

TEDTalks, Jarrett J. Krosoczka

How a boy became an artist

00:12	Hello. My name is Jarrett Krosoczka, and I write and illustrate books for children for a living. So I use my imagination as my full-time job. But well before my imagination was my vocation, my imagination saved my life.
00:29	When I was a kid, I loved to draw, and the most talented artist I knew was my mother, but my mother was addicted to heroin. And when your parent is a drug addict, it's kind of like Charlie Brown trying to kick the football, because as much as you want to love on that person, as much as you want to receive love from that person, every time you open your heart, you end up on your back. So throughout my childhood, my mother was incarcerated and I didn't have my father because I didn't even learn his first name until I was in the sixth grade. But I had my grandparents, my maternal grandparents Joseph and Shirley, who adopted me just before my third birthday and took me in as their own, after they had already raised five children. So two people who grew up in the Great Depression, there in the very, very early '80s took on a new kid. I was the Cousin Oliver of the sitcom of the Krosoczka family, the new kid who came out of nowhere.
01:30	And I would like to say that life was totally easy with them. They each smoked two packs a day, each, nonfiltered, and by the time I was six, I could order a Southern Comfort Manhattan, dry with a twist, rocks on the side, the ice on the side so you could fit more liquor in the drink.
01:48	But they loved the hell out of me. They loved me so much. And they supported my creative efforts, because my grandfather was a self-made man. He ran and worked in a factory. My grandmother was a homemaker. But here was this kid who loved Transformers and Snoopy and the Ninja Turtles, and the characters that I read about, I fell in love with, and they became my friends. So my best friends in life were the characters I read about in books.
02:20	I went to Gates Lane Elementary School in Worcester, Massachusetts, and I had wonderful teachers there, most notably in first grade Mrs. Alisch. And I just, I can just remember the love that she offered us as her students.
02:36	When I was in the third grade, a monumental event happened. An author visited our school, Jack Gantos. A published author of books came to talk to us about what he did for a living. And afterwards, we all went back to our classrooms and we drew our own renditions of his main character, Rotten Ralph. And suddenly the author appeared in our doorway, and I remember him sort of sauntering down the aisles, going from kid to kid looking at the desks, not saying a word. But he stopped next to my desk, and he tapped on my desk, and he said, "Nice cat." (Laughter) And he wandered away. Two words that made a colossal difference in my life.
03:21	When I was in the third grade, I wrote a book for the first time, "The Owl Who Thought He Was The Best Flyer." (Laughter) We had to write our own Greek myth, our own creation story, so I wrote a story about an owl who challenged Hermes to a flying race, and the owl cheated, and Hermes, being a Greek god, grew angry and bitter, and turned the owl into a moon, so the owl had to live the rest of his life as a moon while he watched his family and friends play at night. Yeah. (Laughter)
03:53	My book had a title page. I was clearly worried about my intellectual property when I was eight. (Laughter) And it was a story that was told with words and pictures, exactly what I do now for a living, and I sometimes let the words have the stage on their own, and sometimes I allowed the pictures to work on their own to tell the story.
04:17	My favorite page is the "About the author" page. (Laughter) So I learned to write about myself in third person at a young age.
04:29	So I love that last sentence: "He liked making this book." And I liked making that book because I loved using my imagination, and that's what writing is. Writing is using your imagination on paper, and I do get so scared because I travel to so many schools now and that seems like such a foreign concept to kids, that writing would be using your imagination on paper, if they're allowed to even write now within the school hours. So I loved writing so much that I'd come home from school, and I would take out pieces of paper, and I would staple them together, and I would fill those blank pages with words and pictures just because I loved using my imagination.
05:07	And so these characters would become my friends. There was an egg, a tomato, a head of lettuce and a pumpkin, and they all lived in this refrigerator city, and in one of their adventures they went to a haunted house that was filled with so many dangers like an evil blender who tried to chop them up, an evil toaster who tried to kidnap the bread couple, and an evil microwave who tried to melt their friend who was a stick of butter. (Laughter) And I'd make my own comics too, and this was another way for me to tell stories, through words and through pictures.

