

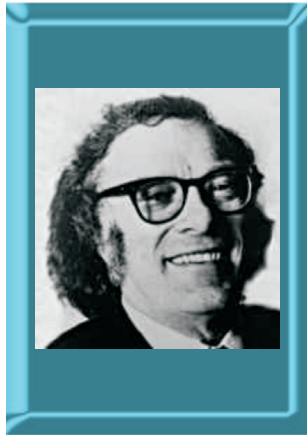


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THE FUN THEY HAD

Issac Asimov

Isaac Asimov (1920-1992), Russian-born American writer is known for his science fiction and for his popular works in all branches of science. Asimov's encounters with science fiction magazines led him to follow the dual careers of writing and science. He entered Columbia University at the age of 15, and at the age of 18 he sold his first story to *Amazing Stories*.

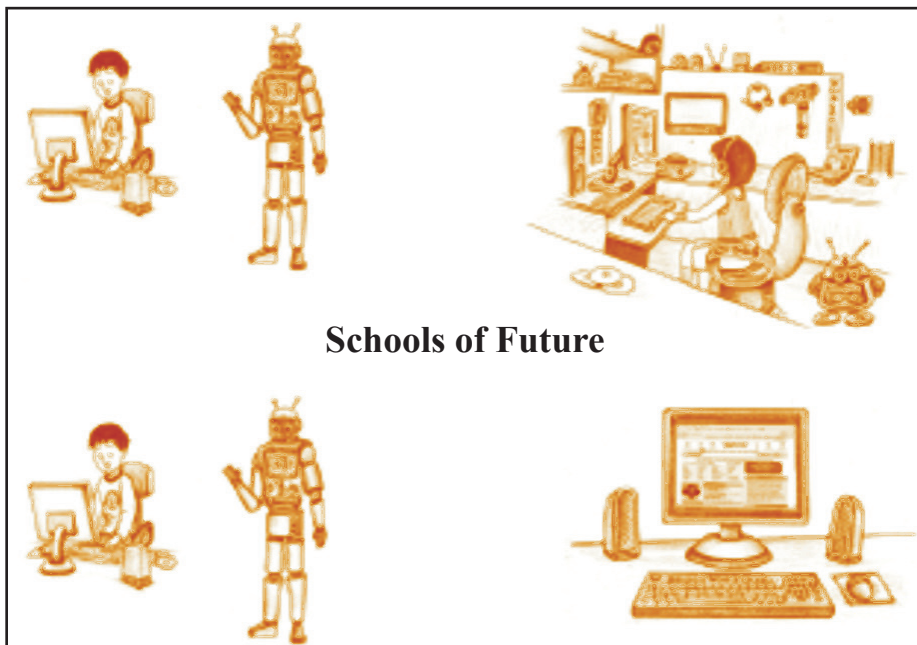


After serving in World War II (1939-1945), Asimov earned a Ph.D degree at Columbia University in 1948; from 1949 to 1958 he taught biochemistry at the Boston University School of Medicine. His first science fiction novel, *Pebble in the Sky*, appeared in 1950 and his first science book, a biochemistry text written with two colleagues, was published in 1953. Asimov turned to writing full time in 1958. He authored more than 400 books for young and adult readers, extending beyond science and science fiction to include mystery stories, humor, history, and several volumes on the Bible and English playwright, William Shakespeare. His best known science-fiction works include *I, Robot* (1950); *The Foundation Trilogy* (1951-1953); *Foundation's Edge* (1982); *The Naked Sun* (1957); and *The Gods Themselves* (1972). [It will be interesting to note that the world's greatest science fiction writer never travelled by air himself.]

Can you imagine a time when all the books and schools shall vanish; education will be imparted through computers and virtual classrooms. Would you like such a system? The story we shall read is set in future, when the traditional system of reading and writing shall be done away with. All the students shall become techno savvy. They shall interact with the teacher on screen.

