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## LITERATURE

# Henry Winkler Kids Around At Book Revue

By Iris Wiener

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Henry Winkler may have charmed young ladies while emanating studliness during his run as Fonzie on "Happy Days", but the star of Winkler's hit children's book series couldn't be more unlike any role he has ever performed. Interestingly enough, protagonist Hank Zipzer's story is based on Winkler's own experiences growing up as an undiagnosed dyslexic.

"At one time it was so hard for me to read a book," said Winkler when considering the conception of book number 14, *Life of Me (Enter at Your Own Risk)*, in his and author Lin Oliver's "Hank Zipzer: The World's Greatest Underachiever" series.

"It is so monumental for me to be able to write a book. I want kids to be able to identify, laugh, and realize that they're not alone no matter what their learning challenge is," Winkler said.

Even Winkler's journey to becoming an author is apparent in Hank's stories.

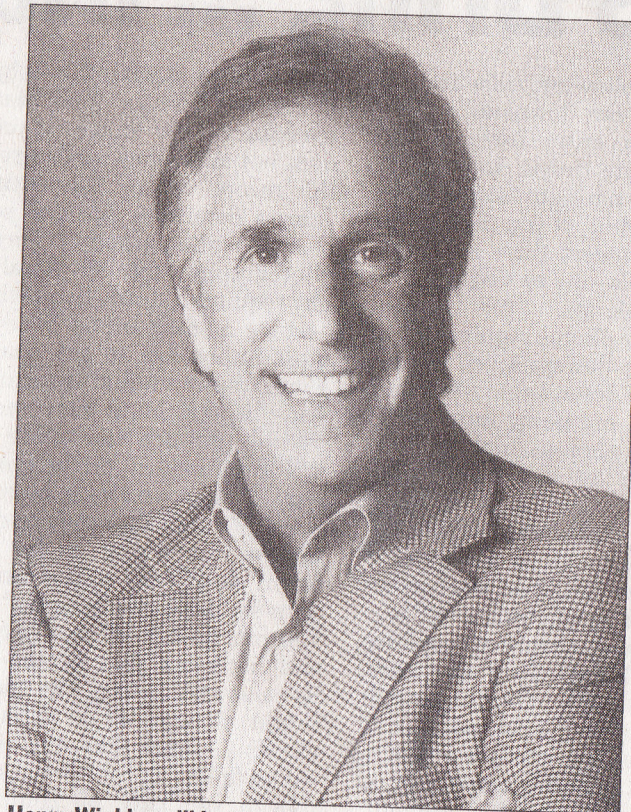
"When I was first asked to work on the books it was 1998. And because I grew up stupid, because I grew up not living up to my potential and lazy, I dismissed it out of hand. I said, 'There is no way that I am going to do this, write a book. I have nothing to write about,'" he explained.

In 2002, Winkler's agent once again asked him if he would work on a series.

"This time I went, 'Okay.' And then he said, 'I'll introduce you to Lin Oliver, she's a friend of mine.'"

Oliver and Winkler received a contract for four books from Penguin Putnam. Because the books have been such big hits, Hank's adventures will continue up to at least number 16.

"I get letters from moms, teachers, and librarians, and I get letters from the kids with and without learning challenges, and they talk about how there's not a word, one sentence, one paragraph that's boring," he said. "Kids and adults say to me, 'How did you know me so well?' or they say, 'My child is a reluctant reader, and we



**Henry Winkler will be signing copies of his new children's book on May 7 at the Book Revue.**

read one, and now my child has read five."

Winkler's favorite letter came from a young boy in Missouri who wrote, "I laughed so hard my funny bone fell out of my body."

"Isn't that a great compliment?" gushed Winkler. "They're funny at first, and they just happen to be about a little boy who has learning challenges."

In *The Life of Me (Enter at Your Own Risk)*, Hank is psyched because his least favorite teacher, Ms. Adolf, hurts her back in a tango contest and Mr. Rock, the mu-

sic teacher, becomes their sub. Life is great until Mr. Rock suggests he attend an after-school reading program, which means he'll now miss tae kwon do. But after-school is not as bad as it seems; Hank develops a crush and Mr. Rock even allows him to present his life as a scrapbook instead of writing the assigned autobiography. Hank is on a roll until he realizes his new crush is cousins with his nemesis, McKelty.

So how much of this stuff is really from Winkler's own life?

"A lot of it is made up," Winkler laughed. "Hank's apartment building is real. Ms. Adolf and Mr. Rock are real. The school, P.S. 87, is real. The name Zipzer comes from a woman who lived on the fourth floor of our building, Ella Zipzer, who is about 85 now. And when I read at P.S. 87 she actually came! What I love about this book too is that I love the scrapbook. We created Hank's actual scrapbook. And I love that we created scrapbooks of Lin and Henry as well!"

Winkler also sees a lot of himself in Hank's persona.

"Hank's cup is half full. In my life I always see myself as that toy with sand at the bottom, you punch it and then it comes right back up again, you know like those big plastic blow-up clowns, you punch him in the nose, he goes down, and then he gets right back up again," he said.

One might be surprised to learn that a man so famous for an iconic television role had a learning disorder, but Winkler says that learning scripts was never a problem for him.

"It was the reading that was hard, the memorization was not so difficult," he exclaimed as he recalls an example of how he overcame dyslexia. "In 1973 I opened and closed on Broadway in one night. I promised myself that I would make that right eventually. I didn't know how, I didn't know when. And then Neil Simon asked me to read a play of his, out loud, in a theatre in Los Angeles. And I thought, 'Oh my God, I can't do that, I can't read out loud, especially in front of Neil Simon. That is my worst nightmare.' And at the same moment, I couldn't

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# *Kidding around at Revue*

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say no, because it's Neil Simon. So I got the script early, and I went over it and over it and over it, and the journey started. I eventually opened with John Ritter on Broadway, and ran for nine months and made it right. It's a matter of being tenacious."

Winkler laughs when considering the differences between his two leading men: Hank and "The Fonz."

"Fonzie is my alterego. He is everything that I wanted to be. He seemed to be in control of something. I was a bowl of jelly when I grew up!"

When Winkler visits Book Revue on May 10, he knows that the parents will be

coming to visit him for one reason, and that the kids will be coming for another.

"I can't wait to see them all! The best part is being in that store, meeting and looking at these faces and hearing these questions that the kids have, and we laugh together, and we have a really good time," Winkler said. "And I read from the book, and it really is a fun event. It's a high-energy event. And I get to shake hands and hug all these kids who so enjoy reading the thing that I thought I could never do! And the kids come with their many volumes of books in their arms, and they're all dog-eared, and their mother's say, 'I can't wait for the next one, because he just read the last one ten times!'"