Robert Munsch: an interview

David Kondo

Robert Munsch estimates that he has told over 700 different stories of his own making. He has little difficulty making up impromptu stories in front of an audience and delivering them with the style and flamboyant manner that one would expect to come only with many tellings.

The transformation from storyteller to published author has made Munsch one of Canada's best known writers. *The paper bag princess,* his most successful publication, is presently in its eighth print run. On the average, Annick Press releases two of Munsch's stories per year. Munsch's books have received international recognition. They have been distributed in Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand, France, the Netherlands, and the Scandinavian countries.

Seeing Robert Munsch perform before an audience of elementary school children at Cambridge, Ontario, in April, 1985, afforded me some insight into his storytelling technique and success as a storyteller. He starts with a slow, clear delivery to secure the children's interest and understanding. His manner of playing with words is a source of humour and emphasis, as, for example, "are you *crrraaazee*?" Munsch encourages the audience's participation and involvement by such techniques as the repetition of key phrases, the stringing out of a word like "NNNNNO!" so that the audience can say it too, and the substitution of the names of audience members for the names of the characters in his stories. By using the interests and experiences of children for his story's content, Munsch generates audience involvement in his tale. Munsch performs actions which are copied by the children. When he delivers the line, "They argued and argued and argued and...", he rocks from side to side, and the entire audience sways with him. The speed of his delivery, which changes to suit the mood of the story, can become fast and frantic, generating excitement and conveying the action. His movements, facial expressions, and strange sounds create a charged atmosphere that adds to the impact of his story. Does Munsch's technique work? Definitely! During the storytelling, there were lots of ooohs, giggles, and roars of laughter from the children. The teachers and the grade fives enjoyed themselves as much as the grade ones.

An indication of Munsch's range as a storyteller is that his low key stories are as successful with his audience as his uproarious ones. One of the best stories told on the afternoon that I listened to him was a lullaby story. The children were just as involved in the soft singing of the lullaby and the accompanying

rocking motion as they were in the actions of the more energetic stories.

The following interview with Robert Munsch took place on April 3, 1985, at an elementary school in Cambridge, Ontario. A portion of the interview preceded Munsch's storytelling sessions, and the rest of the interview occurred during a break between sessions. In this interview, Munsch talks about storytelling, story content, and the transformation of the oral story to book form.

KONDO: You're a storyteller first and foremost. Are there boundaries in your own mind between storytelling and the writing of stories?

MUNSCH: Yes. As a storyteller, I can use delivery techniques to make the story work. But it doesn't mean the story's necessarily good when I get it down on paper. When it's down on paper, the story has to work no matter who reads it. It's like when a really good singer does a song. You say, "Hey, that's a really good song." But, when you try to sing it yourself, you say, "Yes, but it's not really that good." So, if I'm writing a story, it has to be one that works most of the time no matter who is reading it to the kid. It has to be a really good story.

KONDO: Your stories are very popular with adults. Do you create stories keeping in mind adults as part of your audience?

MUNSCH: That's very strange because, when I'm relating to an audience of kids, what I'm thinking about then is keeping the kids happy.

KONDO: But, in terms of the written story, the humour involved appeals to a general audience. For example, in *Jonathan cleaned up — then he heard a sound,* the final illustration shows that the mayor, who was so indifferent to Jonathan's plight [when a subway station was situated in Jonathan's house because of a computer error], is about to have his office turned into a subway station.

MUNSCH: With that story, the illustrator Michael Martchenko was looking at the text, and he said "Look, we can drop out the text for the last picture." But, when I tell the story, I can't just sit there mute (laughs). I say, "Jonathan told his mother there would be no more subways here and he was right. When the mayor came back from lunch, he was sitting in his office when he heard a sound. It was coming from behind the wall. He put his ear up against the wall and said 'That sounds like a train'. The wall OPENED right up. Thousands of people came out. They ran all around the room. They picked up the mayor, they picked up his desk, they picked up his potted palm and went out the front door. And that's the end of the story." Now, that part of the text dropped out in the book because we thought it would be funnier to have a visual ending.

KONDO: That's interesting. I have a friend who performed that story at the storytelling school in Toronto. She ended it just at the point where the mayor heard a sound in the wall. So I wondered how you did it.