Margie even wrote about it that night in her diary. On the page headed 17 May 2157, she wrote, “Today Tommy found a real book!”

It was a very old book. Margie’s grandfather once said that when he was a little boy his grandfather told him that there was a time when all stories were printed on paper.



They turned the pages, which were yellow and crinkly, and it was awfully funny to read words that stood still instead of moving the way they were supposed to — on a screen, you know. And then when they turned back to the page before, it had the same words on it that it had when they read it the first time.

“Gee,” said Tommy, “what a waste. When you’re through with the book, you just throw it away, I guess. Our television screen must have had a million books on it and it’s good for plenty more. I wouldn’t throw it away.”

“Same with mine,” said Margie. She was eleven and hadn’t seen as many telebooks as Tommy had. He was thirteen.

She said, “Where did you find it?”

“In my house.” He pointed without looking, because he was busy reading. “In the attic.”

“What’s it about?”

“School.”

Margie was scornful. “School? What’s there to write about school? I hate school.”

Margie always hated school, but now she hated it more than ever. The mechanical teacher had been giving her test after test in geography and she had been doing worse and worse until her mother had shaken her head sorrowfully and sent for the County Inspector.

He was a round little man with a red face and a whole box of tools with dials and wires. He smiled at Margie and gave her an apple, then took the teacher apart. Margie had hoped he wouldn't know how to put it together again, but he knew how to right it, and, after an hour or so, there it was again, large and black and ugly, with a big screen on which all the lessons were shown and the questions were asked. That wasn't so bad. The part Margie hated most was the slot where she had to put homework and test papers. She always had to write them out in a punch code they made her learn when she was six years old, and the mechanical teacher calculated the marks in no time.

The Inspector had smiled after he was finished and patted Margie's head. He said to her mother, "It's not the little girl's fault, Mrs Jones. I think the geography sector was geared a little too quick. Those things happen sometimes. I've slowed it up to an average ten-year level. Actually, the overall pattern of her progress is quite satisfactory." And he patted Margie's head again.

Margie was disappointed. She had been hoping they would take the teacher away altogether. They had once taken Tommy's teacher away for nearly a month because the history sector had blanked out completely.

So she said to Tommy, "Why would anyone write about school?"

Tommy looked at her with very superior eyes. "Because it's not our kind of school, stupid. This is the old kind of school that they had hundreds and hundreds of years ago." He added loftily, pronouncing the word carefully, "Centuries ago."

Margie was hurt. "Well, I don't know what kind of school they had all that time ago." She read the book over his shoulder for a while, and then said, "Anyway, they had a teacher."

"Sure they had a teacher, but it wasn't a regular teacher. It was a man."

"A man? How could a man be a teacher?"

"Well, he just told the boys and girls things and gave them homework and asked them questions."

"A man isn't smart enough."

"Sure he is. My father knows as much as my teacher."

"He knows almost as much, I betcha."



Margie wasn't prepared to dispute that. She said, "I wouldn't want a strange man in my house to teach me."

Tommy screamed with laughter. "You don't know much, Margie. The teachers didn't live in the house. They had a special building and all the kids went there."

"And all the kids learned the same thing?"

"Sure, if they were the same age."

"But my mother says a teacher has to be adjusted to fit the mind of each boy and girl it teaches and that each kid has to be taught differently."

"Just the same they didn't do it that way then. If you don't like it, you don't have to read the book."

"I didn't say I didn't like it," Margie said quickly. She wanted to read about those funny schools.

They weren't even half finished when Margie's mother called, "Margie! School!"

Margie looked up. "Not yet, Mamma."

"Now!" said Mrs Jones. "And it's probably time for Tommy, too."



Margie said to Tommy, "Can I read the book some more with you after school?"

"May be," he said nonchalantly. He walked away whistling, the dusty old book tucked beneath his arm.

