

Teenage sex:  
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Brian Turner on  
paradise lost



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NEW ZEALAND

# LISTENER

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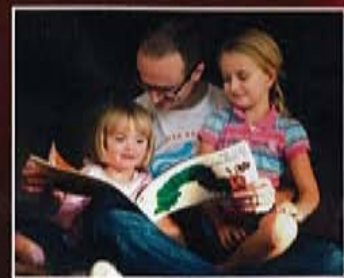
## Dyslexia Unlocking the secrets

*"Now I think it's  
something to be  
proud of..."*

NZ actress Morgana O'Reilly

**PLUS**

A dyslexic CEO  
shares his strategies  
for success



*"I still can't read  
Hairy Maclary to my kids..."*





# In their right mind

At least one in 10 New Zealanders are thought to have dyslexia, and their right-brain emphasis could make them a real asset in the workplace – provided they survive their school years. BY JOANNE BLACK

Morgana O'Reilly recalls sitting on the mat at primary school and admiring the way the pupils around her were moving their lips as they read silently to themselves. She liked the way they looked, so although she could not herself read, she copied them. "I would look at the pictures in my book but mouth fake words, so the teachers thought I could read. Suckers!"

In fact, until she was 15, she didn't read. "I hated it because I couldn't do it. I found it really hard and could not process texts into information."

However, perhaps revealing her innate talents – she is now an accolade-winning actor – she was very good at disguising her difficulties and even remembers receiving certificates for reading based solely on her skills in copying others on the mat.

Although she has to all intents and purposes successfully overcome her mild case of dyslexia, her school story will be familiar to many of the estimated 10% or more of the population who suffer from the neurobiological condition that, in layman's parlance, means the brain is wired differently from that of a non-dyslexic.

The Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand, which prefers the wider "spectrum view" of dyslexia to the narrow focus on literacy difficulties, says brain research has shown that whereas most of us use the "verbal" left side of our brains to understand words, dyslexic people use the "pictorial" right side. This makes them slower to process and understand language, but stronger in creative thinking.

In the UK, the condition has been officially categorised as a disability but our Dyslexia Foundation shies away from that approach. "Academics and researchers want to put dyslexia inside a very,

## Adult dyslexic checklist

1. Do you have difficulty telling left from right?
2. Is map reading or finding your way to a strange place confusing?
3. Do you dislike reading aloud?
4. Do you take longer than you should to read a page of a book?
5. Do you find it difficult to remember the sense of what you have read?
6. Do you dislike reading long books?
7. Is your spelling poor?
8. Is your writing difficult to read?
9. Do you get confused if you have to speak in public?
10. Do you find it difficult to take messages on the telephone and pass them on correctly?
11. When you say a long word, do you sometimes find it difficult to get all the sounds in the right order?
12. Do you find it difficult to do sums in your head without using your fingers or paper?
13. When using the telephone, do you tend to get the numbers mixed up when you dial?
14. Do you find it difficult to say the months of the year forwards in a fluent manner?
15. Do you find it difficult to say the months of the year backwards?
16. Do you mix up dates and times and miss appointments?
17. When writing cheques, do you often make mistakes?
18. Do you find filling in forms difficult and confusing?
19. Do you mix up bus numbers like 95 and 59?
20. Did you find it hard to learn your multiplication tables at school?

very tidy and quite small box that relates dyslexia to literacy," says foundation chairman Guy Pope-Mayell.

