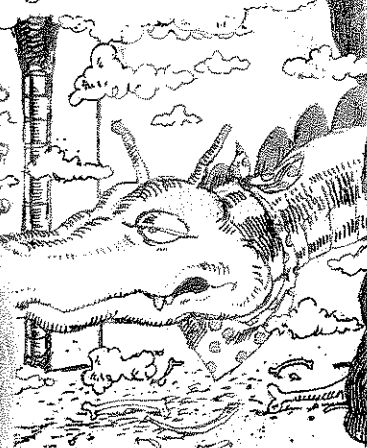


STEPHANIE'S PONYTAIL

Story by Robert Munsch Art by Michael Martchenko

The Paper Bag Princess COVER STORY

COVER STORY



Art by Michael Martchenko

CLASSIC

MUNSCH

PIGS

SNOWSUIT



Story by Robert Munsch



Story by Robert Munsch
Art by Michael Martchenko

The storyteller

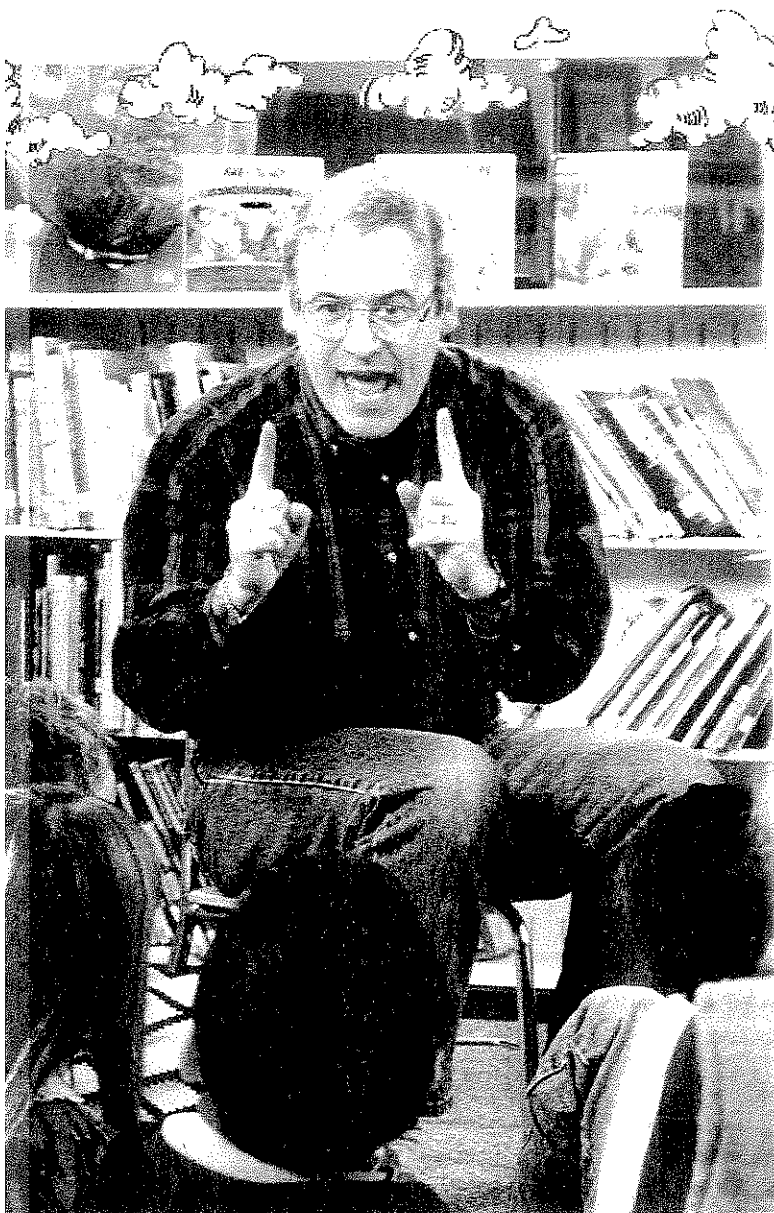
Beloved Canadian children's author Robert Munsch still has stories to tell

BY KIRA VERMOND

A SELF-CONFIDENT princess wearing nothing but a brown paper bag. A little guy named Mortimer who refuses to be quiet. Sixty-four gazillion mosquitoes and blackflies that actually like bug spray. And, of course, the mother who vows to love her son forever.



