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INTRODUCTION

Roald Dahl was a British novelist, short story writer, poet, screenwriter, and fighter pilot. His books have sold more than 250 million copies worldwide. He rose to prominence as a writer in the 1940s with works for both children and adults, and he became one of the world's best-selling authors. He has been referred to as "one of the greatest storytellers for children of the 20th century". His awards for contribution to literature include the 1983 World Fantasy Award for Life Achievement, and the British Book Awards' Children's Author of the Year in 1990. In 2008, The Times placed Dahl 16th on its list of "The 50 greatest British writers since 1945".

Biography

- ***Early life***

Roald Dahl was born in 1916 at Villa Marie, Fairwater Road, in Llandaff, Cardiff, Wales, to Norwegian parents, Harald Dahl and Sofie Magdalene Dahl . Dahl's father had emigrated to the UK from Sarpsborg in Norway, and settled in Cardiff in the 1880s. His mother came over and married his father in 1911. Dahl was named after the Norwegian polar explorer Roald Amundsen. His first language was Norwegian, which he spoke at home with his parents and his sisters Astri, Alfhild and Else. Dahl and his sisters were raised in the Lutheran faith, and were baptised at the Norwegian Church, Cardiff, where their parents worshipped. In 1920, when Dahl was three years old, his seven-year-old sister, Astri, died from appendicitis. Weeks later, his father died of pneumonia at the age of 57. With the option of returning to Norway to live with relatives, Dahl's mother decided to remain in Wales. Her husband Harald had wanted their children to be educated in British schools, which he considered the world's best.

Dahl first attended the Cathedral School, Llandaff. At the age of eight, he and four of his friends (one named Thwaites) were caned by the headmaster after putting a dead mouse

in a jar of gobstoppers at the local sweet shop, which was owned by a "mean and loathsome" old woman called Mrs Pratchett. The five boys named their prank the "Great Mouse Plot of 1924". Gobstoppers were a favourite sweet among British schoolboys between the two World Wars, and Dahl would refer to them in his creation, *Everlasting Gobstopper*, which was featured in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*.

Dahl transferred to a boarding school in England: St Peter's in Weston-super-Mare. His parents had wanted him to be educated at an English public school and, because of the regular ferry link across the Bristol Channel, this proved to be the nearest. Dahl's time at St Peter's was unpleasant; he was very homesick and wrote to his mother every week but never revealed his unhappiness to her. After her death in 1967, he learned that she had saved every one of his letters, in small bundles held together with green tape. In 2016, to mark the centenary of Dahl's birth, his letters to his mother were abridged and broadcast as BBC Radio 4's *Book of the Week*. Dahl wrote about his time at St Peter's in his autobiography *Boy: Tales of Childhood*.

- ***Repton School***

From 1929, when he was 13, Dahl attended Repton School in Derbyshire. Dahl disliked the hazing and described an environment of ritual cruelty and status domination, with younger boys having to act as personal servants for older boys, frequently subject to terrible beatings. His biographer Donald Sturrock described these violent experiences in Dahl's early life. Dahl expresses some of these darker experiences in his writings, which is also marked by his hatred of cruelty and corporal punishment. According to *Boy: Tales of Childhood*, a friend named Michael was viciously caned by headmaster Geoffrey Fisher. Writing in that same book, Dahl reflected: "All through my school life I was appalled by the fact that masters and senior boys were allowed literally to wound other boys, and sometimes quite severely. I couldn't get over it. I never have got over it." The master was later selected as the Archbishop of Canterbury and crowned Queen Elizabeth II in 1953. (According to Dahl's biographer Jeremy Treglown, the caning took place in May 1933, a year after Fisher had left Repton; the headmaster was in fact J. T. Christie, Fisher's successor.) Dahl said the incident caused him to "have doubts about religion and even about God".

He was never seen as a particularly talented writer in his school years, with one of his English teachers writing in his school report "I have never met anybody who so persistently writes words meaning the exact opposite of what is intended." Dahl was exceptionally tall, reaching 6 feet 6 inches (1.98 m) in adult life. He played sports including cricket, football and golf, and was made captain of the squash team. As well as

having a passion for literature, he developed an interest in photography and often carried a camera with him.

During his years at Repton, the Cadbury chocolate company would occasionally send boxes of new chocolates to the school to be tested by the pupils. Dahl would dream of inventing a new chocolate bar that would win the praise of Mr Cadbury himself; this inspired him in writing his third children's book, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964), and to refer to chocolate in other children's books.

