

▼ 'YOUNG AND DYSLEXIC? YOU'VE GOT IT GOING ON' BY BENJAMIN ZEPHANIAH

This article was published in *The Guardian*, 2 October 2015, and is adapted from Zephaniah's contribution to *Creative, Successful, Dyslexic* (Jessica Kingsley, 2015).

As a child I suffered, but learned to turn dyslexia to my advantage, to see the world more creatively. We are the architects, we are the designers.

dyslexia Difficulties with reading despite normal intelligence.

the past is a different kind of country A phrase meaning that life was different in the past.

contradict Challenge what someone has said.

I'm of the generation where teachers didn't know what dyslexia was. The big problem with the education system then was that there was no compassion, no understanding and no humanity. I don't look back and feel angry with the teachers. The ones who wanted to have an individual approach weren't allowed to. The idea of being kind and thoughtful and listening to problems just wasn't done: **the past is a different kind of country**.

At school my ideas always **contradicted** the teachers'. I remember one teacher saying that human beings sleep for one-third of their life and I put my hand up and said, "If there's a God isn't that a design fault? If you've built something, you want efficiency. If I was God I would have designed sleep so we could stay awake. Then good people could do one-third more good in the world."

The teacher said, "Shut up, stupid boy. Bad people would do one-third more bad." I thought I'd put in a good idea. I was just being creative. She also had a point, but the thing was she called me stupid for even thinking about it.

I remember a teacher talking about Africa and the 'local savages' and I would say, "Who are you to talk about savages?" She would say, "How dare you challenge me?" – and that would get me into trouble.

Once, when I was finding it difficult to engage with writing and had asked for some help, a teacher said, "It's all right. We can't all be intelligent, but you'll end up being a good sportsperson, so why don't you go outside and play some football?" I thought, "Oh great", but now I realise he was **stereotyping** me.

stereotyping Making unwarranted assumptions about someone or something.

borstal A residential training centre for young people who are in trouble.

I had poems in my head even then, and when I was 10 or 11 my sister wrote some of them down for me. When I was 13 I could read very basically but it would be such hard work that I would give up. I thought that so long as you could read how much the banknote was worth, you knew enough or you could ask a mate.

I got thrown out of a lot of schools, the last one at 13. I was expelled partly because of arguing with teachers on an intellectual level and partly for being a rude boy and fighting. I didn't stab anybody, but I did take revenge on a teacher once. I stole his car and drove it into his front garden. I remember him telling us the Nazis weren't that bad. He could say that in the classroom. When I was in **borstal** I used to do this thing of looking at people I didn't want to be like. I saw a guy who spent all his time sitting stooped over and I thought, "I don't want to be like that", so I learned to sit with a straight back. Being observant helped me make the right choices.

A high percentage of the prison population are dyslexic, and a high percentage of the architect population. If you look at the statistics, I should