



**Robert Munsch**

**Teachingbooks.net Original In-depth  
Author Interview**

**Robert Munsch, interviewed in his home in Guelph, Ontario, on April 1, 2008.**

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** You are one of Canada’s most beloved children’s authors, and your books, including *Love You Forever* and *The Paper Bag Princess*, have sold millions upon millions of copies. What is this experience like for you?

**ROBERT MUNSCH:** In the United States, you walk into a bookstore, and there are 20 different books by Dr. Seuss. That’s the way it looks in Canada. People just know who I am. It feels wonderful. But it is not like I’m a rock star who has no life.

Once I was walking through the student union at the University of Western Ontario, and a girl looked up and said, “Bob Munsch?” I said, “Yes,” and the students started running to their rooms to get their copies of *Love You Forever* and *Paper Bag Princess*. I thought, “My goodness, they’re university students, and they kept these books.”

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** How did you become a writer?

**ROBERT MUNSCH:** I wasn’t a good writer in school, and I had trouble spelling, so I didn’t like to write. When I was a young adult, I was studying to be a Catholic priest. I worked in an orphanage on the weekends, and it was there that I discovered that I like working with little kids and telling stories to them. I didn’t think of it as a job, but just a neat thing to do.

Years later, I worked in a daycare center and had to keep the kids quiet during naptime. I started telling stories. They started remembering the stories and saying, “We like the one about the princess and the dragon. Tell that one again.” People heard me telling these stories and said, “You should write them down.” I said, “I don’t like to write. I’m not going to do it.” My boss said, “If you don’t write them down and send them to publishers, I’m going to fire you.” I wrote them down and sent them to 10 publishers. One said yes. I became a writer, even though I can’t spell.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What kind of environment did you grow up in?

**ROBERT MUNSCH:** I grew up in a family of nine kids in a large, 150-year-old farmhouse with an enormous yard that had apple trees, pear trees, peach trees, and sickle pear trees. I’m number four—I’m Bobby out of Mary, Margie, Tommy, Bobby, Dickey, Billy, Jimmy, Jackie, Kathy. I was the family clown, kind of the family nerd.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** You have published over 50 picture books. Where do your story ideas come from?

**ROBERT MUNSCH:** When writing my books, I almost always make up pretend stories about real kids in real situations. In *Stephanie's Ponytails*, for instance, Stephanie is a real girl from Durham, Ontario. She was a second grader who had this very long ponytail, all the way down to her knees. She was sitting in the front row of a group while I was making up stories. She wanted a new story. I told one about her ponytail. It became really good. I started telling it again and again.

Five years later, I wrote her a letter at her school that said, "I'm going to make this story into a book. If you want to be in it, send me a picture of yourself, your dog, your mother, your house, and your ponytail." She did. So in that story, Stephanie and the ponytail are real. The story isn't. I drag the stories around and tell them until they get good. That's my secret. Other times, kids write me letters, and I think they're neat, so I turn them into books.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What is your process of refining stories as you tell them?

**ROBERT MUNSCH:** I tell the stories in front of audiences and wait for something to happen. It's similar to a standup comic doing his schtick for an audience. Say I'm telling a story to 1,000 kids who are three, four, and five years old. I never tell the audience to join in. But when the kids start joining in on their own, I know I've got a winner. I did a book called *No Clean Clothes*. I said, "Lacy opened the top drawer of her dresser. No clean clothes. She opened the middle drawer. No ..." and the kids started joining in on their own with "No clean clothes." I want my stories to transcend cultural values and not be laden with information. In *No Clean Clothes*, I don't describe Lacy. It's just that she has no clean clothes.

I'll be performing an early version of *I Have to Go!*, and say, "I have to go pee." Little kids in the audience will nudge their parents and smile. And the adult will smile back. Then I've got them and believe the stories will work.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Your phenomenally popular book *Love You Forever* is an unusual story with the refrain of a mother rocking her son even as he becomes an adult. Near the end, the grown son rocks his ailing mother. Why did you write this story?