CONTINUED ON PAGE 20



ANNICK PRESS

† Munsch captivates en during story time in his writing career.

THE STORYTELLER
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 19

For nearly four decades, Robert Munsch, author and Costco member, has created some of Canada's most endearing—and enduring—books for young children. Classics like *The Paper Bag Princess* and *Love You Forever* have sold tens of millions of copies in dozens of languages around the world. A natural storyteller, Munsch has been known to mesmerize 4,000 children in large stadium shows using nothing but a story, his voice and his startlingly (and hilariously) malleable face. In fact, Munsch is not only a household name, but kids actually know how to spell it.

Yet ask the author to list some of the awards and accolades his books have earned over the years and he shakes his head. None. (For the record, that's not exactly true. Besides a couple of lit awards early in his career, he's

also won a Juno for Best Children's Album, has a star on the Walk of Fame in Toronto and was made a Member of the Order of Canada. Which, of course, is nothing to sneeze at.)

But for Munsch, winning literary prizes handed out by adults has never been the point. The books are, first and foremost, written solidly from a child's perspective, reflecting, in technicolour, the weird frustrations and laugh-out-loud subversive silliness that kids live with on a regular basis.

"Kids like stories that kids like," says Munsch, speaking of his books' appeal to the kindergarten set. "That's a wonderful thing."

His innate ability to tap into children's psyches can likely be traced back to two different eras. First there was his childhood, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where he tramped around the woods near his home and, as a quiet kid, day-dreamed about becoming a superhero who might someday save the world. He says he did more day-dreaming and getting into trouble than studying.

"It was a great place to be a kid," he says. "Except they sent me to school."

A cure for writer's block:

As for the second era, Munsch says that his books are linked to the years he spent working at daycare centres, first in Oregon, then in Guelph, Ontario, where he still lives with his wife, Ann—and where this reporter interviewed him.

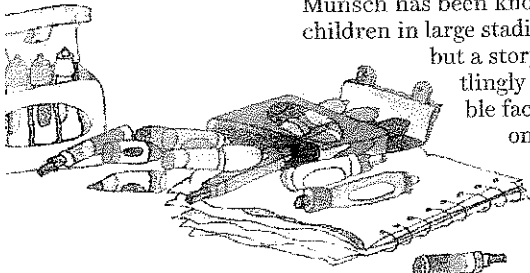
Back in the late '70s, in order to settle down the toddlers and preschoolers in nursery school, he'd make up stories on the fly. Some of them were hits that the kids asked for again and again.

"They were my organic book editors," he says now of the kids. It took him 10 years to start writing any of the stories down.

After sending out the manuscript of *Mud Puddle* to a dozen publishers, it was finally picked up and landed on shelves in 1979. Other books, such as *David's Father* and *The Paper Bag Princess*, soon followed. To date, more than 50 Robert Munsch books and numerous treasuries are in print, although that number is always heading in one direction: up.

For years Munsch used his classroom and library author visits to find inspiration for new stories. Half storyteller, half improv comedian, he would ask his pint-sized audience for ideas and then go to work weaving new stories, turning the best of them into books.

Against this backdrop, Munsch's popularity as an entertainer began to grow, selling out





arenas, halls and theatres across Canada and points beyond.

"I always found that a wonderful cure for writer's block is to get out in front of a thousand kids and say, 'I'm going to tell you a story that's not written down. As a matter of fact, I don't have the foggiest idea what the story is going to be, and then yell out, 'What's an idea for a story?'"

Inspiration on the road

Michael Martchenko, Munsch's main illustrator, created the whimsical, energetic images for *The Paper Bag Princess*, *I Have to Go*, *Mortimer*, *Put Me in a Book* and dozens of other classics. He remembers the first time he participated in a presentation with Munsch, in Toronto. The experience floored him.

