The Fun They Had

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ISAAC ASIMOV

Isaac Asimov was born in Petrovichi in the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (now Smolensk Oblast, Russia) to an Orthodox Jewish family. In 1923, when he was three years old, Asimov's family immigrated to Brooklyn, New York, where his parents owned a candy store. The candy store also sold newspapers, magazines, and pulp literature, inspiring the young Asimov's love for the written word and providing him with a constant amount of reading material that he would not have otherwise been able to afford. He attended Seth Low Junior College and University Extension, branches of Columbia University, to receive his bachelor's in Chemistry. Asimov finished his schooling at Columbia with a Ph.D. in Chemistry in 1948. After completing his education and serving in the U.S. Army as a civilian chemist in Philadelphia, Asimov became a professor of biochemistry at Boston University School of Medicine. In addition to his academic career, Asimov was a prolific author of science fiction, popular science, mysteries, history books, and nonfiction. He is best known for his science fiction, which he began writing at the age of 11. Asimov's most successful output of science fiction dates between 1941-1953, during which he published his famous novelette, "Nightfall," that was voted the best science fiction story of all time in 1964; his Foundation trilogy, which won the Hugo Award for Best All Time Series in 1966; his Galactic Empire series, dealing with an interstellar empire; and his robot stories collected in *I, Robot*. Along with Robert A. Heinlein and Arthur C. Clark, Asimov is considered to be one of the "Big Three" writers of the Golden Age of science fiction and has had a lasting influence as not only on the genre of science fiction and its future writers, but also as one of the most distinguished interdisciplinary thinkers of the twentieth century.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Written in the early 1950s during the peacetime years following World War II, "The Fun They Had" largely focuses on the benefits and drawbacks of technological progress, particularly in regard to computers. Asimov was writing during a time of tremendous innovation, especially in regards to utilizing wartime computer technologies. Although Asimov wrote the story many years before the invention of mobile computers in 1975, he imagines a future in which each child has their own computerized teacher and education system—much like laptop computers and online courses today. During the 1950s, computers were big enough to fill entire rooms and were only programmed to complete specific tasks. First-generation computers had made-to-order instructions for each individual use, and each computer had a different binary-coded program written in machine language that told the system how to operate. Most early computers were extremely limited in versatility and speed, so it's fairly remarkable that Asimov was able to imagine highly individualized, intelligent machines that are miniaturized, yet able to hold an infinite amount of information. In 1946, the University of Pennsylvania announced the development of the ENIAC computer that was able to calculate in 30 seconds a problem that would take a human 20 hours to solve. The press nicknamed the computer the "Giant Brain," and it exhilarated not only scientists, but also the imagination and curiosity of the general public, sparking debate to the future possibilities and powers of computers. "The Fun They Had" speaks directly to these debates and the rising power of computers and the questions of technological progress that were prevalent in the early 1950s and still are today.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Writing during and following the end of World War II, most of Asimov's literary output was during the so-called "Golden Age of Science Fiction," which tremendously changed and popularized the genre. Beginning in 1938, science fiction became a powerful social force, significantly influencing and being influenced by the military, information technology, Hollywood, and science, particularly biotechnology and the pharmaceutical industry. Robert A. Heinlein's Future series and Arthur C. Clarke's space stories and novels (such as *Childhood's End*) reveal a preoccupation with imagining a projected future based on technological progress and inquiry. The Golden Age established many of the most enduring tropes associated with the science fiction genre, including proposing ideas of a technological and inhuman future, space exploration and galactic societies, and the celebration of scientific achievement and the sense of wonder. Many of these tropes appear in Asimov's own work, including his canonical *Three Laws of Robotics* and his novelette *Nightfall*, in which a planet's civilization is overwhelmed by the revelation of the vastness of the universe as the planet is taken over by darkness. Like "The Fun They Had," which presents a high-tech world without traditional bound books, Ray Bradbury's iconic, dystopian novel *Fahrenheit 451* deals with the loss of print due to books becoming banned in a futuristic society. Bradbury's short story "Marionettes, Inc." also charts some of the downsides of technological process, as wildly realistic androids begin to infiltrate society. Ted Chiang's 2011 short story, "Dacey's Patent Automatic Nanny," also bears resemblance to "The Fun They Had"; in Chiang's story, an inventor creates mechanical

nannies to perfectly raise children, leading the children to lack human and social connection just like the impersonal computerized teachers in Asimov's story.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "The Fun They Had"
- **When Written:** Early 1950s
- **Where Written:** United States of America
- **When Published:** First published in a children's newspaper in 1951 and reprinted in the February 1954 issue of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Fiction*
- **Literary Period:** Post-War, Golden Age of Science Fiction
- **Genre:** Science Fiction
- **Setting:** The year 2155 at Margie's house
- **Point of View:** Third-Person Limited

EXTRA CREDIT

A Small Favor. Although Asimov wrote "The Fun They Had" as a personal favor for one of his friends, the short story became one of the biggest surprise successes of his career and was reprinted more than 30 times, including its publication in *The Best of Isaac Asimov*.