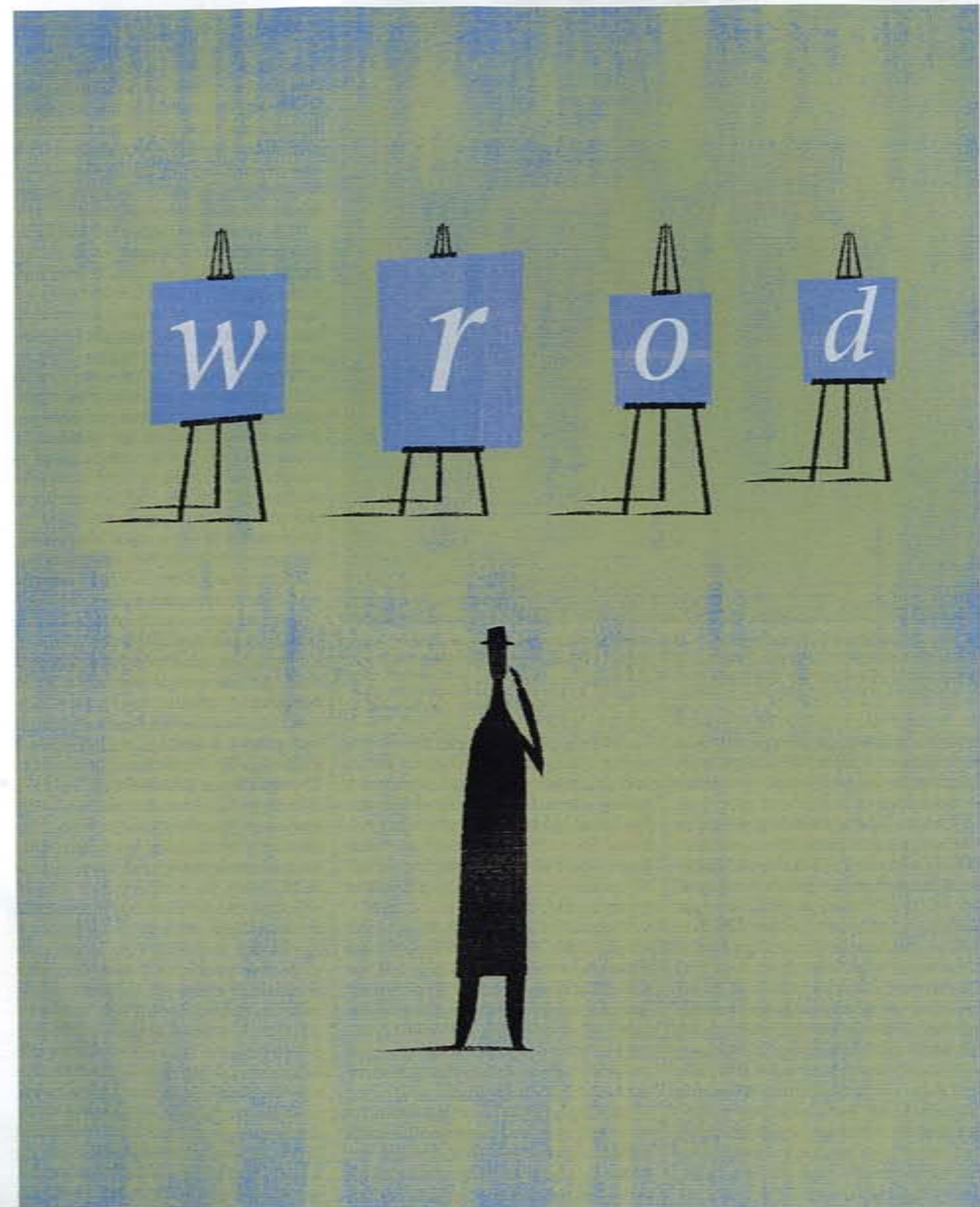
"That's understandable, but the reality for dyslexic individuals is that although literacy does present difficulties and is a core component of what it means to be dyslexic, it's certainly not the whole story. The mind of dyslexic individuals not only presents difficulties in literacy, but can also present difficulties in a number of other areas and, at the same time, present strengths and talents. So the big picture for dyslexia is a spectrum of difficulties, differences, advantages and talents."

Dyslexia is popularly associated with left-right confusion (and sometimes up-down confusion), but both are much rarer than difficulties with reading, writing and spelling.

O'Reilly's story would be all-too-familiar not only to dyslexics who tried hard at school to mask their problems, but also to acclaimed US dyslexia researcher Tom West, who says the perception that more males than females have dyslexia is incorrect. He suspects that one reason this belief took hold is that girls are better at covering up than boys.

"They used to think there were four dyslexic boys for every dyslexic girl and this belief was repeated for about 100 years," West says. "Eventually they did some serious studies, including taking one dyslexic individual and testing everyone in that family, and realised the girls were simply better at hiding their dyslexia than the boys. The girls had better social skills and were more mature."

"The not-so-smart boys simply got frustrated, angry and acted up, so were sent off to the psychologist to get tested. You're only testing the bad boys because



they are the ones who come to attention." In fact, West says, the gender balance of dyslexia "is almost exactly one to one".

Estimates of the percentage of the population who would, if tested, appear somewhere on the spectrum of dyslexia

range from 10% to more than 20%, but the Dyslexia Foundation prefers the more cautious estimate.

However, Pope-Mayell is much less conservative when estimating how many dyslexics feature in some of the country's

worst social statistics. "There is research in certain areas within New Zealand, and internationally, showing that in any situation you look at as a negative within society, whether it's unemployment, court appearances or whatever, up to 50%





Morgana O'Reilly: her diagnosis at 15 was a turning point.

of those individuals will be dyslexic."