"Robert's a very quiet, gentle person. Then, when he goes onstage, he turns into a madman and the kids just go berserk," Martchenko tells *The Connection* from his home in Toronto. "This guy, all he needs is a flute and a feather in his cap, and he could get all the rats out of the village. Holy cow. It's a transformation."

Inspiration for Munsch's books came from other sources too. Years ago, while travelling to the Yukon for presentations at schools in remote locations that were lucky to have a convenience store, never mind a hotel, Munsch stayed with local families. Soon, he rarely travelled any other way. And for good reason. Sitting with his hosts around the dinner table, he started paying atten-

tion to family dynamics and "spying" on the kids. The book *Get Me Another One* was inspired by a fishing family in Rocky Harbour, Newfoundland.

Two hundred to go

Munsch confesses he misses touring. After a number of strokes and heart attacks in recent years—and periods of mental illness he has admitted to treating through self-medication—he has retired from the frantic pace of shows, readings and book signings.

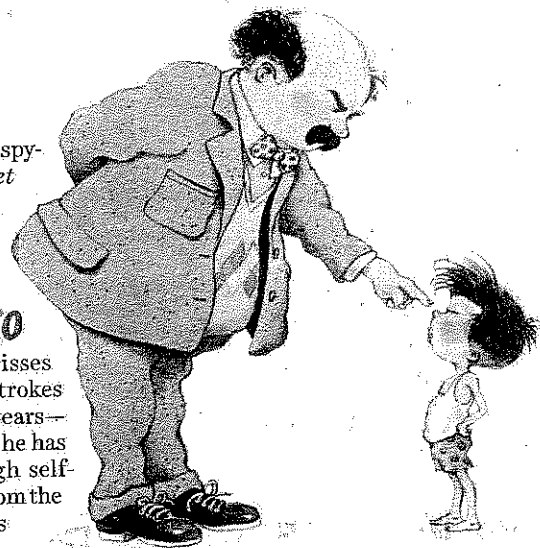
But that doesn't mean Munsch has stopped writing or publishing books. He just doesn't bother coming up with new story concepts. He doesn't have to. He's got a whopping 200-book-idea backlog to get through.

"A couple of years ago I said, 'Why am I running around getting new stories when I have about 200 unpublished stories in my files?'" he tells *The Connection*.

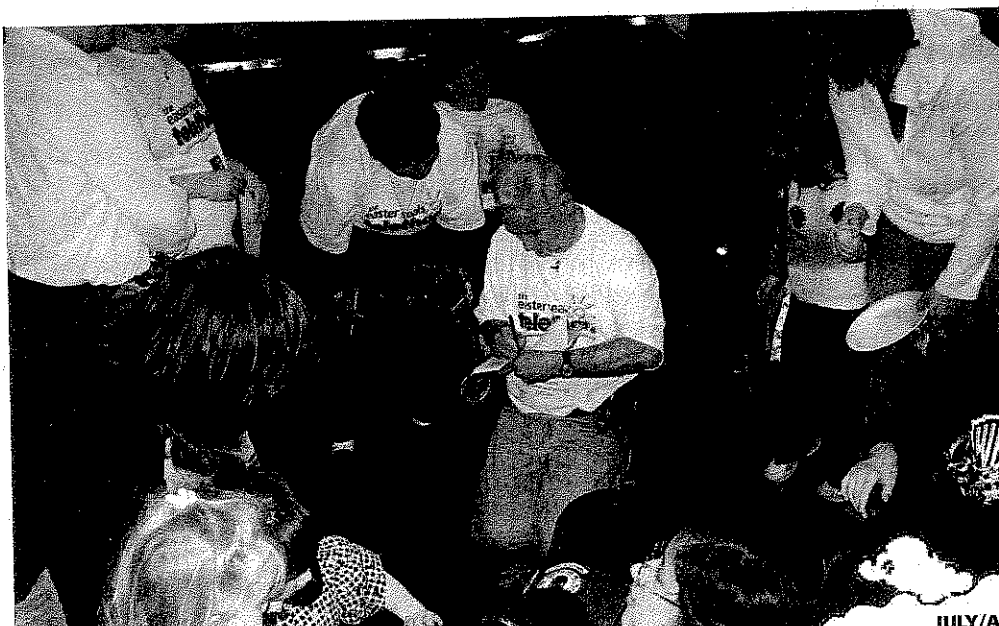
One of his more recent books, *Blackflies*, is illustrated by Jay Odjick, a writer, artist and television producer from the Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg community near Ottawa. When he got the call to create the images in the story, he jumped right in.