Robotics and Electronics. Asimov is the first person to coin and use the word *robotics* in print in his science fiction short story entitled "Liar!" which was published in the May 1941 issue of *Astounding Science Fiction*. Asimov was not aware that he created the term because he already assumed that the word referenced the science and technology of robots, similar to the word *electronics*.

PLOT SUMMARY

"The Fun They Had" takes place in the year 2155 where traditional school has been replaced by individualized, mechanical teachers and computerized learning. Children learn and read on television and computer screens and print books are seemingly absent and unfamiliar to this futuristic society.

In her diary, 11-year-old Margie writes that her 13-year-old friend Tommy found a real **book**. Margie feels extremely excited and shocked by the prospect of reading a real, old-fashioned book and quickly becomes intrigued by this peculiar, ancient object. Tommy shares the book with Margie and the two children read and examine the very old book together. Margie remembers that her grandfather once told her about how his grandfather would read books printed on paper, just like this one. The book's pages are still intact after many years but are yellow and crinkly. The children are accustomed to computers that scroll through text and hold many different eBooks, so the immobile words within the printed book are baffling to them. They wonder if the printed book is supposed to be thrown away once it has been read.

Tommy tells Margie that he found the book in his attic, and that it's about school. At first, Margie doesn't understand why anyone would write about school because she hates it so much: her mechanical teacher is too difficult for her, and she hates doing her homework in punch code. One time when her geography lesson was too challenging for her, the County Inspector had to come and reprogram her teacher. Margie's mother was disheartened that her daughter was doing so poorly in school, but the County Inspector was compassionate and understanding, and explained that sometimes the computers are geared to be too quick.

Margie asks Tommy why anyone would want to write about school. Tommy believes Margie is too naïve and explains to her that school from many centuries ago was extremely different that their computerized school. Margie is shocked to learn that in the old schools, the teacher was a human and not a computer. The children question if a human knows enough to be a teacher, but Tommy concludes that his father knows just as much as any teacher. Continuing to read the book, the children also discover that in the olden days, all children went to a special building to learn and learned the same thing if they were the same age. At first, Margie doesn't understand because her mother always says that education has to be individualized for each boy and girl; however, Margie and Tommy realize that the fun of the old schools was that students got to learn together, and that education wasn't just about learning facts, but also social interaction and human connection.

Margie's mother interrupts the children before they're done with the book because it's time for school. Margie asks Tommy if she can read the book with him later, and he responds nonchalantly with a maybe. Margie goes into her schoolroom, but she is still thinking about the book, filled with curiosity, daydreaming about all the kids playing and laughing in the schoolyard, sitting together in the classroom, going home with each other after school to play and help each other with their homework, and the teacher who is a real, live human. The mechanical teacher begins to drone on about fractions while Margie descends further into her imagination, fantasizing how in the old days, kids must have loved school, and she wonders about all the fun the students used to have.

CHARACTERS

Margie – Margie is the 11-year-old protagonist of the story and a friend of Tommy's. The third-person-limited point of view is filtered through her childlike innocence and curiosity. Margie is a curious girl who is constantly asking questions and wanting to be around other people. This personality may account for her recent poor performance in her fact-based and passive

geography lessons; Margie seems to crave an education that is interactive, engaging, and involved other people, but this vision is incompatible with her computerized and individualized model of education. In particular, she longs to be around other children her age—hence her constantly hanging around Tommy and dreaming of how fun it would have been to attend school with a whole neighborhood of children—but instead she's forced to sit alone in the schoolroom in her house, day after day, watching a computer screen talk at her. Margie is also a highly imaginative child, as evidenced by her ability to picture historical scenes from Tommy's old **book** about schools from many centuries ago. After reading through the ancient book and learning about the ways of the past, Margie loses herself in her imagination, envisioning what it would be like to be a student hundreds of years ago and dreaming of "the fun they had."

Tommy – Tommy is Margie's 13-year-old friend who finds an extremely old **book** in his attic, complete with wrinkly, yellowing pages. Although Tommy shares the book with Margie and helps her understand how the schools of the past functioned, he finds Margie's extreme enthusiasm and constant questions annoying and naïve. He frequently condescends to her, sometimes going to far as laughing in her face and calling her stupid for not knowing as much as he does about the world. He's also arrogant: when Margie remarks that a human man couldn't possibly be a teacher and know as much as their mechanical teachers, Tommy haughtily declares that his father knows "almost as much." As he's two years older, he also tries to act nonchalant in front of Margie—like noncommittally answering "Maybe" when Margie asks if they can read together after school—which is a sharp contrast from Margie's unbridled curiosity and enthusiasm.