Margie went into the schoolroom. It was right next to her bedroom, and the mechanical teacher was on and waiting for her. It was always on at the same time everyday except Saturday and Sunday, because her mother said little girls learned better if they learned at regular hours.

The screen was lit up, and it said: "Today's arithmetic lesson is on the addition of proper fractions. Please insert yesterday's homework in the proper slot."

Margie did so with a sigh. She was thinking about the old schools they had when her grandfather's grandfather was a little boy. All the kids from the whole neighbourhood came, laughing and shouting in the schoolyard, sitting together in the schoolroom, going home together at the end of the day. They learned the same things, so they could help one another with the homework and talk about it.

And the teachers were people...

The mechanical teacher was flashing on the screen: "When we add fractions $\frac{1}{2}$ and $\frac{1}{4}$..."

Margie was thinking about how the kids must have loved it in the old days. She was thinking about the fun they had.

Glossary

crinkly (adv) 'krɪŋ.klɪ	wrinkled.
awfully (adv) 'ɔ:fəl.ɪ	badly or unpleasantly.
gee dʒi:	word used to incite to action.
telebook tel.ɪbʊk	electronically composed digital book.
attic 'ætɪk	the space or room at the top of a building.
scornful(adj) 'skɔ:nfəl/(adj)	hateful.
slot slɒt	allotted space for programmes, etc.
punch code pʌntʃ kəʊd	computer code.
loftily (adv) 'lɒf.tɪ.lɪ	at a height.
scream skri:m	shout.
nonchalantly (adv) 'nɒn.tʃəl.ənt.lɪ	behaving in a calm manner.



Thinking about the Text

- I. Answer these questions in a few words or a couple of sentences each.
 1. What did Margie write in her diary?
 2. Had Margie ever seen a book before?
 3. What things about the book did she find strange?
 4. What do you think a telebook is?
 5. Where was Margie's school? Did she have any classmates?
 6. What subjects did Margie and Tommy learn?
- II. Answer the following with reference to the story:
 1. "I wouldn't throw it away."
 - (i) Who says these words?
 - (ii) What does 'it' refer to?
 - (iii) What is 'it' being compared to by the speaker?
 2. "Sure they had a teacher, but it wasn't a regular teacher. It was a man."

- (i) Who does 'they' refer to?
- (ii) What does 'regular' mean here?
- (iii) What is it contrasted with?

III. Answer each of these questions in a short paragraph (about 30 words).

1. What kind of teachers did Margie and Tommy have?
2. Why did Margie's mother send for the County Inspector?
3. What did he do?
4. Why was Margie doing badly in geography? What did the County Inspector do to help her?
5. What had once happened to Tommy's teacher?
6. Did Margie have regular days and hours for school? If so, why?
7. How does Tommy describe the old kind of school?
8. How does he describe the old kind of teachers?

IV. Answer each of these questions in two or three paragraphs (100 – 150 words).

1. What are the main features of the mechanical teachers and the schoolrooms that Margie and Tommy have in the story?
2. Why did Margie hate school? Why did she think the old kind of the school must have been fun?
3. Do you agree with Margie that schools today are more fun than the school in the story? Give reasons for your answer.

Language Work

An ideal student is the one who is an all-rounder. By all-rounder we mean one who is good at studies, play, and at home tasks. Discipline, obedience, respect for elders and hardwork are his guiding principles. An ideal student rises early in the morning. He refreshes his body by going out for a morning walk regularly. He understands that only a sound body can harbour a sound mind. He is not a mere bookworm, but exposes himself to various plays and games. He is an adventure lover and this makes him enterprising. He never puts off any work for tomorrow because he believes in today. He values friendship and relationships. His good behaviour is a hallmark of his personality. He loves everyone and tries to be helpful to everyone. He goes to the library regularly and adds to his knowledge. He keeps a hobby and is also interested in fine arts such as painting, music, sculpture and literature. He has thirst for knowledge that he wants to quench by reading different books, thereby enriching his imagination. He is an embodiment of hardwork, commitment and humility.

