

Chapter Two

School Days

On the first day of school, Mr. Munsch drove Robert to All Saints

School on Davey Street in the big family station wagon and took him to meet his teacher and classmates. It was not a happy time for Robert: The class was crowded with sixty other grade one students and the nuns who ran the school were very strict. Students were expected to sit quietly at their desks, face forward, and put all thoughts of play out of their minds.

Compared to the easy-spirited house full of books and family that he left behind each day, the school was like a prison with its crowded classrooms and



At about age eight, Robert got dressed up for his first communion at the Roman Catholic Church in Etna, Pennsylvania.

Robert Munsch

hallways. Robert, who preferred books to people, didn't like it at all. One of the reasons the school was so crowded was due to the "baby boom" that occurred after the Second World War. A population explosion had begun in the United States (and Canada) when hundreds of thousands of soldiers returned home from the war, anxious to get married and start families. So many babies were born that schools were crammed full until new schools could be built.

To make matters worse, Robert was a daydreamer who did not do well in class, even though he was well-behaved. He was easily bored and found it difficult to pay attention. Often, Robert left his homework assignments uncompleted.

Today, Robert remembers his early school days sadly. "It was a very crowded school. A very structured school. You had to memorize stuff...it was very challenging. I couldn't spell and I couldn't do math so it was very challenging for me. Let's say it didn't use my strong points."

School was hard for him: kids called him "Dumb Bobby," his report cards were filled with comments about his poor work habits, and his grades were usually low. At family gatherings, the adults would shake their heads and look sad when they talked about "poor Bobby." Mr. Munsch was worried that he would be stuck doing "screwdriver work" while his siblings became lawyers and engineers. When teachers considered failing Robert, they were reminded that his brother, Dickie, was just a year behind and so Robert was always promoted to the next grade to be saved from the humiliation of being passed by his younger brother.

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As Robert sums it up, "I never learned how to spell, graduated from eighth grade counting on my fingers to do simple addition and, in general, was not a resounding academic success."

What Robert and his parents didn't realize at the time, however, was that the school system itself was largely to blame for Robert's lack of academic success. At that time, students at the school learned to read from textbooks and "readers." They didn't have to complete novel studies or book reports until grade eight, which meant that Robert was not getting any credit for being a reading genius, even though he was reading about four books a week—much of it adult non-fiction. His teachers were so busy paying attention to what he wasn't doing well, they didn't recognize his special talents. Even worse, there was no creative writing taught, so his artistic talents were also being ignored. Eventually, little "Bobby's" love of books

Robert



A class picture shows Robert at All Saints School, second from the right in the fourth row.

Robert Munsch

saved his shaky academic career—but not until most of his teachers had labeled him a failure.

It was his love of books that brought him into contact with Sister Emma Jean Middendorf, a young nun who was the school librarian when Robert was in grade four. Even though students didn't have to read extra books for school, the young librarian tried to interest the students in books for fun and was delighted by Robert's enthusiasm for her library. Although Robert had a reputation as a poor student, Sister Emma Jean quickly learned about his voracious appetite for books. She decided that he was actually a very intelligent boy who simply didn't do well at the subjects his teachers were interested in. Knowing that his parents were worried about him, she sent them a note assuring them that Robert was actually quite smart and would possibly grow up to be an artist of some kind.

Sister Emma Jean also had enough of a sense of humor to appreciate Robert's quirky view of life and, when he brought a sign for her office one day, she thanked him and hung it above her desk. It said: "You don't have to be crazy to work here but it helps." By that time, Robert was working with Sister Emma Jean in the library as a volunteer helper. In 1958, when All Saints School was being expanded, Sister Emma Jean had been given the task of creating a brand new library. When 13-year-old Robert saw her typing out catalogue cards for each book in the library, he offered to help—working with her after school and on Saturdays,



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even over the summer. They became good friends and still keep in touch with each other today.

By the time he left elementary school, Robert had finally established himself as a kid who was smart at some things—especially topics that had been covered by *National Geographic*—although he had also become a loner who found it hard to form friendships. To make things worse, he began to suffer from bouts of depression. Clouds of gloom would descend on him, making him feel sad and isolated.

“I didn’t know what was the matter,” he now says. “It was just wrecking my life. It was making me socially non-functional—a wacko.”

Convinced that he would never fit in with the world around him, he decided to become a Roman Catholic priest when he grew up. Until then, however, he had to survive four years of high school.

Robert does not have fond memories of his high school years. He wasn’t popular, didn’t play sports, and only dated girls in his final year. Although his marks improved as he became more interested in his courses, he remained a loner. The only club he joined was the biology club where he learned about animals and insects, and occasionally got to dissect them. A self-described nerd, he even refused to cheer at the school’s football and basketball games he attended. He was a very unhappy young man whose sole pleasure seemed to come from the books that he read constantly, usually in the privacy of his attic bedroom.

His quiet, isolated life seemed like perfect preparation for the priesthood and he was relieved when he finally graduated from North Catholic High School in 1963.