County Inspector – The County Inspector is a mechanic who fixes Margie's mechanical teacher when the lessons are too difficult for her. He is described as a "round little man with a red face and whole box of tools with dials and wires." Although he is just the repairman, he has a level of empathy and understanding that the mechanical teacher does not and actually seems to be exactly what Margie needs in an educator. He understands that the lesson is too difficult for Margie and adjusts it accordingly to the appropriate level, making sure to still encourage Margie so that she doesn't feel like a failure. He also has an emotional warmth that Margie's computerized teacher lacks. While the mechanical teacher—which is a "large and black and ugly" screen—just bombards Margie with test after test, the County Inspector smiles pleasantly, pats Margie on the head, and communicates with both Margie and her mother about Margie's work in the classroom. Besides showing the drawbacks of technological progress on a social and emotional level, the role of the County Inspector also suggests that even though the story's futuristic society relies on computers, these machines are not autonomous and are still maintained by humans.

Margie's Mother / Mrs. Jones – Mrs. Jones is Margie's mother. She expects Margie to succeed in her education and is disappointed when Margie has difficulties with her geography lessons. From the "sorrowful" look on her face, it seems that Mrs. Jones sees calling the County Inspector to reprogram the mechanical teacher as a mark of Margie's failure as a student. Mrs. Jones strongly believes in the mechanical teacher's ability to teach each child individually and keeps Margie to a strict school schedule.

TERMS

Punch Card – A piece of stiff paper that can contain digital data represented by the presence or absence of holes in predefined positions. Punched cards were used for processing digital data and to control automated machinery. Early computers utilized punched cards as the principal medium for input and output. In "The Fun They Had," the children enter their homework into their mechanical teachers so that the computer can calculate their score. **Margie** has to write her homework out on punch code, which she had to learn when she was six years old. Although the punch card is anachronistic to contemporary computers and therefore the future, it was very popular in the age of early computers, when Asimov was writing the story.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

TECHNOLOGICAL PROGRESS AND EDUCATION

In "The Fun They Had," Asimov constructs a futuristic world in the year 2155, in which traditional school has been replaced with a computerized homeschooling system. The story follows an 11-year-old girl named Margie who is mystified by the "**very old book**" about school that her friend Tommy found. With young and curious Margie as the story's protagonist, Asimov allows questions of technological progress to be filtered through a lens of innocence. Although treated with naiveté and frankness, Asimov's story is a warning about the power of technological progress. In detailing this futuristic, computerized, and highly individualized educational system, the story suggests that technological progress can have major drawbacks, especially in the realm of education and social development: such a system is impersonal and minimizes human connection, which can be

isolating and unproductive for students.

For Margie and Tommy, going to school means sitting alone in a room in their respective houses while staring at a television screen that mechanically transmits information at a computer-set pace—a system that is meant to be individualized and efficient. However, by contrasting human teachers with computers and artificial intelligence, Asimov suggests that such high-tech learning isn't so efficient after all. In the story, students are taught individually by machines that can be adjusted by a human mechanic to meet each child's specific learning needs. However, while the computers are individualized, they aren't very personal; the robotic teachers lack human emotion and the ability to connect and support the student on a personal level. Instead, they're just "big screen[s] on which all the lessons [are] shown and the questions [are] asked." For instance, when Margie begins "doing worse and worse" in geography, the mechanical teacher can't sit down with her and talk candidly about what she's specifically struggling with or what other learning techniques might be helpful for her. Instead, it just gives her "test after test," all of which she does poorly on. It gets so bad that Margie's mother has to call the County Inspector, who is the mechanic that manually reprograms mechanical teachers and sets their pace for each individual student. Although Asimov constructs futuristic education as being based on artificial intelligence, it is paradoxical that a human must come and fix Margie's computerized teacher. Because the technology itself—the mechanical computer—doesn't have the ability to personalize itself to each student in the way that the human Inspector can, it seems that technological progress doesn't necessarily lead to the more efficient and individualized education it strives to create.

However, when talking to Tommy about the kind of old-fashioned education that's detailed in Tommy's "very old book," Margie expresses disbelief that a human could ever effectively teach students, saying bluntly, "A man can't know as much as a [mechanical] teacher." This is an important part of the point that Asimov is making: although it is true that a human being could never store and be able to recall as much raw data as a computer, a mechanical teacher lacks the ability to interact with students in the way that someone like the County Inspector can. With this, Asimov is providing an early but now familiar critique of the computer age: in exchange for a wealth of knowledge, society has traded more familiar and nourishing forms of human engagement.

The old book about school also pinpoints the lack human connection in computerized education when it comes to relationships among students. In contrasting the way students used to engage with one another versus the way they do in the story's futuristic setting, Asimov emphasizes how technological progress can isolate humans from social interaction and replace fun and curiosity with efficiency and detachment. In the story, Margie's interaction with other children is limited to occasionally playing with her friend Tommy. While discussing Tommy's old book, Margie finds it difficult to believe that there could have been a time where children were taught in groups, because this contrasts so heavily with the individualized learning, she is familiar with. Asimov is suggesting here that although computers can present more information more quickly, such an approach perhaps deprives children of the important social experience of school. At the end of the story, Margie daydreams of the fun that her grandfather's grandfather had when he was a boy, back when "all the kids from the whole neighborhood" flocked to the schoolyard every day, "laughing and shouting"—a situation that couldn't be more different from the lonely way in which Margie learns. In this old-fashioned education, children "learned the same things, so they could help one another on the homework and talk about it." Even though school in the old days is not individualized, students had the ability to learn from each other, which is another—perhaps richer—layer to education that Margie's current system lacks.