**ROBERT MUNSCH:** My wife and I had two stillborn babies, and this is the story of them growing up, even though it doesn't say that. *Love You Forever* makes people think about life and death and kids. Usually, people don't think about that; they just kind of live life. Also, in real life, a lot of families break apart. People see the mother and son separated in the book, and they cry.

For kids, *Love You Forever* is a story about growing up. For adults, it's about loving their children and, in a sense, losing them to adulthood. I was trying to get at the absolute parental love that hangs around into your adult life. We're all kind of uncomfortable with it. *Love You Forever* also led to me doing shows in hospitals. Parents found these performances to be useful when their kids were sick.

This is a very tricky story if you tell it wrong. If the kids figure out that the mother dies at the end, there's chaos. My regular publisher, Annick Press, didn't like it. Firefly Books published it, and it was the best-selling kid's book in Canada that year, selling 30,000 copies. The next year, it sold 70,000. We've sold about a million a year ever since, with no publicity.

Half of the letters I get are about that book. People say, "Our two-year-old just died, and we buried the book with him." Stuff like that.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** *The Paper Bag Princess*, which has sold about three million copies, has a very different tone—it is an inversion of the traditional prince and princess happily-ever-after story, because the princess saves the prince. What was your inspiration for this?

**ROBERT MUNSCH:** The mothers at the daycare where I worked didn't like me telling regular prince stories where the prince saved the princess, because most of the mothers were not married. I changed the ending, and then they liked the story.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** You love poetry, and several of your poems are featured on your website ([www.robertmunsch.com](http://www.robertmunsch.com)). Will you share your process of writing poems?

**ROBERT MUNSCH:** Many of the kids who write to me want me to send them a story. Well, that's kind of hard, but I can often write a quickie poem. So I respond to their letters with poems, and have many of them posted on my website. *Shadow, Shadow* is one of my favorite ones. A kid wrote me an email and said, "I need a shadow poem for school." So this is what I wrote: "My shadow in the morning / is very, very long / but by the time it's lunchtime / my shadow's almost gone. / It's grown again by dinner. / It's very long and thin. / It gets so big at nighttime / It lets the stars come in."

A boy named Caleb sent me a picture of himself playing with Legos. My son, Andrew, is a Lego freak. So this Lego idea clicked, and I wrote a Lego poem: "Caleb likes Lego / And Lego likes him. / They play well together / With vigor and vim." And so on.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Many of your books humorously explore situations that are stressful for kids and grownups. *Alligator Baby*, for instance, is about a girl whose parents bring home an alligator baby and other animal babies from the zoo instead of her new baby brother. The girl points out all the reasons that these creatures are not her brother. How did you come to imagine this story?

**ROBERT MUNSCH:** *Alligator Baby* puts the kid in charge in a situation where she feels quite helpless. All of a sudden, the mommy and daddy bring home a new baby. Life implodes for the older sibling. I wrote *Alligator Baby* for a girl named Kristin, whom I taught in nursery school. Her mother was going to have a baby. One day, she took all of the girls into the block room and shut the door. And then everyone heard all this noise. She was leading a birth class for all the five year olds. So I said, "This kid is definitely into birthing and babies." That's where that one came from.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** *I Have to Go!* is about the travails of toilet training and is also a very funny book. Why did you write this one?

**ROBERT MUNSCH:** That book is comic relief for both adults and kids about a situation that is not funny. My son, Andrew, was the worst pee-pee kid for a long time. People forget what a big issue toilet training is for adults and kids, and it is not fun, especially when you're in a car on the interstate. *I Have to Go!* works because it touches on the emotional tinge of trying to integrate a child into a family, and the child is peeing and pooping where you don't want him to.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What is one of your favorite examples of a story that derived from a letter a child sent you?

