

Dear Reader,

For me, growing up autistic is wrapped up a lot with my love of books, and comics especially. I used them all the time as an escape from a world that was incredibly overwhelming for me on a daily basis, both mentally and physically. But in spite of my love of comics, I never found any as a kid that I could really relate to. In most of the stories I read, characters never got anxious, and they spoke easily to others and always had conflict coming from the outside world rather than inside their own uncontrollable bodies. I used to feel so bad about myself, especially after meltdowns, wondering why I couldn't keep it together like these characters could. If there ever were any stories at all about autistic people, they were always very sad, serious, and focused on how terrible and emotionless it must be to be autistic.

When you're already struggling with low self-esteem and intense bullying as a kid, it sure doesn't help if the only characters who are anything like you are made out to have a miserable existence. I realized when I did grow up that the best way to deal with being awkward and anxious was to completely own it and be proud of it—even the bad times that come with it. This is how *Speak Up!* came about—I wanted to make a fun comic to escape into that could be relatable to all the autistic kids out there. With a hero who was brave (in an anxious kind of way) and inspiring (in an awkward kind of way).

I want all the autistic kids out there to finally feel proud of themselves and all their good and bad experiences!

Rebecca