On the surface, "The Fun They Had" is a simplistic, children's story, yet Asimov also provides a serious warning that technological progress is not always social progress. The story clearly indicates the problems with computerized educational systems, including the lack of social interaction with other children, impersonal teachers and learning environments, and the inability for artificial intelligence to actively engage students in the learning process. Although the reader might imagine computerized learning to be more fun than traditional school, Asimov's story critiques this notion by illustrating the downsides of such an approach.

BOOKS AND PRESERVATION OF THE PAST

Even though "The Fun They Had" takes place in a futuristic world where computerized technology is the basis of education and society, Asimov's story also expresses the importance of the preservation of the past. The "**very old book**" that the children find is not simply a book, but a valuable historical document or archival object; the book is both a primary source and record of times gone by. Through the children's fascination with the old book that Tommy finds in his attic—plus the fact that the book is still intact hundreds of years after the switch to digital books—the author argues that traditional paper-bound books are powerful because of the way they incite curiosity and preserve former times. Asimov asserts that the preservation of the past is an important key to knowledge and curiosity, suggesting that learning about history also enhances understanding of the present.

The story centers around the idea of preservation; the ancient book contains some sort of story or information about old-fashioned schools (present-day schools for the reader), while

the book's form—a traditional book with paper pages and inked words—preserves a slice of history in a time where books have all gone digital. Tommy and Margie's description of the book reflects its age and how different it is from their computerized book. The book is a remnant of the past with its "yellow and crinkly" pages with "words that stood still instead of moving the way they were supposed to—on a screen." The children cannot comprehend why the words within a print book are stationary. Perhaps, Asimov is asserting the durable quality of print to preserve not only the words on the page, but also the stories and lessons from the past. It's also fitting that Tommy finds the book in his attic. The attic is a space of preservation—where Tommy's family has stored relics of the past so that those objects can be dusted off and revisited again someday.

Even though the children claim to find the book strange, they also find it incredibly intriguing and valuable, pointing to the idea that the preservation of the past and the printed word both have a unique ability to incite curiosity. The children are enthralled by the book, and although they find past education "funny," they want to continue to read and learn about the past. When Margie's mom tells her that it is time for school, Margie responds "not yet" with haste and asks Tommy if she can continue reading the book after school. Margie's curiosity grows as she continues to think about the book and the history of education, leading her to daydream and even be distracted from her math lesson. Because of the contents of the book, Margie's now longs for the schools of the past where children learn and play together: "she was thinking about the old schools [...] all the kids from the whole neighborhood came, laughing and shouting in the schoolyard, sitting together in the schoolroom, going home together at the end of the day." Meanwhile, the mechanical teacher drones on about fractions, unaware that Margie's attention has been captivated by something else. Margie's daydream, evoked by the book and history, stands in direct contrast to the computer's stale math lesson that fails to engage Margie, spark her imagination, or encourage her to think critically. Thus, the book's evocation of the past speaks to the power of the preservation of history and the printed word to lead to wonder, curiosity, and a longing for times gone by.

Although the book is the most notable historical document in the story, oral tales and stories passed on by family members from generation to generation also play a role in preserving the past. The book belongs to Tommy's family and has likely been passed on from one generation to another for centuries. Through this handoff, the story implies that family is important for preserving the past, as Tommy wouldn't have had access to the "very old book" without many generations before him preserving a piece of history for him later discover. Orality also plays a role in "The Fun They Had," as Margie's family has passed down verbal stories of the past: "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." With this, Asimov asserts that family plays a special role in passing down stories in order to preserve the past and nurture awareness and imagination.

Asimov's story itself preserves the past, enfolding into its pages the spirit of the 1950s. The story encapsulates the burgeoning technological developments of the time and the growing awareness of a possible future that is dominated by technology—a future that could replace the printed word and the importance of preserving the past, history, and the stories that humankind tells. Although the computer technology in the story is outdated from the computers that contemporary readers are familiar with, "The Fun They Had" is a warning that as the future increasingly relies on technological progress and becomes more digitized, it is extremely important to preserve the past to cultivate imagination and curiosity and to continue to learn from history.

GRATITUDE AND WANTING

The central arc of "The Fun They Had" focuses on Margie learning about the schools and education of the past, leading to her wishing for a school in which she could learn and have fun with other children. Through Margie's longing to experience school the way her ancestors did many years ago, Asimov suggests that it's natural for people to want what they don't have, but that people should try to be grateful for all of the things that are good about their situation and actively work to change what's not.

