

Living with dyslexia

Overcoming dyslexia is a challenge, but is it ultimately a gift or a life-long curse?

DEBBIE Macomber has written more than 100 books. She has sold more than 60 million books worldwide, and is a New York Times bestselling author. Not bad for someone who couldn't read until she was 11 years old.

"I am dyslexic, but they didn't have a word for that when I was a child," says Debbie who is from Washington State. "I was just considered slow. School was difficult." That is an understatement.

"I was the only girl in the slow reading group," says Debbie on a visit to Dublin to publicise her latest book, *Wednesdays at Four*. "My teacher said, 'Debbie is a nice girl but she will never do well at school'. And I didn't."

Debbie, though, had a dream. She loved telling stories. She adored books, and she fantasised, always, about becoming a writer.

"I would throb with joy at the thought of it," she says, "but I didn't tell anyone; not even my best friend.

"I knew if I did tell anyone they would say, 'you can't be a writer; you don't get good grades. You can't spell'. It was an impossible dream."

Debbie didn't become a writer overnight. She married at 19; had four children, and was turning 30 before she told her husband, Wayne, she wanted to try writing.

"He said, 'honey, go for it'. So I rented a typewriter, sat down, and tried. But the stories in my head didn't transpose to my fingers. I learned by dissecting the books I loved.

"By doing that I learned about plotting, pacing and chapter openings. And I wrote four books right through. But I kept getting rejected. This went on for five years. They were hard years. We had no vacations. We struggled. I felt guilty, but I always believed I would be published."

And she was. Simon and Schuster bought the book as part of their romance line, *Silhouette*.

"It was the first of that line to be reviewed in *Publisher's Weekly*," says Debbie. "I was pictured in *Newsweek*. And I gradually built my audience."

Throughout that difficult childhood, Debbie always knitted.

"I began when I was 11 years old. It gave me confidence when I so badly needed it. One of the nuns asked me to knit a sweater for her niece's baby. I got a lot of praise for that." Debbie still knits, every day.

"I have more yarn in my suitcase than clothes," she says, laughing. And she brings knitting into her books. It has spawned a whole industry.

There are Knit with Debbie pattern books. And 35,000 readers, who have written to Debbie, receive a regular newsletter which contains a free knitting pattern.

Debbie is not the first writer to overcome dyslexia. Our own William Butler Yeats suffered from it. Many successful people have overcome it. There's Richard Branson, Picasso, Michael Heseltine and Noel Gallagher. Winston Churchill was dyslexic. So was Einstein.

Not everyone with dyslexia is so lucky.

Research from England and America shows that undiagnosed, many people with dyslexia lose heart, fall out of school, and find themselves unemployed. Some get in trouble with the law.

"Dyslexia can be very difficult, even for adults," says Rosie Bissett, the new director of the Dyslexia Association of Ireland. "Some will be left with severe literacy problems.

"Other will make great strides. They will find wonderful compensatory strategies. They will use technology to get around their difficulties; but for others, dyslexia continues to be a great blight on their lives.

"Dyslexia limits their ability to progress in work. They are afraid to go for promotion if this means more written work.

"Some people love this idea of 'the gift of dyslexia'. And some people do have wonderful gifts. They have good spatial skills, or, like Richard Branson, they are good entrepreneurs, because they can think outside the box.

"But for every one of those people, there are others who do not have a gift; and who have been limited through a lack of diagnosis, lack of intervention, and lack of support in school.

"Dyslexia can affect people emotionally. They can be very hurt by it. And it can take them a long, long time to get over it."

For more information visit www.dyslexia.ie

Published on www.independent.ie on April 23, 2008