MUNSCH: Well, when I do it for really little kids, they don't catch subtleties like that. It has to be sent to them by Western Union. They're just not too good at catching things like that.

KONDO: In *Jonathan cleaned up,* the inclusion of familiar signposts such as

the TTC appeals to readers who live in Toronto. Did you request that the Toronto area be depicted?

MUNSCH: That was Michael's idea. I'm trying to remember. We might have asked him to put some Toronto stuff in it but, you see, it's more complicated than that. For somebody in Toronto, it's a Toronto story because it has Old City Hall and all that stuff. But it's not Toronto. The reason that we used Old City Hall instead of new City Hall is because Old City Hall looks more like any city hall you're ever going to see. And things like this [indicating the picture on the last page of *Jonathan cleaned up*]. For a Canadian, that's a Canadian flag. But for somebody in France, it's just a flag. The publishers wanted to sell the book internationally, so it has local colour which you recognize if you are local but which can also be generalized.

KONDO: Does your being American-born, or your being labelled as a Canadian author, influence your thoughts on using Canadian content?

MUNSCH: Well, I'm a Canadian citizen. My views on Canadian content are that I'm living in Canada and I'm a Canadian citizen and I'm telling stories to keep *these kids* happy, and they're Canadian stories. I don't have to drag a Mountie and two beavers out to make it a Canadian story. I just don't worry about that issue at all. I want a good story. It's a funny thing. Nobody says to Maurice Sendak, "What's the American content in your stories?" I said to the publisher, "All my books are dedicated to kids. They're all Canadian kids from very specific places. Why don't we put, 'To Jule Ann in Guelph' or 'To Jennifer in Fort Qu'Appelle' or 'Thomas comes from Halifax'?" For me, the stories are about particular kids in particular places. The first kid that I made up the story about stays as the character in the story. But there are no beavers in those stories.

KONDO: Your major characters are children who are independent and who cope well with their situations. Their ability to cope is emphasized because their situations are so fantastic. For example, in *Jonathan cleaned up,* Jonathan's dealings with city hall bureaucracy stem from a subway station being placed in his home. That's not a likely occurrence! Do you intentionally portray the adult world as being sort of a silly place at times?

MUNSCH: I think I have this basic view of the world: the world doesn't quite work. This comes out in my stories where things are definitely not working. Everything is all mucked up. I think that reflects *my* world view coming out in my stories. It's not the adult world that's mucked up; EVERYTHING is mucked up!

KONDO: Your stories provide non-sexist role models. Is this something that you are consciously trying to do when you make up stories?

MUNSCH: I think it's because of the way I think. My wife and I, until very recently, always split our jobs, always split taking care of the kids, and we split a professorship half-time at the University of Guelph. One of the reasons I had a male go off with the baby in *Murmel murmel murmel* was that I was ticked

off that nobody would believe I stayed home two days a week with the kids. They always said, "Oh no, you're really staying home to write."
KONDO: How do you decide when a story is ready to commit to print?
MUNSCH: How do I decide when one is printable? The snowsuit story [not yet published at the time of the interview] is three years old now and gets audience reaction in spite of itself. It just works so nicely. But if you notice, with some of the ones I made up on the spot, the kids will sit there and they'll like them but the words aren't right yet. I don't know how to explain it, except to say that the words aren't right. The structure isn't right and it just takes a long time to get it right. A lot of stories I tell just drop out. Finally, some get to the point where I think that they're acceptable. The question then of what story becomes a book is a discussion with my publisher. I have ten stories that are ready for books now. I want one, and they want the other. Usually, an author goes to a publisher with one book, and they take it or not. But I have this weird sort of thing where the publishers come to my storytellings. . .
KONDO: So it's a joint decision of what is to be published. They decide on the basis of what's going to sell well?
MUNSCH: That's their bottom line. If it doesn't sell, then it's out in the cold.
KONDO: So you present as many acceptable stories as you can?
MUNSCH: Yes.
KONDO: Your latest story to be published [before this interview] is *Millicent and the wind.* When I first looked at that story, I noticed that it wasn't Michael Martchenko doing the artwork. I also noticed that it's not your usual "off the wall" presentation. The mood, particularly because of Suzanne Duranceau's artwork, is much more laid back and low key. Is there a reason for the difference in style?
MUNSCH: My stories aren't published in the order that they were developed. *Millicent* is one of my oldest stories. That's one of the original daycare, naptime stories. It's a quiet-them-down naptime story, so it's much more laid back than the kind I do now in front of an audience, where the idea is to whoop them up. There's a difference in tone and a difference in purpose.
KONDO: What caused the delay in publishing *Millicent and the wind*?
MUNSCH: When I first sent stories to Annick, I sent them *Mud puddle* and *Millicent.* So *Millicent* was one of the first stories they got, and they really liked it but they didn't think they had an illustrator for it. They were sitting on it for five years and then, all of a sudden, they called me up. I had a contract on another story signed and delivered, and they said, "We've changed our minds. We've found an illustrator for *Millicent*!" They showed me some proofs, and I said, "Well, that looks like it will float."
KONDO: How much input do you have into the artwork for your books?
MUNSCH: It depends. With Michael Martchenko, I've gradually had less and less because I find that I just like what he does and I trust him to come up with neat ideas. Still, compared to a lot of writers, I have a lot of input. Michael