By reading the **book** about old education systems, Margie becomes acutely aware of all her computerized school lacks. She takes up a "grass is greener" mentality, assuming that school in the old days was much better than the kind of computerized learning she's subjected to now. At the beginning of the story, Margie is adamant that she hates school. Once she learns about old-fashioned schools from Tommy's "very old book," she becomes sensitized to all the things her school is missing, which are contributing to her hatred of it. She wishes she could have a school system with a real teacher and play with "all the kids from the whole neighborhood" and learn "sitting together in the schoolroom"—a situation that contrasts sharply with Margie's solo learning in front of a computer screen. Another reason that Margie hates her mechanical school is because of the computer's inability to engage her emotionally and understand when she is struggling: "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." She despises the mechanical, information-driven system that she is accustomed to and yearns for the comradery of human teachers and peers, which she learns about through the old book, to help her. Through Margie's growing contempt for her current situation, Asimov not only suggests that it is natural for

people to want what they do not have, but also natural for people to dream and imagine what seems to be missing and of what is an essential part of society and education—in the case of the story, social development, emotional engagement, and human interaction.

Although Margie is adamant in her hatred towards computerized education and yearns for the schools of the past, Tommy and Margie also remain grateful for the benefits of their schooling system and work in small ways to change what they don't like, whether they realize it or not. Margie and Tommy are well aware of the benefit of abundance produced by their computers and televisions. Tommy in particular is grateful that is television can hold "a million books" and that "it's good for plenty more." Even though they are fascinated by the "very old book" and the old-fashioned schools it speaks of, the kids are able to find bright spots in their own situations. Furthermore, even though Margie and Tommy do not get to learn with other children and do not usually learn from real books, the two children pore over the ancient book and spend time together to infuse some elements of old-school learning into their lives. This is a small way for the two kids to actively change their situation and align it more closely with the type of engaged, communal education that Margie in particular longs for.

The moral of Asimov's story is neatly summed up in the age-old adage "the grass is always greener on the other side," suggesting that it is human nature to both desire what one doesn't have and be grateful for what one does. And while Asimov indicates that no education system is completely perfect—and thus that Margie has a right to wish her situation was different—he also shows the value in being appreciative for what one does have. Indeed, Margie's hatred for school will perhaps resonate with some readers, but her longing for the education system of days gone by—that is, the type of school modern readers are familiar with—may remind readers that they perhaps have things better than they realize.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

TOMMY'S BOOK

Tommy's book symbolizes the passage of time and the importance of preserving the past. Asimov utilizes the book to demonstrate the ways in which the world of the future differs from that of our present and past. The ancientness of the book is manifested in its physical condition, found in Tommy's attic, it is old and fragile, and its pages are brittle, yellow, and crinkled. The book, although seemingly worthless and of little value, is extremely special to the children, especially to Margie because she had previously only heard about print books and their use from her grandfather, who heard about them from his grandfather. The children's computers now hold millions of eBooks (called "telebooks" in the story), and it is unfathomable to them that a print book only holds a single story—making them wonder if people used to throw books away after reading them. The book awakens Margie's curiosity and imagination as a mysterious, archival object that tells stories about the past and the history of education. Margie's reading of the book and her new understanding of bygone schools leads her to daydream about the school system of the past that is very different from her own, where there are human teachers and children laugh, learn, and play together. By including the book in the story, Asimov shows how much time has passed and the dramatic social changes that can occur as a result of new technological progress.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Houghton Mifflin edition of *Technology* published in 1989.

The Fun They Had Quotes

❝ Margie even wrote it that night in her diary. On the page headed May 17, 2155, she wrote, "Today Tommy found a real book!"

Related Characters: Tommy, Margie

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

The story opens with Margie writing in her diary which allows for the description of the story's setting. The story clearly takes place in the future, leading immediately to the conclusion that *real books* must not exist in this futuristic society. This is ironic, considering that the reader of "The Fun They Had" is likely encountering the story on a printed page. By stating the year (over a century after the story was first published) and by making such a common object for the reader, Asimov immediately creates a sense of separation between the contemporary reader and the futuristic world that Margie in habits. A physical book would have been common everyday object for readers in the 1950s, yet Margie's tone here suggests that it is now a rarity to happen upon one. Through this small detail, he makes it clear just

how much print media (and society at large) have changed since the 20th century.

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

Related Characters: Margie

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

The book that Tommy finds in his attic is very old—so old that Margie has only heard about printed books from her grandfather who heard it from his grandfather. Tommy's book is from a different time when all of the stories were printed on paper and not read on computer screens. Although the story's society relies on computer technology for education and stories, the fact that Margie's grandfather told her about the past highlights the lasting relevance of oral storytelling and the passing of stories and memories from one family member to the next in order to preserve history. The book, itself, also preserves the past as it is a reminder of the importance of the printed word and contains stories about the past on its pages.

> 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 had when they read it the first time.

Related Characters: Tommy, Margie

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

The children look at the book Tommy finds in his attic in more detail, realizing that it is very different from the computerized "telebooks" to which they're accustomed. The tactile nature of pages is imbued with age—not only is the book itself a historical artifact with "yellow and crinkly" pages that have clearly been well-worn by time and use, but its content has preserved the past by recording a single, unchanging story. Unlike the eBooks that are constantly moving on the screen and have infinite information and possibilities, the immobility of the words on the pages highlight the book's power in archiving history for future generations. Margie and Tommy's captivation, too, suggests that there is inherent value in learning from this type of text as opposed to the futuristic methods to which they're accustomed.

