

Dav Pilkey

Author and illustrator

Date of birth: March 4, 1966

Place of birth: Cleveland, Ohio

Also known as: David M. Pilkey Jr.

Education: Kent State University

Significance: Dav Pilkey authored and illustrated many humorous and sometimes irreverent children's books. His Captain Underpants book series was especially popular with children and was translated into more than twenty-eight languages, with more than 80 million copies sold.

Background

Dav Pilkey was born David M. Pilkey Jr. on March 4, 1966, in Cleveland, Ohio, the younger of two children of Barbara Pilkey and David M. Pilkey Sr. His father was a Baptist minister and sales engineer for a large steel company before starting his own business.

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Pilkey was raised in the Greater Cleveland area, where he attended parochial schools. As a student with dyslexia and attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), he found the classroom environment difficult and often got in trouble at school. He was often punished for his disruptive behavior by being sent to sit in the hallway. It was there, in second grade, that he invented two of the characters who later featured in two of his book series: the superheroes Captain Underpants and Dog Man. Pilkey loved to draw from early childhood, especially comic book characters, superheroes, monsters, and animals. During his exile in the hallway, he drew comic books featuring Captain Underpants and other cartoon characters he created.

In 1984, Pilkey enrolled in Kent State University as an art major. There he continued to doodle and draw in the classroom. Encouraged by an English teacher who praised his creative writing and suggested he write an illustrated children's book, Pilkey wrote and illustrated a Cold War story about two animals competing in an arms race. He entered it in a national student contest in 1986, and it won first place and was published as *World War Won* in 1987.

Pilkey acquired the nickname Dav during college, when he worked as a waiter at a pizza parlor. A typo on his name tag omitted the “e” in “Dave,” and the unusual spelling stuck. He graduated from Kent State in 1987 with an associate degree.

Career in Children’s Literature

Winning the national writing contest inspired Pilkey to become a freelance writer and illustrator. He followed his first book with several picture books, including *’Twas the Night Before Thanksgiving* (1990), *When Cats Dream* (1992), *Kat Kong* (1993), and *Dog Breath: The Horrible Trouble with Hally Tosis* (1994). In 1991, he introduced the Dragon’s Tales series, a series for beginning readers about a blue dragon. The first book in the series, *A Friend for Dragon* (1991), tells a tale of deception, with a villain who passes off an apple as Dragon’s friend. Other titles include *Dragon’s Fat Cat* (1992) and *Dragon’s Halloween* (1993).

Writing under the pseudonym Sue Denim, Pilkey began his second series, the Dumb Bunnies, in 1994 with the book *The Dumb Bunnies*. Featuring a mother, a father, and a baby bunny whose “dumbness” is their most appealing characteristic, the books describe the zany adventures they have as a result. While some critics panned the books for their overly juvenile humor, they were a hit with young children.

Pilkey introduced two series in 1997. The Big Dog and Little Dog series were picture books with very simple text for beginning readers; they featured two canine best friends that have a series of funny adventures. Titles include *Getting in Trouble* (1997), *Going for a Walk* (1997), and *Making a Mistake* (1999). The other was the Captain Underpants series, which became his best-known work.

The Captain Underpants series, which began with *The Adventures of Captain Underpants* (1997), features the cartoon character Pilkey had first drawn as a second grader. Aimed at elementary- and middle-school readers, the books follow the adventures of two fourth-grade boys, George and Harold. Like Pilkey, the boys have ADHD and constantly get into trouble at school. They create comic books populated with cartoon characters based on individuals from their school, including their mean principal. However, through hypnosis their principal takes on the titular role as an avenging superhero wearing only underwear and a cape. Eleven sequels followed, including *Captain Underpants and the Attack of the Talking Toilets* (1999) and *Captain Underpants and the Wrath of the Wicked Wedgie Woman* (2001). Some adults considered the books’ toilet humor and violence inappropriate, but it was that very inappropriateness that made the books a big hit with children. The Captain Underpants series was adapted into an animated film, *Captain Underpants: The First Epic Movie*, in 2017. A Netflix television series, *The Epic Tales of Captain Underpants*, followed in 2018.

Other series by Pilkey include the Ricky Ricotta books, which opened with *Ricky Ricotta’s Mighty Robot* (2000) and included planet-based books such as *Ricky Ricotta’s Mighty Robot vs. The Unpleasant Penguins from Pluto* (2016). The Dog Man series of

graphic novels feature a part-human, part-dog superhero. It led off with *Dog Man* in 2016 and included *Dog Man and Cat Kid* (2017) and *Lord of the Fleas* (2018).

Impact

Dav Pilkey’s books have been lauded for inspiring to children who struggle with school, learning disabilities, or life in general. They show children they can be strong and powerful, overcome challenges, and excel at things. At the same time, they poke fun at adult conventions by featuring often-inappropriate language and topics, while adhering to the comic book mantra of making the world a better place by defeating evil.

Personal Life

Pilkey and his wife, Sayuri, a musician, divided their time between Bainbridge Island, Washington, and Minami Izu, Japan.

Principal Works

Dragon’s Tales, 1991–93

Dumb Bunnies, 1994–97

Captain Underpants, 1997–2015

Big Dog and Little Dog, 1997–99

Ricky Ricotta, 2000–2016

Dog Man, 2016–

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