY WINKLER: The underpinning of the new series is that you can’t judge a book by its cover. Two boys, who would never be friends, are thrown together through extraordinary circumstances and figure out that they can help each other.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like to tell students?

HENRY WINKLER: I’ve spoken to thousands of students, and we laugh together. In the beginning, I say, “Raise your hand if you have trouble in school.” Two people raise their hands. After we have been together for an hour, everybody raises their hand, even if they have no trouble.

I tell every child I meet that they have to remember that how they learn has nothing to do with how brilliant they are.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like to tell teachers?

HENRY WINKLER: I tell them that the child who is studying to be a doctor, a scientist, or an engineer is fantastic. But that there are children who are really good with their hands and who would be good at plastering or plumbing or building or painting or dancing, and those children have to be as celebrated as the others. The doctor is going to live in a house one day and is probably not going to build it; the other child across the room will.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you do when you get stuck?

HENRY WINKLER: There are some times when my brain just stops, and I put the piece of paper away. At that moment, I have tried and tried and tried, but nothing is coming. At another times, the juices flow.

Sometimes there are too many things on my mind, or I haven't eaten well, or I haven't slept well, and nothing comes. Instead of panicking, it is really the art of submission. I submit to the block, as opposed to fighting the block.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What is a typical workday like for you?

HENRY WINKLER: I go to Lin's office at 10:00 in the morning, and we talk about our children and catch up a bit. Then, we start writing. I leave her office at 11:00 with six to eight pages that did not exist before.

When we're writing together, we do this every day for two months. Then after another half a month, when we go through the editor's notes and stuff, and we have a novel. It's amazing.

TEACHINGBOOKS: It sounds like you are really enjoying yourself.

HENRY WINKLER: I love my life. At this moment, I am living that needle-pointed pillow that says, "When it rains, it pours." When I leave Lin's office with those pages that never existed before—and this has been the case ever since we started writing together in 2003—I am overwhelmed every day, as if it is the first day.

TEACHINGBOOKS: And you are doing television as well.

HENRY WINKLER: Right now, I'm shooting a show called *Children's Hospital*, which is a rude comedy on The Cartoon Network. It's the first live-action comedy for them. I'm also in *Royal Pains* on USA Network.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What else would you like to share with your readers?

HENRY WINKLER: Children have got to know that how they learn has nothing to do with how brilliant they are and that every one of them has a gift. If it's not geometry, it's something else. They have to find out what their gift is, dig it out, and give it to the world.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your novels have really given you a way to reach that audience in a whole new way.

HENRY WINKLER: They have. I got a letter from a little girl who said to me, "I can't spell. Hank can't spell. I could be a writer." I wrote her back and said, "I can't wait to read your book."

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