> "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."

Related Characters: Tommy (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

Tommy believes that the printed book is a waste because it only contains a single story. He does not understand the book's power to preserve the past and thinks that once he is done reading, the book is supposed to be thrown away. Although he cannot understand the importance of the printed book, he is grateful for the abundance of books and information on his television screen. The children live in a future that is saturated with information and the power of technology to hold infinite data that is extremely difficult for them to understand why such a thing like a bound, paper book exists and why it can only contain a limited and measurable amount of words. Rather than cherishing the book and wanting to preserve it, they are conditioned to view it as a disposable object. This reflects their society's attitude toward history as something to be discarded and constantly updated rather than preserved for posterity. The enduring quality of print books' contents have been rejected for the sheer quantity that the television has to offer. Through this distinction, Asimov implies that while learning on a television screen is likely more efficient and

offers an exponentially larger variety of materials, it falls short of what books have to offer: the unchanged ideas of the past, captured for generations to come.

"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. "

Related Characters: Margie (speaker), County Inspector

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

The old book Tommy's finds in his attic is about school. Margie cannot believe why anyone would write about school because she hates it. In the story, the children do not go to traditional school, but rather have mechanical teachers that instruct them individually from home. Although the education is specialized for each student, their education is based solely on facts and information—there are no social, emotional, or creative dimensions to the work they do. The children do not play and learn from other kids or human teachers, so their education is extremely impersonal. Margie hates school because the geography lessons are too difficult for her, yet the mechanical teacher is unable to adjust the lessons to the appropriate level. Even Margie's mother is upset, and the only way to fix the teacher is through human intervention. This suggests that while the education system has been optimized for efficiency (much like the printed book has been rendered obsolete by the "telebook"), it has clearly made children *less* engaged in learning, not more so.

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."

Related Characters: County Inspector (speaker), Margie's Mother / Mrs. Jones, Margie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

Margie and the other children in her world are taught individually by mechanical teachers rather than going to school. When her mechanical teacher breaks, the County Inspector comes to fix Margie's mechanical teacher. Even though society is driven by computers and artificial intelligence, the computers are controlled and adjusted by humans. The County Inspector shows empathy and support towards Margie whereas the mechanical teacher does not show any emotion towards her. Although he is presumably a stranger to the Jones family, there is still an effortless human connection between Margie and the County Inspector that does not exist between her and the mechanical teacher that she hopes will break. The reader can infer, then, that Margie would learn more effectively with a human teacher like the County Inspector, who understands and supports her learning ability and adjusts lesson out of empathy.

Tommy looked at her with very superior eye. "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."

Related Characters: Tommy (speaker), Margie

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

Although Margie and Tommy are friends that enjoy reading the book together, Tommy constantly gets aggravated by Margie's naiveté. Margie is 11 and Tommy is 13, he and believes that he knows a lot more than she does. He looks down on her when she asks questions that he believes are stupid like when Margie asks, "why anyone would write about school." He explains to her that it is a different type of school because the book is from centuries ago. Tommy's lofty attitude and matter-of-fact interest in the book

contrasts with Margie's deep curiosity and imagination. In this sense, Tommy and Margie represent the opposing mindsets that Asimov is examining through the story. Whereas Tommy represents Asimov's imagined futuristic world in which people look down upon history and have little patience for human connection or sustained attention, Margie is more closely aligned with the past. By empathizing with her desire for the unique level of inquiry and nonlinear creative thought that books allow, the contemporary reader can see the value of traditional learning in a classroom in a new light.

"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."

Related Characters: Tommy, Margie (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

Reading the book in more detail, Tommy and Margie learn that in the ancient schools, men used to be a teacher instead of computers. Margie is unable to believe this and that a man could be smart enough to teach children. Her inability to believe the book demonstrates how her society is extremely saturated in information, which has ultimately conditioned Margie to be unable to imagine anything other than a machine being able to be a teacher and provide students with enough information and knowledge. Additionally, it is difficult for the children to understand how a man can teach multiple students at once because their school is highly individualized and just the student and the mechanical teacher. Margie's disbelief reflects the bleak vision of the future that Asimov holds: without collaborative learning and humanized instruction, children are isolated from one another and cannot conceive of their fellow human beings (or themselves) as intelligent enough to be experts on any given subject.

She was thinking about the old schools they had when her grandfather's grandfather was a little boy. All the kids from the whole neighborhood 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 on the homework and talk about it [...] Margie was thinking about how the kids must have loved it in the old days. She was thinking about the fun they had.

