

Whatever you make of it

Robert Munsch

In 1972 I was a student teacher at a nursery school near Boston. On the day when I was supposed to do my first circle time I came with a lot of small containers full of corn. They made a lot of noise when rattled. I gave them to the kids and then told a sort of story-song that I had made up the night before. It was about a little boy named Mortimer who did not want to go to bed. He kept singing:

Clang, clang, rattle bing bang,
Gonna make my noise all day.
Clang, clang, rattle bing bang,
Gonna make my noise all day.

I had made up the song the night before and was quite proud of it. Every time I sang it the kids would shake their containers and a nice loud time was had by all. The story went over so well that the children kept asking for it. I even told it to my sister's children the next time I visited her. When I called her later she said that her children had taught it to the whole neighborhood and even made a play out of it. "You should get it published," she said.

At the time, my wife and I were living in a tent looking for the perfect place to live or else just waiting for our money to run out. Publishing was an alien idea and besides I found it more threatening than evading scorpions in Arizona. Also, Mortimer was not even written down and I hated to write. I had always hated to write because I could not spell. (Maybe I should have listened to my sister. When Mortimer was finally published ten years later I dedicated it to her children).

So *Mortimer* was the first story I made up even though it was not the first to be published. Its structure grew out of the simple fact that three and four-year-olds do not like to be lectured at. As nursery school teachers soon find out, the best way to keep a group of them interested is to let them participate in some way. *Mortimer* is, in fact, half way between a story and a song. Like a lot of my stories, it spread by word of mouth and by the time it was published there were lots of daycares in Ontario using it as an oral story.

Mortimer went over so well that I continued to storytell whenever I worked with young children. I soon noticed that while I made up lots of stories, there were only a few that the children kept requesting to hear again and again. They

were the good ones. For most of this time I was working in daycare centres or nursery schools and usually making up a new story every day. I figured out once that the stories the children kept requesting came to 2% of my total output.

When the children kept requesting a story, it went through rapid evolution in plot and structure as I told it day after day. Often a good story would start out with an idea that the children liked (getting jumped on by a mud puddle was one) which was not backed up by much of anything. As the story evolved, it developed the structure and style of presentation that made it into an interactive participation sequence with the children. The more the children yelled out predictable repetition elements or imitated sound effects and gestures, the more they stayed put.

Note that at this period of my life I did not think of stories as things in themselves, but rather as little machines that kept kids happy and occupied. They existed only in interaction with the audience, were not written down and did not even have titles. Children requested stories by content or else they asked by the names of the child in the story. The names were especially meaningful because I used the names of the children I was working with at the time. So, "Tell Shelly" referred to a particular story.

When I got a job at the University of Guelph laboratory nursery school, I suddenly found myself in an environment where people got raises and kept their jobs by publishing. The laboratory school director, Bruce Ryan, and his wife, Nancy (a children's librarian!), both urged me to do something about my stories. So I started writing them down. At first I made the mistake of attempting to change my stories into what I considered good writing. They were terrible. Finally I tried keeping the text as close as possible to the oral version and that worked.

I think it worked because children's books are read aloud. It so happened that the oral version read quite well as long as I stuck to the oral version. In fact, the written text tended to lead to the same type of interactive participation that children liked in the oral version.

For me, writing often consists in coming up with a good oral story and then dictating it to myself as I type. Getting a good oral story takes at least three years of telling. The basic plot settles quite soon but the vital word changes that make a participation story work come very slowly. Often it is a case of finding the exact words that the kids expect will come next. Here is an example of what I mean from a later story:

That is the ugliest thing I have seen in my life. If you think that I am going to put on that ugly snowsuit, you are CRAZY.

This simple fragment is a storyteller's dream, a perfect sentence; because if I say it in a certain way an audience of young children will join in on the word "crazy" even though they have never heard the story before. Actually, they don't join in on the whole word. They join in on the "zy".

I rate choral response elements in stories according to how many times I have to say them before the kids *spontaneously* join in. Thus in the *Mud puddle* story “Mommy, mommy, mommy! A mud puddle jumped on me” has a rating of three because I have to say it at least three times before kids will join in on their own when they are hearing the story for the first time. “Crazy” in the above example has a rating of one half because the kids join in (sometimes) when I am only half of the way through the word. It is very difficult to come up with that kind of wording. The above example did not appear in the story until I had been telling it for two years.

I think that “crazy” works there because it is the exact word that kids expect based on context and delivery. If I were to say “strange” or “dumb as a lobotomized dodo” the kids would not join in.

Now the link between a text that tells well and a text that reads well is not self evident. It took me a while to figure out that the books that were selling best were often the ones that were best developed orally. Once I figured that out, my writing of my oral stories became a lot easier. Munsch the writer simply wrote what Munsch the storyteller dictated.

But some of my stories are not oral stories and one is half and half. The half and half one is *Jonathan cleaned up*. It was a little story fragment that I used to tell about a boy whose house got turned into a subway station. Ann Millyard and Rick Wilks, from Annick Press, heard me tell it at a Toronto bookstore. They decided to publish it so I wrote the story and added an ending. The first part of the story is a simple oral participation story. The whole city hall part is written text. The two parts are really quite different. That second part of *Jonathan* was my first bit of regular written English. The book sold and I decided to try it again.

Murmel, murmel, murmel isn't an oral story at all. This led to an interesting problem when school audiences requested the story. If there were too many kids (say 400) it didn't work to read the book, as most of the people could not see the pictures. So I ended up developing an oral version of the story that works for storytelling.

I wrote *Murmel* just after we adopted our first child and it was, for me, a statement about adoption. Now it is not a very clear statement about adoption. I hate clear statements because they only mean what they mean. Unclear statements have the nice effect of meaning whatever they mean to whomever they mean it to and if various meanings appeal to various groups then the book sells more. Unfortunately, the one group that *Murmel* sometimes does not appeal to is adoptive parents, who are the one group I had especially in mind. They get upset because the book is about rejection as well as acceptance.

While I am on the topic of adoption, *David's father* is about adoption. More specifically it is about interracial adoption and the group I wrote it for was my family because nobody else ever gets that out of it. This brings up the problem of multilevel meanings. *David's father* means a lot of different things to

different people and to lots of people it is a funny story that does not mean anything at all.

One child wrote me and said, "I like *David's father* because my father is just like David's father only smaller." For this child, *David's father* functioned like a traditional giant story.

Is the child correct?

Yes, the child is correct; because I want my stories to mean different things to different people. I spend time getting them to do that. So the correct answer to, "What does a Munsch story mean?" is, "To whom?". If you are the reader then you are the arbiter of the meaning. I set it up that way. Besides, I have probably changed my mind several times about what the story meant since I wrote it down. So your own meaning is yours. You as the reader own the story. Have fun.

Robert Munsch is one of Canada's best known storytellers.