05:43	Now when I was in sixth grade, the public funding all but eliminated the arts budgets in the Worcester public school system. I went from having art once a week to twice a month to once a month to not at all. And my grandfather, he was a wise man, and he saw that as a problem, because he knew that was, like, the one thing I had. I didn't play sports. I had art. So he walked into my room one evening, and he sat on the edge of my bed, and he said, "Jarrett, it's up to you, but if you'd like to, we'd like to send you to the classes at the Worcester Art Museum." And I was so thrilled. So from sixth through 12th grade, once, twice, sometimes three times a week, I would take classes at the art museum, and I was surrounded by other kids who loved to draw, other kids who shared a similar passion.
06:29	Now my publishing career began when I designed the cover for my eighth grade yearbook, and if you're wondering about the style of dress I put our mascot in, I was really into Bell Biv DeVoe and MC Hammer and Vanilla Ice at the time. (Laughter) And to this day, I still can do karaoke to "Ice, Ice Baby" without looking at the screen. Don't tempt me, because I will do it.
06:55	So I get shipped off to private school, K through eight, public schools, but for some reason my grandfather was upset that somebody at the local high school had been stabbed and killed, so he didn't want me to go there. He wanted me to go to a private school, and he gave me an option. You can go to Holy Name, which is coed, or St. John's, which is all boys. Very wise man, because he knew I would, I felt like I was making the decision on my own, and he knew I wouldn't choose St. John's, so I went to Holy Name High School, which was a tough transition because, like I said, I didn't play sports, and it was very focused on sports, but I took solace in Mr. Shilale's art room. And I just flourished here. I just couldn't wait to get to that classroom every day.
07:38	So how did I make friends? I drew funny pictures of my teachers – (Laughter) – and I passed them around. Well, in English class, in ninth grade, my friend John, who was sitting next to me, laughed a little bit too hard. Mr. Greenwood was not pleased. (Laughter) He instantly saw that I was the cause of the commotion, and for the first time in my life, I was sent to the hall, and I thought, "Oh no, I'm doomed. My grandfather's just going to kill me." And he came out to the hallway and he said, "Let me see the paper." And I thought, "Oh no. He thinks it's a note." And so I took this picture, and I handed it to him. And we sat in silence for that brief moment, and he said to me, "You're really talented." (Laughter) "You're really good. You know, the school newspaper needs a new cartoonist, and you should be the cartoonist. Just stop drawing in my class."
08:43	So my parents never found out about it. I didn't get in trouble. I was introduced to Mrs. Casey, who ran the school newspaper, and I was for three and a half years the cartoonist for my school paper, handling such heavy issues as, seniors are mean, freshmen are nerds, the prom bill is so expensive. I can't believe how much it costs to go to the prom. And I took the headmaster to task and then I also wrote an ongoing story about a boy named Wesley who was unlucky in love, and I just swore up and down that this wasn't about me, but all these years later it was totally me.
09:27	But it was so cool because I could write these stories, I could come up with these ideas, and they'd be published in the school paper, and people who I didn't know could read them. And I loved that thought, of being able to share my ideas through the printed page.
09:41	On my 14th birthday, my grandfather and my grandmother gave me the best birthday present ever: a drafting table that I have worked on ever since. Here I am, 20 years later, and I still work on this table every day. On the evening of my 14th birthday, I was given this table, and we had Chinese food. And this was my fortune: "You will be successful in your work." I taped it to the top left hand of my table, and as you can see, it's still there. Now I never really asked my grandparents for anything. Well, two things: Rusty, who was a great hamster and lived a great long life when I was in fourth grade. (Laughter) And a video camera. I just wanted a video camera. And after begging and pleading for Christmas, I got a second-hand video camera, and I instantly started making my own animations on my own, and all throughout high school I made my own animations. I convinced my 10th grade English teacher to allow me to do my book report on Stephen King's "Misery" as an animated short. (Laughter)
10:57	And I kept making comics. I kept making comics, and at the Worcester Art Museum, I was given the greatest piece of advice by any educator I was ever given. Mark Lynch, he's an amazing teacher and he's still a dear friend of mine, and I was 14 or 15, and I walked into his comic book class halfway through the course, and I was so excited, I was beaming. I had this book that was how to draw comics in the Marvel way, and it taught me how to draw superheroes, how to draw a woman, how to draw muscles just the way they were supposed to be if I were to ever draw for X-Men or Spiderman. And all the color just drained from his face, and he looked at me, and he said, "Forget everything you learned." And I didn't understand. He said, "You have a great style. Celebrate your own style. Don't draw the way you're being told to draw. Draw the way you're drawing and keep at it, because you're really good."