Related Characters: Margie

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

The story ends with Margie thinking about the old schools from Tommy's book while she is in school learning about fractions. Margie does not pay attention to her mechanical teacher and instead drifts off to the world of the book. The book incites her imagination causing her to daydream of the old days when kids would learn and play together. This daydream expresses her desire for an education that not only puts emphasis on facts and information, but also on social and emotional development. By ending the story with Margie's yearning, Asimov shows the reader the importance of socialization and collaboration in education and a child's development. Rather than impersonal machines, Margie dreams for a school in which she connects with the other students and teachers. The last line of the story is particularly ironic. Although Margie does not know that kids from the past might have hated school as well, she believes that the old form of school must be so much fun. The reader (who is likely to be a child or teenager attending one of the very schools that Margie envies) is implicitly called to re-examine the present system of education, which is traditionally not considered to be particularly fun or enjoyable. Asimov geared the story toward school-aged children, and therefore impels them to feel grateful for the education they have and appreciate its merits, rather than dismissing it in favor of the cold, dehumanized system imposed upon Margie and Tommy.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE FUN THEY HAD

On the page dated May 17, 2157, Margie writes excitedly in her journal about an amazing discovery: "Today Tommy found a real **book**!" The book is exceptionally old—Margie remembers her grandfather telling her once about how *his* grandfather used to tell him about a time long, long ago when stories were printed on paper with ink. Margie and Tommy flip through the book, fascinated by the "yellow and crinkly" pages. The children can't believe that the words don't move like they do on a computer screen.

The story is set in the future, in a world where e-books ("telebooks," in the world of the story) have completely replaced print media. An actual antiquated book holds a special fascination for the children as a relic of the past, and their amazement is ironic considering the reader is likely encountering the story on a printed page. Whereas the children's telebooks are technologically advanced, this analog book holds unique value: the ability to preserve the past, unchanged by any outside influences.

It's especially bewildering to Tommy and Margie that when they turn to back to a page that they've already read, it still has the same words on it as when the children read it the first time. Tommy believes that the **book** is "a waste," and that people must have thrown the books away after reading them. Tommy marvels at the fact that his television at home has at least a million books on it—"and it's good for plenty more"—and he would never dream of throwing it away. Margie echoes in agreement. She's 11 and hasn't seen as many "telebooks" as 13-year-old Tommy.

The children live in a world which is saturated with information, and as a result they find the idea of a book containing only a limited amount of information to be silly and old-fashioned. Rather than appreciating the book as something valuable in and of itself, they are quick to dismiss it as something disposable since it is limited in its scope. This reaction suggests that, in Tommy and Margie's futuristic reality where information changes constantly, the notion of preserving anything for posterity is completely foreign.

Margie asks Tommy where he found the **book**. Engrossed in his reading, Tommy points to his house without looking up, and tells Margie that he found the book in the attic. Margie asks him what the book is about, and Tommy answers tersely: "School."

The book's location in the attic indicates that it is considered by Tommy's family to be old and largely worthless. Books are seen as antiquated relics, rather than educational resources that can help people learn about history and apply those lessons to the present day.

At first, Margie can't imagine anyone wanting to write a **book** about school because she hates it so much. A while back, her mechanical teacher was constantly testing her in geography, but Margie just kept doing worse and worse. Upset by her daughter's poor performance, Margie's mother finally called for the County Inspector, a mechanic, who came to fix the mechanical teacher. The County Inspector was a small, plump man with a red face and a toolbox filled with dials and wires. When he came to fix Margie's mechanical teacher, he smiled pleasantly at Margie and gave her an apple before taking her mechanical teacher apart.

In the world of the story, classroom schooling has been completely replaced with individualized mechanical instructors that teach each child separately at home. Although this system is designed to provide personalized education for each student, the fallibility of the machines and their reliance on human mechanics to fix them shows how people are still an essential part of the computer-driven world. Though things books and teachers have been discarded in favor of digital alternatives, there is no replacement for human expertise.

At the time, Margie had hoped that the County Inspector wouldn't be able to put her mechanical teacher back together again; however, after an hour, Margie was once again faced with her teacher's large, black, and ugly screen where it displays lessons and questions. What Margie hates more than anything is filling out her homework in punch code and having to put her homework and tests into the slot that allows her teacher to grade all her work instantly.

Margie dislikes the lessons provided by the teacher, as she finds the machine impersonal and unfriendly, and the work to be repetitive and taxing. Whereas the mechanical teacher is designed to be more efficient and personalized than a live teacher, and therefore to provide a better educational experience, it has clearly has the opposite effect, leading to more boredom and a lack of personal connection with the teacher and other students.

When he was done fixing the mechanical teacher, the County Inspector smiled at Margie again and patted her on the head. Understanding Margie's trouble with the lessons, the County Inspector told Margie's mother, Mrs. Jones, that wasn't Margie's fault that she was doing so poorly, and that the geography lessons were geared a little too fast for Margie. The Inspector changed the lessons to a 10-year-old level and told Mrs. Jones that Margie's overall work was satisfactory. He patted Margie's head one more time before leaving. Margie was extremely disappointed—she was hoping that the County Inspector would take her teacher away altogether, just like they had taken Tommy's teacher for almost a month when its "history sector had blanked out completely."