Throughout his childhood and adolescent years, Dahl spent the majority of his summer holidays with his mother's family in Norway. He wrote about many happy memories from those visits in *Boy: Tales of Childhood*, such as when he replaced the tobacco in his half-sister's fiancé's pipe with goat droppings. He noted only one unhappy memory of his holidays in Norway: at around the age of eight, he had to have his adenoids removed by a doctor. His childhood and first job selling kerosene in Midsomer Norton and surrounding villages in Somerset are subjects in *Boy: Tales of Childhood*.

• ***After school***

After finishing his schooling, in August 1934 Dahl crossed the Atlantic on the RMS *Nova Scotia* and hiked through Newfoundland with the Public Schools Exploring Society.

In July 1934, Dahl joined the Shell Petroleum Company. Following two years of training in the United Kingdom, he was assigned first to Mombasa, Kenya, then to Dar-es-Salaam, Tanganyika (now Tanzania). Along with the only two other Shell employees in the entire territory, he lived in luxury in the Shell House outside Dar es Salaam, with a cook and personal servants. While out on assignments supplying oil to customers across Tanganyika, he encountered black mambas and lions, among other wildlife.

• ***Death***

Roald Dahl died on 23 November 1990, at the age of 74 of a rare cancer of the blood, myelodysplastic syndrome, in Oxford, and was buried in the cemetery at St Peter and St Paul's Church in Great Missenden, Buckinghamshire, England. According to his granddaughter, the family gave him a "sort of Viking funeral". He was buried with his snooker cues, some very good burgundy, chocolates, HB pencils and a power saw. Today, children continue to leave toys and flowers by his grave. In November 1996, the Roald Dahl Children's Gallery was opened at the Buckinghamshire County Museum in nearby Aylesbury. The main-belt asteroid 6223 Dahl, discovered by Czech astronomer Antonín Mrkos, was named in his memory in 1996. In 2002, one of Cardiff Bay's modern

landmarks, the Oval Basin plaza, was renamed Roald Dahl Plass. Plass is Norwegian for "place" or "square", alluding to the writer's Norwegian roots.

Writing

Dahl's first published work, inspired by a meeting with C. S. Forester, was "A Piece of Cake", on 1 August 1942. The story, about his wartime adventures, was bought by The Saturday Evening Post for US\$1,000 (a substantial sum in 1942) and published under the title "Shot Down Over Libya".

His first children's book was *The Gremlins*, published in 1943, about mischievous little creatures that were part of Royal Air Force folklore. The RAF pilots blamed the gremlins for all the problems with the aircraft. While at the British Embassy in Washington, Dahl sent a copy to the First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt who read it to her grandchildren, and the book was commissioned by Walt Disney for a film that was never made. Dahl went on to create some of the best-loved children's stories of the 20th century, such as *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *Matilda*, *James and the Giant Peach*, *The Witches*, *Fantastic Mr Fox*, *The BFG*, *The Twits* and *George's Marvellous Medicine*.

Dahl also had a successful parallel career as the writer of macabre adult short stories, which often blended humour and innocence with surprising plot twists. The Mystery Writers of America presented Dahl with three Edgar Awards for his work, and many were originally written for American magazines such as *Collier's* ("The Collector's Item" was *Collier's* Star Story of the week for 4 September 1948), *Ladies Home Journal*, *Harper's*, *Playboy* and *The New Yorker*. Works such as *Kiss Kiss* subsequently collected Dahl's stories into anthologies, and gained significant popularity. Dahl wrote more than 60 short stories; they have appeared in numerous collections, some only being published in book form after his death (see *List of Roald Dahl short stories*). His three Edgar Awards were given for: in 1954, the collection *Someone Like You*; in 1959, the story "The Landlady"; and in 1980, the episode of *Tales of the Unexpected* based on "Skin". One of his more famous adult stories, "The Smoker", also known as "Man from the South", was filmed twice as both 1960 and 1985 episodes of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, and also adapted into Quentin Tarantino's segment of the 1995 film *Four Rooms*. This oft-anthologised classic concerns a man in Jamaica who wagers with visitors in an attempt to claim the fingers from their hands. The 1960 Hitchcock version stars Steve McQueen and Peter Lorre.