**ROBERT MUNSCH:** I wrote *From Far Away* after a kid sent me a letter about her first Halloween in Canada. She was a refugee from Lebanon and practically had a nervous breakdown because people dressed up in military costume. In Lebanon, when people were military, they shot you. I cried when I read her letter. I said, "I have to turn this into a book." I split royalties with the girl. Her letter was half the book.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Your website features many stories that have not yet been published.

Typically, how do you decide which story to publish next?

**ROBERT MUNSCH:** Scholastic has about 100 of my unpublished stories on hand. We'll get together and argue about which one is going to come next. When we decide on one, I'll start telling it like crazy, knowing that things can change a lot from that experience.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** How closely are you involved in picture decisions with Michael Martchenko, who has illustrated most of your books?

**ROBERT MUNSCH:** Michael and I work closely together. We have a book called *We Share Everything*, about two kids who shared clothes in kindergarten. He said, "You don't have a paint fight in this one, and I really wish you did because it would look nice." So I said, "Oh, yes, so we added it." And Michael made a very nice picture.

Michael is a Ukrainian war refugee who grew up in concentration camps and refugee camps and came to Canada in 1955. He had no childhood, no toys, no books, no nothing. And here he is today illustrating children's books.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What motivates you to write?

**ROBERT MUNSCH:** I just like it, which perhaps is a way of saying that I am an obsessive-compulsive person. My obsessive compulsiveness comes out in stories. I just do it. I'm sitting at a bus stop and looking at some kids and I say, "I've got a story there."

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** You have spoken publicly about your experiences of being manic and having OCD. Why do you share this information with your audiences?

**ROBERT MUNSCH:** A lot of kids don't feel that they're quite right for school. I think it helps them to look at me and think, "This is a writer. He must be a hero. Oh, look, he's got all kinds of troubles." That helps them identify with what I'm doing. I remember not liking school and not liking being a kid. If you don't remember childhood and you idealize it, you can't write books for kids because they're not real. Kids pick that up.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** During your school visits, what do you like to tell students?

**ROBERT MUNSCH:** If I'm visiting kindergarten, first, and second grades, I don't give speeches. I just tell stories. If I have 200 kindergarten kids in the gym, I'm trying to stay alive and keep them happy.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What do you like to tell teachers?

**ROBERT MUNSCH:** I tell them to let kids read a lot. I try to tell teachers they have a really hard job. If the kids can just manage reading, writing, and arithmetic, they're doing great.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What is a typical workday for you?

**ROBERT MUNSCH:** I'm home, I'll do what I call "book stuff." Things pile up—requests for things, or issues where people want to steal my story and make their own versions. But I spend a lot of time responding to letters from kids. I start to answer the letter, and then I write a story or poem for the kid. A child might ask, "Do you have a story about a cat?" I do have a couple of unpublished stories about cats. I'll drop one into my letter to that kid, and then I'll end up rewriting it. That might take a while, but a lot of what I do is just reacting to stuff kids send me.

When I'll get tired of that, or have a story to test, I'll say, "I'm going to go visit a school." Often, I show up unannounced. I'll be traveling somewhere, like Toronto, and I'll take along a letter I wrote to a second grade class at a school there. I'll hand-deliver the letter to the school. I'll say, "I need to talk to this second grade class."

I used to have trouble with the school secretaries. Once, I walked in to a school in a little town. The principal, first and second grade teachers, and the librarian were all out. The secretary was giving me a hard time. She said, "Well, sir, we don't allow access to our children, sir." There was a little kid nearby who'd knocked out a tooth and was spraying blood all over the secretary. The kid said, "He's a famous author. If you don't let him in, people are going to be very upset." Now, most of the secretaries recognize me.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What do you do when you get stuck?

**ROBERT MUNSCH:** I go out to a school or someplace and say, “Who wants to be in a new story?” And a kid sticks up his hand. And if nothing comes to mind, I say to the other people, “Tell me about this kid,” until something clicks. And then I tell a story.

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For more information about Robert Munsch and his books, go to <http://teachingbooks.net/>. Questions regarding this program should be directed to [info@teachingbooks.net](mailto:info@teachingbooks.net).

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