

be in prison: a black man brought up on the wrong side of town whose family fell apart, in trouble with the police when I was a kid, unable to read and write, with no qualifications and, on top of that, dyslexic. But I think staying out of prison is about conquering your fears and finding your path in life.

When I go into prisons to talk to people I see men and women who, in intelligence and other qualities, are the same as me. But opportunities opened for me and they missed theirs, didn't notice them or didn't take them.

I never thought I was stupid. I didn't have that struggle. If I have someone in front of me who doesn't have a problem reading and writing telling me that black people are savages I just think, "I'm not stupid – you're the one who's stupid." I just had self-belief.

For my first book I told my poems to my girlfriend, who wrote them down for me. It really took off, especially within the black community. I wrote "wid luv" for "with love". People didn't think they were dyslexic poems, they just thought I wrote phonetically.

At 21 I went to an adult education class in London to learn to read and write. The teacher told me, "You are dyslexic," and I was like, "Do I need an operation?" She explained to me what it meant and I suddenly thought, "Ah, I get it. I thought I was going crazy."

I wrote more poetry, novels for teenagers, plays, other books and recorded music. I take poetry to people who do not read poetry. Still now, when I'm writing the word "knot", I have to stop and think, "How do I write that?" I have to draw something to let me know what the word is to come back to it later. If I can't spell "question" I just put a question mark and come back to it later.

When I look at a book, the first thing I see is the size of it, and I know that's what it's like for a lot of young people who find reading tough. When Brunel University offered me the job of professor of poetry and creative writing, I knew my students would be officially more educated than me. I tell them, "You can do this course and get the right grade because you have a good memory – but if you don't have passion, creativity, individuality, there's no point." In my life now, I find that people **accommodate** my dyslexia. I can perform my poetry because it doesn't have to be word perfect, but I never read one of my novels in public. When I go to literary festivals I always get an actor to read it out for me. Otherwise all my energy goes into reading the book and the mood is lost.

If someone can't understand dyslexia it's their problem. In the same way, if someone **oppresses** me because of my race I don't sit down and think, "How can I become white?" It's not my problem, it's theirs and they are the ones who have to come to terms with it.

If you're dyslexic and you feel there's something holding you back, just remember: it's not you. In many ways being dyslexic is a natural way to be.

What's unnatural is the way we read and write. If you look at a pictorial language like Chinese, you can see the word for a woman because the character looks like a woman. The word for a house looks like a house. It is a strange step to go from that to a squiggle that represents a sound.

So don't be heavy on yourself. And if you are a parent of someone with

accommodate Make adjustments for someone or something.

oppresses Makes someone feel inadequate or worthless and limits their freedom.