Fill in the blank:

Close to perfection _____

A student who is good at studies, play and other curricular activities _____

Behaviour, outlook, presentation and mental make-up comprise our _____

Painting , music and sculpture are _____

Enterprising means _____

I. Adverbs

Read this sentence taken from the story:

They had once taken Tommy's teacher away for nearly a month because the history sector had blanked out completely.

The word complete is an adjective. When you add -ly to it, it becomes an adverb.

1. Find sentences in the lesson which form the adverbs given below:

awfully sorrowfully completely loftily

carefully differently quickly nonchalantly

2. Now use these adverbs to fill in the blanks in the sentences below:

(i) The report must be read _____ so that performance can be improved.

(ii) At the interview, Sameer answered our questions _____, shrugging his shoulders.

(iii) We all behave _____ when we are tired or hungry.

(iv) The teacher shook her head _____ when Ravi lied to her.

(v) I forgot about it _____.

(vi) When I complimented Revathi on her success, she just smiled and turned away _____

(vii) The President of the Company raised his head and spoke _____

(viii) I finished my work so that I could go out to play _____.



Remember:

An adverb describes action. You can form adverbs by adding -ly to adjectives.

Spelling Note: When an adjective ends in -y, the y changes to i when you add -ly to form an adverb.

For example: angr-y – angr-i-ly

3. Make adverbs from these adjectives/nouns.

- | | |
|-----------------|---------------|
| (i) angry | (ii) happy |
| (iii) merry | (iv) sleep |
| (v) ease | (vi) noise |
| (vii) tidy | (viii) gloomy |
| (ix) thoughtful | (x) beautiful |

II. If Not and Unless

- Imagine that Margie’s mother told her, “You’ll feel awful *if* you *don’t* finish your history lesson.”
- She could also say: “You’ll feel awful *unless* you finish your history lesson.”

Unless means *if not*. Sentences with *unless* or *if not* are negative conditional sentences.

Notice that these sentences have two parts. The part that begins with *if not* or *unless* tells us the condition. This part has a verb in the present tense (look at the verbs *don’t finish*, *finish* in the sentences above).

The other part of the sentence tells us about a possible result. It tells us what will happen (if something else doesn’t happen). The verb in this part of the sentence is in the future tense (you’ll feel/you will feel).

Notice these two tenses again in the following examples:

<i>Future Tense</i>		<i>Present Tense</i>
• There won’t be any books left	unless	we preserve them.
• You won’t learn your lessons	if	you don’t study regularly.
• Tommy will have an accident	unless	he drives more slowly.

Complete the following conditional sentences. Use the correct form of the verb.

- If I don’t go to Anu’s party tonight,
- If you don’t telephone the hotel to order food,
- Unless you promise to write back, I
- If she doesn’t play any games,
- Unless that little bird flies away quickly, the cat

Writing Work

Write an e-mail to the bookseller asking for a new revised volume of Issac Asimov's short stories, *Ignited Minds* by A.P.J.Abdul Kalam

Discussion

1. What is fiction and what is science fiction ?
2. How do you imagine the future world is going to be?
3. Have you ever seen a science fiction movie? Describe it.
4. In groups of four discuss the following topic:

‘The Schools of the Future Will Have No Books and No Teachers!’

Your group can decide to speak for or against the motion. After this, each group will select a speaker to present its views to the entire class.

You may find the following phrases useful to present your argument in the debate.

- In my opinion...
- I/we fail to understand why...
- I wholeheartedly support/oppose the view that...
- At the outset let me say...
- I'd/we'd like to raise the issue of/argue against...
- I should like to draw attention to...
- My/our worthy opponent has submitted that...
- On the contrary...
- I firmly reject...

Suggested Reading

Frankenstein by Mary Shelley.

The Time Machine by H. G. Wells.