The kindness of the County Inspector shows how important supportive human contact is to a child's development. His treatment of Margie creates an ironic distinction between the smiling human and the emotionless computer, and Margie's disappointment after he leaves shows just how much she dreads the drudgery of learning without other people to join in the experience with her.

Margie asks Tommy why anyone would want to write about school. Tommy calls Margie stupid and arrogantly explains that it's a different kind of school: "the old kind of school that they had hundreds and hundreds of years ago." Margie's feelings are hurt, and she admits that she doesn't know what kind of school existed so long ago. Reading the **book** over Tommy's shoulder, Margie says that the only thing she knows about school in the old days is that they also had a teacher. Tommy explains to her that of course they had a teacher, but that it wasn't a "*regular* teacher," but a man.

Having lived entirely within a society where mechanical teachers are the norm, Margie has no conception of how schooling might have been different in the past. Not only has the mechanization of learning made traditional classroom learning obsolete, it has effectively erased the record of alternative methods that came before it by rendering physical books irrelevant. Thus, the book offers a rare glimpse into a past way of living and learning that has been thoroughly devalued and eradicated by Tommy and Margie's society.

Margie is baffled and doesn't understand how a man could be a teacher, believing that a man could never be smart enough. Tommy insists that his father knows nearly as much as his teacher. Margie doesn't want to argue, but she also doesn't comprehend why anyone would let a strange man come to their house and teach. Tommy shrieks with laughter, mocking Margie for how little she knows. He explains that the teachers didn't live in the house, but rather all students went to a "special building" with all the kids from the neighborhood.

As with the book, Margie's confusion over how a human could be a teacher demonstrates how she has grown up in a world where machines can provide virtually unlimited information. It also suggests that Margie doesn't believe she herself could ever have enough knowledge or wisdom to teach someone else better than a computer could. The mechanized education system in the children's world has not only robbed them of fun, but of their full potential to collaborate with others and develop intellectually.

Tommy explains that students in the old days learned the same things if they were the same age. Margie finds this confusing because her mother always tells her that "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." Annoyed, Tommy snaps at Margie that schools didn't work that way back then, and if she doesn't like it, she doesn't have to keep reading the **book**. Margie quickly replies that she never said that she didn't like it—she wants to keep reading about the strange schools.

For Margie, school means individualized instruction, and she finds it difficult to imagine the possibility of going to school with other children but is nevertheless fascinated by the idea. This takes on an ironic note, since readers of the story are likely well-acquainted with physical books and traditional classroom learning. And whereas these elements of education are often viewed as mundane and commonplace in everyday life, they are completely foreign to these children.

Before Tommy and Margie are even halfway through the **book**, Mrs. Jones calls her daughter inside for school. Margie doesn't want to go to school, but her mother insists that it's time for Margie and probably for Tommy too. Margie eagerly asks Tommy if she can read more of the book with him after school. He replies, "Maybe," and he walks away with the old book beneath his arm.

Margie and Tommy go their separate ways to go to school, further highlighting how this mechanized method of schooling isolates children from one another. While their education system encourages rote memorization and completing assignments on punch cards rather than reading and writing, Margie clearly longs for more free-form, collaborative learning.

Margie goes into her schoolroom, which is right next to her bedroom. The mechanical teacher is already waiting for her—Margie has school at the same time every day, apart from Saturday and Sunday, because Mrs. Jones believes that "little girls [learn] better if they [learn] at regular hours." The mechanical teacher lights up and begins a lesson on fractions, asking Margie to first insert yesterday's homework into the slot.

An interesting feature of the mechanical teacher is the ability to deliver lessons at any time of day for their particular student, again showing how schooling has become more individualized and distinct from the archaic method of classroom teaching. With every student learning a different curriculum on potentially different schedules, it is likely that they have less in common with their peers and less time to spend with them than children of the past enjoyed.

Sighing, Margie puts her homework in, but she isn't thinking about fractions at all. She's too busy imagining the old schools from the **book**, wondering what it would have been like to attend school back when her grandfather's grandfather was a small boy. She daydreams of all the kids from the entire neighborhood going to school together, working together, and playing and laughing together during recess. She longs for the ancient schools where the teachers were real people and all students learned the same thing and helped each other with their homework.

During the repetitive and emotionless lesson, Margie finds herself pining for the kinds of schools that used to exist, where she could learn from human instructors, and, more importantly, be with her friends. Again, this passage is significant because it holds the reader's present experiences in a positive light—rather than having a critical view of the traditional education system, it encourages reverence and gratitude toward more simplified ways of learning and preserving the past.

Meanwhile, the mechanical teacher drones on about fractions, but Margie still isn't paying attention—she is too busy "thinking about how the kids must have loved it in the old days. She [is] thinking about the fun they had."

The story ends on an ironic note: for Asimov's audience, children in the 1950s, it would likely seem laughable to call their schooling "fun." Yet, "The Fun They Had" shows the dark consequences of a futuristic world that has forgone books and traditional group learning for a more mechanized and individualized system. Margie's longing for the "olden days" of the 20th century encourages young readers to view their own education with gratitude, since Asimov's alternative proves to be isolating and unfulfilling.

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