

Review One

Robert Munsch: Larger Than Life

**By Frank B. Edwards.
Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2009.**

**Review by Ellen Heaney
Canadian Materials**

***** /4 stars**

Frank B. Edwards is known for humorous picture books and easy readers, such as *Mortimer Mooner Stopped Taking a Bath* and *Crowded Ride in the Countryside*. Here, his work takes a new turn as he writes the biography of a man who is undoubtedly the most well-known Canadian children's author ever. (What appears to be a series title, "Larger than Life," appears on the cover and the title page, but there are no other entries in the series in the current Fitzhenry and Whiteside catalogue.)

The book takes readers step-by-step from Munsch's infancy through childhood and a difficult adolescence.

It was his love of books that brought him into contact with Sister Emma Jean Middendorf, a young nun who was the school librarian... 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.

Munsch's lack of ability to achieve acceptable results academically led to depression that dogged him through his school years. After high school, Munsch entered a Jesuit novitiate, and, after four years, he went into the Jesuit seminary at Fordham University where he thrived studying history and philosophy.

The community service expected of a seminarian led him into working with children whom he entertained with games and storytelling. A tragic beating by street thugs in 1971 caused Munsch memory loss so severe that he had to give up university studies. This situation brought him to working full-time in daycare and eventually to the Family Studies "laboratory preschool" at the University of Guelph.

Robert's favourite daycare activity was storytime, when he could sit down with the kids and tell them stories as he had been doing before in Coos Bay and Boston. But this time there were adults watching quietly behind the mirror, trying not to laugh as Robert made funny faces and hilarious noises. One of those adults was Robert's boss, Dr. Bruce Ryan, whose wife, Nancy, was a children's librarian. They were both impressed by his wild stories and their popularity with the children.

Munsch's wife Ann worked at the preschool too, and it was at her suggestion that it be a princess, not a prince, who bested the dragon in one of the stories he was telling. And the rest, as they say, is history.

Edwards' biography includes family photos, group pictures, and some of the book covers and goofy portraits of Robert Munsch as a performer. It is everything we want to know about Robert Munsch told with care and sympathy. Because the book is much too detailed for the preschool and primary children who love *David's Father* and *Murmel Murmel Murmel*, it will more likely find a place among older children who want to know about Robert Munsch and with adults who are fans.

Recommended.

Ellen Heaney is Head, Children's Services at the New Westminster Public Library, New Westminster, BC.

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Quill & Quire magazine, July/August 2009

Robert Munsch's status as a bona fide superstar of children's lit arguably owes as much to his animated public persona as to his books, so it's fitting that his life story has become part of Fitzhenry & Whiteside's Larger than Life series. In this engaging biography, Frank B. Edwards chronicles the circuitous route the author took to become the celebrated "storyteller to a nation."

Edwards gives appropriate attention to Munsch's most beloved books, telling stories behind *The Paperbag Princess* and *Love You Forever*, among others, and showing how these stories reflected Munsch's experiences as well as those of the children he had met. Drawing heavily on interviews with his subject, Edwards leavens the factual material with glimpses of the quieter, more complex individual behind the frenetic public image. For instance, as a child Munsch was a bookworm with poor social and academic skills, who was written off by most of his teachers. He has suffered from depression all of his life. These insights, along with peeks into Munsch's creative process will be intriguing material for young readers.

At just over 70 pages – including illustrations, and index, and sidebars – Robert Munsch is a concise but certainly sufficient treatment, one that won't tax young readers but won't leave their parents feeling cheated, either. The series' wide target-age range does mean that the information level and tone are not always in sync. Teens, for instance, may find the narrative voice too juvenile, while younger audiences may not understand some of the concepts and references Edwards draws upon. The book will work well for readers in the middle of that range, however, and function well as part of an author study or a unit on biography.

Laurie McNeill, who has a PhD in autobiography studies and teaches at UBC.