The literacy difficulties that frequently accompany dyslexia are not the only thing that makes dyslexics more likely to be unemployed. Equally important is their experience in the school system where, even if their IQ is high, their confidence may be knocked by repeated public failures.

"Imagine having thinking skills that are four or five times as high as your basic skills, so you can think as ably and maybe even better than the person beside you. But what you're being judged on at school is the paragraph you've written about the visit to the museum," says Pope-Mayell. "You know what went down, you may even know the intricate details of the life cycle of a spider, but you can only manage to write: 'We went to the museum. We saw some spiders. I had fun.'"

"The guy beside you writes two pages and if you could, you'd have written five pages in detail. That's incredibly frustrating and the constant judgment of our kids about their basic skills leads to very low self-esteem."

O'Reilly says her own diagnosis with dyslexia at age 15 was a turning point. Her mother, choreographer Mary Jane O'Reilly, had doubted her daughter was dyslexic, but took her to an optometrist when Morgana complained that words sometimes seemed to change order on the page. "Of course,

I had perfect vision, so it wasn't about that," O'Reilly says. She then went to a specialist who diagnosed dyslexia.

"If anything, my diagnosis was something to be proud of. I could think, 'Okay, I'm not stupid', and it meant I could recognise what was happening and simply say, 'Oh, my God, I just got those words totally mixed around, but not because I'm a dumb-arse, but because that's dyslexia.' If it hadn't been picked up when it was, I would have been much worse off. My pride would have got in the way of me trying to fix it myself."

"Once I got clued into it, I almost immediately started reading and got better and better at it and now ... I can read aloud pretty fluently, which is really good for my career." She says she still gets some letters mixed up, and when learning a difficult script tries to visualise it on the page, "seeing the words as a picture, rather than as an equation".

The Dyslexia Foundation wants to concentrate on the talents and creative elements that come with dyslexia but Pope-Mayell says the tough reality for the majority of dyslexic individuals, including many who are successful in their careers, is that they carry a deep sense of shame and fear from their experiences at school.

West describes what happens to dyslexics at school in even more dramatic terms. "In many cases, it's really child abuse for 12 years."

He says dyslexics have particular abilities, including being able to quickly see "the big picture" in some problem or situation, and they are often creative thinkers and good with numbers, graphics and visual images. "And they avoid like the plague foreign languages, English essays and literature courses, and because most of them eventually move into a technical stream of education, they can do that."

"On the campus of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, they say there are so many dyslexics that locally they call it the MIT disease. The dyslexics are the most brilliant of the brilliant, yet they can't do certain things and they successfully avoid it."

"What dyslexics can't do is real and it just happens that, almost by definition, everything that is required particularly in primary school is what they are poor at."

"In my own case I couldn't learn to read, or hardly could, for the first three or four years of school. And I always felt as though I was catching up. And all these memory things – the states, the capitals, the presidents, multiplication tables, but particularly any list of things which you could not derive in any reasonable way – would just evaporate. I would memorise it and the next day it would be gone."

"But when I got into high school, I realised there were all kinds of stuff in literature and philosophy that I could do much better than my classmates and it was a shock. At college, it got better, at graduate school it got better again and in the workplace it got better still."

However, he says dyslexics in workplaces can quickly be overwhelmed by too many things going on at once. "You have to work slowly and carefully and meticulously."

For all the difficulties dyslexics face, the list of high-achievers is long. Research shows that in the US 35% of entrepreneurs are dyslexic; in the UK the figure is put at 20%. "It's a joke among entrepreneurs that the dyslexic guy or woman who started the company would never be hired by the human-resources people now because they would not have the right degrees, or high grades," West says.

He recalls visiting New Zealand about four years ago and going to see Richard Taylor at Weta Workshop. "Just looking around, I said to myself, 'This place has got to be awash in dyslexics – very talented, creative dyslexics.'"

"And I sort of guessed that Richard Taylor himself probably was dyslexic but I was only there half a day and I didn't want to get into it with him. It was two or three years later that he went public [about being dyslexic] and I said, 'Well, I'm not surprised.'"

Because there are now programmes to identify and assist dyslexics at school, the Dyslexia Foundation wants to shift its focus to adults with dyslexia. "In the workplace, their different way of thinking is going to present difficulties, both related to literacy and also in many other ways," says Pope-Mayell. "Again, it's not just about an inability to read, or a difficulty in spelling – it's the way they process information."