will do pencil roughs of major characters, and I'll look at them and say, "That's what Shelley really looks like" or "No, that's too old or too young." Then he comes with the sketchboard of the whole thing, and we go over it. Then he does a colour picture, and then he does them all in colour. There's lots of room for give and take. In fact, with Michael, it's mostly that he gives and the publisher and I take. There was one major disaster, however. For *David's father,* the distributor called up six months before we thought we needed anything and said, "We need the cover illustration to put into the catalogue." It was a rush job. Michael had to do the cover, but the publisher, who gave him the text, didn't tell him that the girl in the story, Julie (Julie is my daughter), is half Jamaican, and has curly hair and brown skin. So he comes back on the day for the cover to be photographed with this picture of a blond-haired, blue-eyed, Caucasian kid. He had varnished the picture, so he couldn't add any colour to it. I was just freaking out. This was Julie's story; it was dedicated to her. Finally, he taped over Julie with scotch tape and coloured the scotch tape with magic marker. They photographed the cover like that. But the problem was that he could change her colour but he couldn't curl her hair. When Julie first saw it, she said, "What's the matter with my hair?"

KONDO: In an article published as part of *Meet the Author Kit #4* (Children's Book Centre), you said, "I don't think about the story visually, when I'm telling it. I think about it sonically. In telling the story, there is an inter-active thing with the audience. I don't have time to visualize what it looks like." I tend to think of a story as a series of images or a movie unravelling in my mind. Now, you don't do that, right?

MUNSCH: No, I don't have a heavy visual bias. When the artist comes with the picture, I don't say, "That doesn't look like — whatever."

KONDO: When you made up the story [during that afternoon's storytelling session] about the child who didn't want a spelling lesson, how did that story come to you then?

MUNSCH: Okay, how did that come to mind? For me, that story was a couple of simple elements — what I call repetition sequences — where the teacher keeps telling the boy in the story, "No, you're not going to do that." The story is built around the concept of kid versus power structure. Kids love that. I mean, really, in school you have to eat your spinach and sit still. You know, you have to go to bed at night...

KONDO: Yes. Most of the stories tend to be about situations which are contrary to the setting that they're found in.

MUNSCH: You see, my stories are to kids what spy novels are to adults. It's this fantasy that "I'm a great spy and I'm saving the world", even though I'm not saving the world. And kids like stories about other kids picking up the teacher and the principal precisely because that's the opposite of what really does go on.