11:53	Now when I was a teenager, I was angsty as any teenager was, but after 17 years of having a mother who was in and out of my life like a yo-yo and a father who was faceless, I was angry. And when I was 17, I met my father for the first time, upon which I learned I had a brother and sister I had never known about. And on the day I met my father for the first time, I was rejected from the Rhode Island School of Design, my one and only choice for college.
12:21	But it was around this time I went to Camp Sunshine to volunteer a week and working with the most amazing kids, kids with leukemia, and this kid Eric changed my life. Eric didn't live to see his sixth birthday, and Eric lives with me every day.
12:34	So after this experience, my art teacher, Mr. Shilale, he brought in these picture books, and I thought, "Picture books for kids!" and I started writing books for young readers when I was a senior in high school. Well, I eventually got to the Rhode Island School of Design. I transferred to RISD as a sophomore, and it was there that I took every course that I could on writing, and it was there that I wrote a story about a giant orange slug who wanted to be friends with this kid. The kid had no patience for him. And I sent this book out to a dozen publishers and it was rejected every single time, but I was also involved with the Hole in the Wall Gang Camp, an amazing camp for kids with all sorts of critical illnesses, and it's those kids at the camp that read my stories, and I read to them, and I saw that they responded to my work.
13:22	I graduated from RISD. My grandparents were very proud, and I moved to Boston, and I set up shop. I set up a studio and I tried to get published. I would send out my books. I would send out hundreds of postcards to editors and art directors, but they would go unanswered. And my grandfather would call me every week, and he would say, "Jarrett, how's it going? Do you have a job yet?" Because he had just invested a significant amount of money in my college education. And I said, "Yes, I have a job. I write and illustrate children's books." And he said, "Well, who pays you for that?" And I said, "No one, no one, no one just yet. But I know it's going to happen."
13:58	Now, I used to work the weekends at the Hole in the Wall off-season programming to make some extra money as I was trying to get my feet off the ground, and this kid who was just this really hyper kid, I started calling him "Monkey Boy," and I went home and wrote a book called "Good Night, Monkey Boy." And I sent out one last batch of postcards. And I received an email from an editor at Random House with a subject line, "Nice work!" Exclamation point.
14:26	"Dear Jarrett, I received your postcard. I liked your art, so I went to your website and I'm wondering if you ever tried writing any of your own stories, because I really like your art and it looks like there are some stories that go with them. Please let me know if you're ever in New York City." And this was from an editor at Random House Children's Books.
14:44	So the next week I "happened" to be in New York. (Laughter) And I met with this editor, and I left New York for a contract for my first book, "Good Night, Monkey Boy," which was published on June 12, 2001.
15:00	And my local paper celebrated the news. The local bookstore made a big deal of it. They sold out of all of their books. My friend described it as a wake, but happy, because everyone I ever knew was there in line to see me, but I wasn't dead. I was just signing books. My grandparents, they were in the middle of it. They were so happy. They couldn't have been more proud. Mrs. Alisch was there. Mr. Shilale was there. Mrs. Casey was there. Mrs. Alisch cut in front of the line and said, "I taught him how to read." (Laughter)
15:34	And then something happened that changed my life. I got my first piece of significant fan mail, where this kid loved Monkey Boy so much that he wanted to have a Monkey Boy birthday cake. For a two-year-old, that is like a tattoo. (Laughter) You know? You only get one birthday per year. And for him, it's only his second. And I got this picture, and I thought, "This picture is going to live within his consciousness for his entire life. He will forever have this photo in his family photo albums."
16:05	So that photo, since that moment, is framed in front of me while I've worked on all of my books.
16:11	I have 10 picture books out. "Punk Farm," "Baghead," "Ollie the Purple Elephant." I just finished the ninth book in the "Lunch Lady" series, which is a graphic novel series about a lunch lady who fights crime. I'm expecting the release of a chapter book called "Platypus Police Squad: The Frog Who Croaked." And I travel the country visiting countless schools, letting lots of kids know that they draw great cats.
16:39	And I meet Bagheads. Lunch ladies treat me really well. And I got to see my name in lights because kids put my name in lights. Twice now, the "Lunch Lady" series has won the Children's Choice Book of the Year in the third or fourth grade category, and those winners were displayed on a jumbotron screen in Times Square. "Punk Farm" and "Lunch Lady" are in development to be movies, so I am a movie producer and I really do think, thanks to that video camera I was given in ninth grade. I've seen people have "Punk Farm" birthday parties, people have dressed up as "Punk Farm" for Halloween, a "Punk Farm" baby room, which makes me a little nervous for the child's well-being in the long term.

17:26	And I get the most amazing fan mail, and I get the most amazing projects, and the biggest moment for me came last Halloween. The doorbell rang and it was a trick-or-treater dressed as my character. It was so cool.
17:41	Now my grandparents are no longer living, so to honor them, I started a scholarship at the Worcester Art Museum for kids who are in difficult situations but whose caretakers can't afford the classes. And it displayed the work from my first 10 years of publishing, and you know who was there to celebrate? Mrs. Alisch.
17:59	I said, "Mrs. Alisch, how are you?"
18:00	And she responded with, "I'm here." (Laughter)
18:03	That's true. You are alive, and that's pretty good right now.
18:10	So the biggest moment for me, though, my most important job now is I am a dad myself, and I have two beautiful daughters, and my goal is to surround them by inspiration, by the books that are in every single room of our house to the murals I painted in their rooms to the moments for creativity where you find, in quiet times, by making faces on the patio to letting her sit in the very desk that I've sat in for the past 20 years. Thank you. (Applause)