"Being a First Nations artist and being able

CONTINUED ON PAGE 22



“Half storyteller, half improv comedian, he would ask his pint-sized audience for ideas and then go to work weaving new stories, turning the best of them into books.”



Robert Munsch signing books at a 2006 Easter Seals telethon.



THE STORYTELLER
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 21

to do a Munsch book is huge,” says Odjick. “To have that name value and do a book set in a First Nations community with First Nations characters is just a game changer.”

The book is about a girl named Helen (like many of Munsch’s characters, she’s based on an actual girl—this time from Fort McMurray, Alberta) who takes matters into her own hands when springtime blackflies and mosquitoes attack. Odjick didn’t speak to Munsch while he was working on the book, which is common for illustrators and authors working together for the first time. Even so, he felt his contribution mattered, particularly now as he tours indigenous communities and presents at schools and libraries himself.

“It’s been a real treat to hear from parents and kids who are super excited to have a great book by an author they love that features kids who look like them for the first time,” he says. “Yeah, that’s really amazing.”

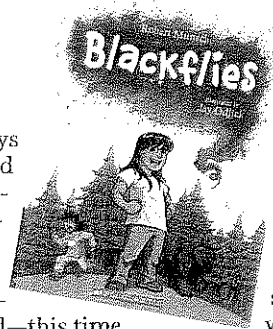
Luck, talent and a princess

Like Odjick, Martchenko considers himself fortunate that his path crossed Munsch’s. He calls it “serendipity” and “pure luck.”

The illustrator, a household name in his own right, was working in the advertising business in the late ’70s, when Munsch and his publisher stumbled across his work at a wine-and-cheese art and design show in Toronto. Fortunately, he’d signed a small piece of art he’d put up on the wall. The next day at work he got the call—to illustrate *The Paper Bag Princess*—that would change everything.

“Who knew that 40 years later it would still be going strong?” Martchenko says. “I can’t get over that. You know, it was just a little freelance job I did on the side to make a couple of extra bucks—and it turns into a classic. Amazing.”

Broccoli, apples and air hockey



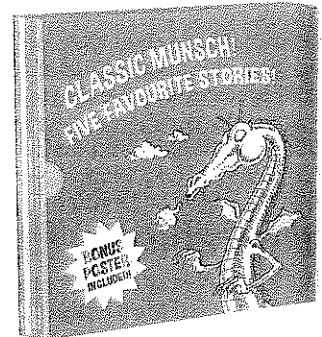
his spacious basement office, littered with sculptures and a wall of his own books. Locals are also used to seeing him around town, including walking the aisles at Costco.

Still a master at telling a good story, Munsch recalls the time he went to Costco to pick up some fruits and veggies to fill the fridge. “I came home with broccoli, apples—and a \$400 air hockey table,” he says, laughing. “Everybody in the family thought I was nuts, and I was!”

As Munsch talks, his face lights up and the quiet, daydreaming man with 200 stories inside him disappears to make way for the bouncing entertainer who can keep thousands of small children spellbound with his voice.

The face—and the story—are pure Robert Munsch. ☺

Kira Vermond is a veteran journalist and children’s author who lives in Guelph, Ontario. She still remembers the day Robert Munsch told stories to her Girl Guide troop.



THE COSTCO CONNECTION

A variety of Robert Munsch book titles will be available early July in most warehouses, including an exclusive five-book box set (item #1239753).

