

Robert Munsch

Author

Date of birth: June 11, 1945

Place of birth: Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Also known as: Robert Norman Munsch; Robert Norman Peter Maria Munsch

Education: Fordham University; Boston University; Tufts University

Significance: One of Canada's most popular children's authors, Robert Munsch has written numerous books based on real-life children and the things that intrigue them, from the need to go to the bathroom to their excitement at seeing authority figures caught in embarrassing moments.

Background

Robert Munsch was born on June 11, 1945, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, as the fourth of nine children born to Thomas and Margaret Munsch. A poor student in elementary school, he was a voracious reader, composed poetry, and loved science, but struggled with math, spelling, and classwork. After his high school graduation, he joined the Jesuits, a Catholic religious order, and trained to become a priest. During this time, he earned a bachelor's degree in history from Fordham University in 1969 and a master's degree in anthropology from Boston University in 1971.

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His anthropology studies caused him to reexamine his decision to become a priest. Unsettled by learning that all belief systems were relative, a concept at odds with many Catholic teachings, he decided to work with children in daycare centers while he reassessed his career goals.

Working with and Writing for Children

In the early 1970s, Munsch worked in daycare centers in places such as Boston and Coos Bay, Oregon, before relocating to Canada in 1975. He had also returned to school and received a master's degree in child studies from Tufts University in 1973.

In 1975, Munsch obtained a position as an associate professor in the family studies department at the University of Guelph and as a teacher in its laboratory preschool. Often working with few resources, Munsch had discovered early on in his career with preschool children that storytelling was an excellent way to engage and calm them. He created hundreds of stories and told them to his charges. At the University of Guelph, colleagues who overheard his stories encouraged him to write them down.

Taking two months off work, Munsch wrote a few stories and sent them to several publishers. One out of nine agreed to work with him, and his first book, *Mud Puddle*, was published in 1979. A picture book for preschoolers, it describes how a girl defeated a mud puddle that jumped out at her. A second picture book, *The*

Dark, appeared later that year. Munsch's books sold slowly at first, and he continued working at the university until 1984, when he left to write full time.

Munsch considers himself a storyteller more than a writer. He often performed as a storyteller at schools, festivals, concerts, libraries, daycares, and other venues. During his performances, he created stories on the spot, using ideas gleaned from real-life children. He selected one child as the main character and used the child's actual name in the story before refining the tale through further storytelling. Additionally, when he traveled he would stay with families rather than at hotels, and observing them would often inspire his stories.

Munsch's stories focus on children's concerns. They often start with routine activities, such as walking to school or going to bed, and then take a twist. For example, in *Thomas' Snowsuit* (1985), a young boy resists his teacher's and the school principal's efforts to have him put on his snowsuit. A struggle ensues and results in the teacher wearing the principal's suit and the principal wearing her dress, and Thomas readily putting on his snowsuit to go out to play. When he comes back inside, he gets the principal and teacher to switch clothes and put their own back on. Like many of Munsch's stories, it includes themes of self-determination, independence, and role reversal, with the adults being silly and the child getting them to act appropriately.

One of his other most popular books, *The Paper Bag Princess* (1980), was inspired by his wife. After she heard him tell a traditional princess story to a group of daycare students, she asked why it was the prince who saved the princess. Munsch created a new story where a princess saved the prince and then decided not to marry him because he did not meet her expectations. Munsch's best-selling book *Love You Forever* (1986) is based on the loss he and his wife had experienced when two of their children were stillborn. Narrated by a mother who promises to love and like her son always, it details their relationship from toddlerhood to adulthood—and to the mother's old age, when her son holds and rocks her in the chair in which she had once rocked him.

Honored with membership in the Order of Canada in 1999, Munsch reduced and largely stopped his touring after experiencing a stroke in 2008. Although he rarely tests his stories in front of a live audience, he responds to the hundreds of letters school children send him and often sends their classes an unpublished story. He was able to continue publishing books, including 2017's *The Enormous Suitcase*, using the many rough stories that he had already written down and kept on file.

Impact

Robert Munsch's more than sixty books have sold millions of copies and have been translated into several different languages. Almost all of the books he has published have remained in print long after they were first published, a rare feat for any author. Several books have been adapted for other purposes. *Love You Forever* served as the basis for a musical composition by Marjan Mozetich. Two Ontario schools have been named after him.

Personal Life

Munsch met his wife, Ann, at a Boston daycare center. They have three grown children: Julie, Andrew, and Tyra. A dog lover, Munsch has owned several dogs, including black poodles. His interests include stargazing, hiking, and *Star Trek*. He became a Canadian citizen and announced in 2010 that he had struggled with drug and alcohol addictions as well as mental health issues.

Principal Works

Mud Puddle, 1979

The Paper Bag Princess, 1980

Love You Forever, 1986

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