He says a dyslexic person who is given background material they are expected to read and immediately comment on in a meeting can often struggle because they lack fluency. "But probably the real problem is that they feel under pressure. And because they have had such bad experiences of reading aloud at school, they carry that with them as emotional threads into the workplace."

He says when it comes to supporting dyslexic individuals at work, the "key word" is empathy. "Once you have empathy, it doesn't take much effort to issue those background reading notes, for example, the day before the meeting, or a couple of hours before, so the dyslexic individual can read them in an environment where he or she does not feel as pressured."

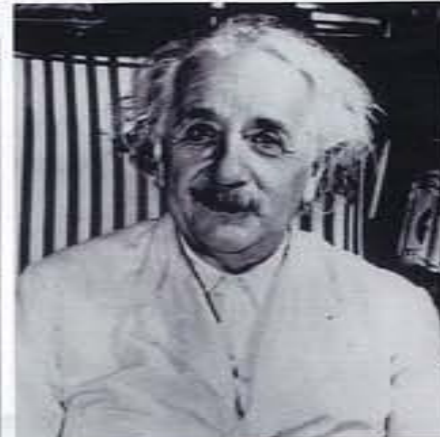
He says dyslexics tend to see the big picture, and prefer to work on sequential tasks, rather than being overloaded. They might also prefer to receive information verbally, rather than by email. They may have a tendency to knock on the door and come to talk about things, which could be irritating for a non-dyslexic.

For a linear thinker, email is effective and efficient and removes social and time-consuming interactions. "But for a dyslexic person, that interaction can be of critical importance to convey their ideas and obtain some kind of fulfilment and, very importantly for both them and the business, also provide an opportunity to actually deliver value from their role."

"There needs to be a level of awareness and level of flexibility, and the only way that really works is if the issue is out in the open."

Another source of help for dyslexics is changing technology. Spellcheckers have helped, but the increasing sophistication of software that converts voices into text is likely to make a big difference.

So should a dyslexic person "come out" at an interview? "If you ask me what would be my dream come true," says Pope-Mayell, "it would be where if a dyslexic individual did disclose that in the hiring process, they would rise to the top of the list of prospective employees because the employer would recognise that dyslexia brings fantastic



Many famous scientists, artists and entrepreneurs have been dyslexic, including (clockwise from top left) Albert Einstein, Sir Richard Branson, Sir Winston Churchill and Jamie Oliver. Researcher Tom West says many creative people are dyslexic and they are leading the field in the computer graphics industry. "It is rare not to see some dyslexic traits in the people at the top."

talents and things that businesses value.

"But until we actually have employers understanding what dyslexia is, how simple it is to accommodate it and what the benefits are, if you disclosed it at an interview you may well be prejudiced against getting the job. That's the harsh reality that applies at the moment."

West is also wary about "coming out". "If your employer thinks dyslexia is a kind of retardation, don't tell them. But my best answer is to say, 'I have trouble with spelling, but I'm very good at [some other thing], so could I have someone check my spelling?' and so not get a big label, if possible."

Champion as he is of people with dyslexia, Pope-Mayell admits not every dyslexic individual will have special talents, creativity and the ability to think outside the square. But he says the percentage of dyslexics who have these talents will be up to four times higher than for the rest of the population. And if so many dyslexics were not burdened by issues of self-esteem, "there is a strong argument to say that all dyslexics would have the talents that we're talking about."

"What keeps a lid on that is the educational experience they have had, and the deep shame. We love to talk about the

talents and creativity, but for the majority of dyslexic individuals who have had the normal dyslexic experience at school, they bring with them into their adult life a deep sense of shame and fear about who they are and what they can do. That gets triggered in sometimes the most simple situations at work, which keeps a lid on their potential."

If that all sounds bleak, West says today's dyslexics have time on their side, and their day is coming. In his book *In the Mind's Eye*, West quotes a Harvard neurologist who argues that we are in a blip in time when society has been obsessed with reading, but soon technology will again turn us back into a more oral culture, even if it is your computer that you talk to.

"The people who are good at words, Latin and the capitals of the states will be useful in a secondary role, but to lead the charge, dyslexics are the ones who instantly take to the new technology and say, 'Yes! This is the way I think.'"

International dyslexia expert Neil Mackay will hold a workshop for employers and employees on June 4. See [www.4d.org.nz](http://www.4d.org.nz). Morgana O'Reilly is touring a solo show, *The Height of the Eiffel Tower* – email [yourtheatre@gmail.com](mailto:yourtheatre@gmail.com).