KONDO: When you tell a new story to children during a storytelling session

and you think it's good, do you ever have trouble recalling it?
MUNSCH: If it's really good, I usually don't have any trouble remembering it. For example, I made up the birthday party story [told in the story-telling session prior to this part of the interview] in November of last year for a little girl's birthday party. When I was done, it had worked so well that it was like, "Oh Wow". I didn't have any trouble remembering it. I have a story list [pulls out list]. This is my list of ongoing stories. These are ones that I've made up recently, and I stick new stories on the bottom of the list. If I can remember the title, I can remember the story. It has sometimes happened that I don't get a title down, and I'll remember that at such-and-such a school, I had a story that the kids really liked, but I can't remember it. Sometimes, the kids have written from a school and said, "We really liked the frog story." You know, fifty kids will write and say that they liked the frog story, but I can't remember what it was (laughs). So I don't always remember.
KONDO: Have you ever thought about taping yourself at storytelling sessions?
MUNSCH: Yes, I thought about it, but I've never done it (laughs).
KONDO: You were saying that *Millicent and the wind* was one of your first stories and that it's a quieting-down story. These days, do you concentrate entirely on doing high energy, active stories or do you ever come up with low key stories anymore?
MUNSCH: I'll tell a low key one in my next storytelling session. I have another low key one that I'm working on. I'll tell it to the school group.
KONDO: I noticed that you used the kids' input to generate a story. You used their experiences and interests. How much do you put of your own personal history and your own interests into a story?
MUNSCH: I don't think I put my own personal history into a story. No, I take it back. *David's father* was a story I made up for my daughter at bedtime. It was a very personal story, but it jumped into my public storytelling. Usually my personal stories don't. They stay at home with my own kids. Specifically, for my daughter, *David's father* was a story that justified interracial adoption to her, because we got her when she was five and a half. She helped me construct it. It was rolling along at home for a long time. I was very surprised by the response when I tried it once in public. It meant something absolutely different to the audience. Nobody said, "It's about interracial adoption." Nobody catches that at all.
KONDO: Why are you a good storyteller?
MUNSCH: I think I'm a good storyteller because I really respect kids as an audience. In a sense, I'm keeping them happy. I don't solicit participation from an audience of children. A lot of children's performers will say "Now you're all going to sing the following jingle. La dee da da da..."
KONDO: I noticed that the kids just jump in on your stuff.
MUNSCH: To have the kids just jump in means that it has to be really good stuff. So, by not being fakesy with an audience, I force myself into a position

where my stories have to be good. I respect kids as an audience and I have a very quick, disorganized thinking style. I've never been very good at scholarship or university, or more formal logical set-ups, but I have a very good, scrambly, informal, fast way of thinking. And that's good in front of an audience because, when I'm making up a story, I'm making it up and delivering it at the same time.

KONDO: And I noticed that, when you did that one made-up story, I couldn't tell that you hadn't been working on it for years. You know what you're doing as storyteller.

MUNSCH: I keep thinking that I've figured myself out as a writer and a storyteller. I get this sort of abstract idea of my function and, usually, my next story screws up my theory!

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Jonathan cleaned up — then he heard a sound; or blackberry subway jam. Illus. by Michael Martchenko. Toronto: Annick, 1981.
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Angela's airplane. Illus. by Michael Martchenko. Toronto: Annick, 1983.
David's father. Illus. by Michael Martchenko. Toronto: Annick, 1983.
The fire station. Illus. by Michael Martchenko. Toronto: Annick, 1983.
Mortimer. Illus. by Michael Martchenko. Toronto: Annick, 1983.
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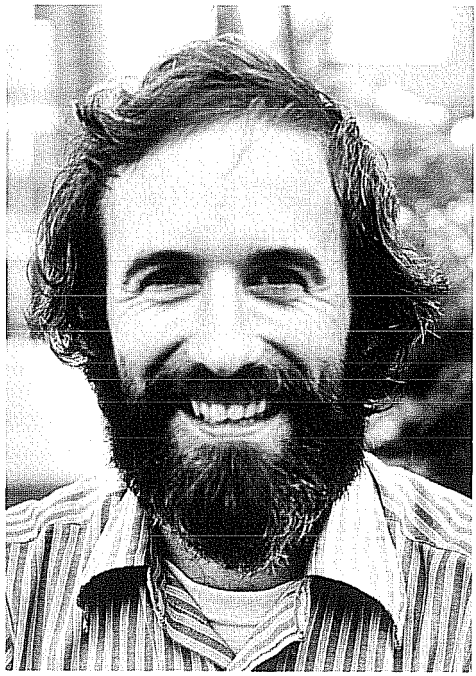

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