William Sutcliffe
Haberdashers’ Aske’s, Hertfordshire

"My first school was a local state primary, a short walk across a park from our suburban semi in north London. I learned to read and write there, and how to kick a football, but probably not much else. Then I went to "posh school". That was Haberdashers’ Aske’s, a huge private school with 150 students in each year, out in the green belt near Epsom. Instead of crossing a park with my friends, I now had to walk to a patch of pavement outside Harrow Post Office and wait for a coach to pick me up.

After half an hour’s drive, stopping every few minutes to collect more children, we arrived at a huge concrete car park surrounded by rugby pitches. Rugby! I had never played rugby in my life and the thought of it made me want to cry, out of physical fear and in mourning for the absence of football from the curriculum.

It was only a couple of months earlier that my sporting prowess had seemed largely quite impressive. With other children in the playground as young as five, towering and athletic 11 year olds like me were quite something. Now, in the course of one summer holiday, I had become a dwarf. As I walked up the long driveway to the school assembly hall, I looked up at the sixth formers and they seemed to me like fully grown men, complete with booming voices, huge muscles and tufts of facial hair. I wasn’t sure I had ever come across any creature more terrifying than these man-boys, shouting and jumping on each other like children but with the strength and stature of adults. What if one of them bumped into me? Or told me what to do? Would I survive?

I remember being corralled into another car park with all the other first years. We stood around, feeling awkward and self-conscious in our unfamiliar school uniforms, with creases down the fronts of our too-long trousers, our blazers stiff and new, and our necks straining under the noose-like grip of collars and ties, which most of us were wearing for the first time in our lives.

But we weren’t all equal because Haberdashers’ had its own prep school and, as I stood there, knowing no one and too afraid to speak, other boys sauntered confidently in and greeted one another as old friends. There were hugs and backslaps, jokes and play-fights, and I remember thinking they were hammering it up, making a display of how confident and relaxed they felt in this terrifying place.

Watching these boys, I added them to the list of people I should be afraid of. Even though they were the same age and size as me, their confidence appalled me. I had never had any trouble making friends but now I was struck with a feeling of dread that I would never belong in this place. I was too insignificant a person.

Three decades later, several of the boys huddling with me that day in the car park in front of the assembly hall are still my closest friends."

William Sutcliffe’s latest novel, Whatever Makes You Happy, is published by Bloomsbury, price £7.99. See Bookshop, page 82.
Viv Groskop
Bruton Primary School, Somerset

"Everything will be all right," I told myself. "They have Plasticine." It was September 1978, I was five years old and Mrs Abbott's reception class hummed with the magic aroma of putty. The other smell was milk. And how special I felt when presented with my first, perfectly formed third-of-a-pint bottle, with glistening foil lid pierced with a green straw. I loved it because it made me feel grown-up while also reminding me of home.

Pacing around the classroom as we sucked furiously at our straws was Mrs Abbott, a giant figure in a turquoise twisset and pudding bowl haircut. She was kindly and old-fashioned, strict but maternal, everything you would hope for in your first teacher. But not even she could bring me comfort. How big everything seemed, and how noisy. You had to climb huge steps to the classrooms, and in the assembly hall my feet dangled awkwardly from the long wooden benches. That first morning I sat at the end because I thought I'd spotted an unwrapped toffee. But when I reached out to grab it, it turned out to be the end of the wooden peg holding the bench together. I looked around sheepishly, hoping no one had seen.

I don't recall speaking to anyone or making friends that day but I can picture myself sitting at my desk, trying to work out which hand should hold a pencil in case we started the writing that I longed to learn. And I spent a lot of time worrying about where the toilets were (a few days later I would arrive home in boys' shorts and football socks, the humiliating spare kit for anyone who hadn't made it in time).

At the end of this day, my mother asked me how it had gone. "Not very well," I replied. "They haven't taught me to read and write yet."

Viv Groskop is a journalist and broadcaster.

Alan Warner
Oban High School, Argyll

"As an oversensitive fellow, my first day at secondary was a huge cultural and personal wrench. At our tiny village primary school I could wear my Jaws T-shirts and my continually snatched Marine Corps cap, but now it had to be ties and uniforms, bought three sizes too large.

We were bussed in, and any carnival spirit withered to a hushed sense of oppression at the first sight of this Victorian pile with its gloomy Gothic bell tower. In the new gym hall we were divided into registration classes arranged by gender. Already a reader of Second World War lore I found it difficult not to imagine the names being called out as a heartless segregation in some military internment camp. I was assigned to class 1B1, which I thought sounded vaguely menacing. I could not have been more wrong. It was peopled with colourful psychopaths, from whom I was to learn much — principally when to shut up. And not a single one of my primary school classmates came with me. They all had at least one, sometimes two or three fellow villagers in their assigned classes but I was to be the sole representative of our village among 25 other boys, all unpredictable strangers. So I had been pitched from a world where we had swarm in the sunny river together, knowing each other's middle names, into a chaos of unfamiliarity where frantic period bells clattered in the corridors every half hour.

Techy Thomson was our registration teacher and he was formidable. The registration class was a forge of doom, where the metalwork classes for the technical department were based. The building looked like a smoky: belows, cruel clamps and grips hung from the walls, threatening some kind of physical torture to come. Sheets of thin metal were stored against the walls and around a minstrel's gallery, secured by straps, as if we were apprenticed to build a battleship.

I whispered to the boy next to me, who was to become a close ally: "Do you think we'll have to do any work today?" He shrugged, his eyes full of homesickness. Oban High served secondary pupils from the inner islands and he was from the Isle of Mull. That was tantamount to civilisation — he could stare out at it mournfully during lunch time — but rules stipulated that he must reside during the week at the hostel, of which there were four, scattered throughout the town and strictly segregated along gender lines. Island pupils returned by the ferries at weekends. In any disaster, it is strengthening to know that some are worse off than yourself.

The dreaded Lochgelly tawse, or school belt, was still used for corporal punishment in those times. Even on that very first day, Techy Thomson hoisted his out to display what would befal those who strayed from righteousness. It rose from his drawer, like an erect and mumified iguana, its two vicious fingers of thick leather beckoning to me.

That unnecessary separation from the boys and girls of my village had a deeply detrimental influence. Previously an outgoing and even popular figure at primary, I retreated into myself. It was the beginning of a certain loner quality that has never left me. Within two terms I was playing truant, hiding up in the hills and woods like a lone guerrilla and dodging appointments with the school psychologist. It was me against the world from that day on."

Alan Warner's latest novel The Stars in the Bright Sky (Jonathan Cape, £12.99) has been long-listed for this year's Man Booker Prize. See Express Bookshop, page 82.