Dahl acquired a traditional Romanichal vardo in the 1960s, and the family used it as a playhouse for his children at home in Great Missenden, Buckinghamshire. He later used the vardo as a writing room, where he wrote *Danny, the Champion of the World* in 1975. Dahl incorporated a Gypsy wagon into the main plot of the book, where the young English boy, Danny, and his father, William (played by Jeremy Irons in the film adaptation) live in a vardo. Many other scenes and characters from Great Missenden are reflected in his work. For example, the village library was the inspiration for Mrs Phelps' library in *Matilda*, where the title character devours classic literature by the age of four.

His short story collection *Tales of the Unexpected* was adapted to a successful TV series of the same name, beginning with *Man From the South*. When the stock of Dahl's own original stories was exhausted, the series continued by adapting stories by authors that were written in Dahl's style, including the writers John Collier and Stanley Ellin.

Some of his short stories are supposed to be extracts from the diary of his (fictional) Uncle Oswald, a rich gentleman whose sexual exploits form the subject of these stories. In his novel *My Uncle Oswald*, the uncle engages a temptress to seduce 20th century geniuses and royalty with a love potion secretly added to chocolate truffles made by Dahl's favourite chocolate shop, *Prestat of Piccadilly*, London. *Memories with Food at Gipsy House*, written with his wife Felicity and published posthumously in 1991, was a mixture of recipes, family reminiscences and Dahl's musings on favourite subjects such as chocolate, onions and claret.

- ***Children's fiction***

Dahl's children's works are usually told from the point of view of a child. They typically involve adult villains who hate and mistreat children, and feature at least one "good" adult to counteract the villain(s). These stock characters are possibly a reference to the abuse that Dahl stated that he experienced in the boarding schools he attended. Dahl's books see the triumph of the child; children's book critic Amanda Craig said, "He was unequivocal that it is the good, young and kind who triumph over the old, greedy and the wicked." While his whimsical fantasy stories feature an underlying warm sentiment, they are often juxtaposed with grotesque, darkly comic and sometimes harshly violent scenarios. *The Witches*, *George's Marvellous Medicine* and *Matilda* are examples of this formula. *The BFG* follows it in a more analogous way with the good giant (the BFG or "Big Friendly Giant") representing the "good adult" archetype and the other giants being the "bad adults". This formula is also somewhat evident in Dahl's film script for *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*. Class-conscious themes also surface in works such as *Fantastic Mr Fox* and *Danny, the Champion of the World* where the unpleasant wealthy neighbours are

outwitted.

Dahl also features in his books characters who are very fat, usually children. Augustus Gloop, Bruce Bogtrotter and Bruno Jenkins are a few of these characters, although an enormous woman named Aunt Sponge is featured in *James and the Giant Peach* and the nasty farmer Boggis in *Fantastic Mr Fox* is an enormously fat character. All of these characters (with the possible exception of Bruce Bogtrotter) are either villains or simply unpleasant gluttons. They are usually punished for this: Augustus Gloop drinks from Willy Wonka's chocolate river, disregarding the adults who tell him not to, and falls in, getting sucked up a pipe and nearly being turned into fudge. In *Matilda*, Bruce Bogtrotter steals cake from the evil headmistress, Miss Trunchbull, and is forced to eat a gigantic chocolate cake in front of the school. Featured in *The Witches*, Bruno Jenkins is lured by the witches into their convention with the promise of chocolate, before they turn him into a mouse. Aunt Sponge is flattened by a giant peach. Dahl's mother used to tell him and his sisters tales about trolls and other mythical Norwegian creatures and some of his children's books contain references or elements inspired by these stories, such as the giants in *The BFG*, the fox family in *Fantastic Mr Fox* and the trolls in *The Minpins*.

Receiving the 1983 World Fantasy Award for Life Achievement, Dahl encouraged his children and his readers to let their imagination run free. His daughter Lucy stated "his spirit was so large and so big he taught us to believe in magic."

• ***Influences***

A major part of Dahl's literary influences stemmed from his childhood. In his younger days, he was an avid reader, especially awed by fantastic tales of heroism and triumph. Amongst his favourite authors were Rudyard Kipling, Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray and Frederick Marryat, and their works went on to make a lasting mark on his life and writing. Finding too many distractions in his house, Dahl remembered the poet Dylan Thomas had found a peaceful shed to write in close to home. Dahl travelled to visit Thomas's hut in Carmarthenshire, Wales in the 1950s and, after taking a look inside, decided to make a replica of it to write in.

Dahl was also a huge fan of ghost stories and claimed that *Trolls* by Jonas Lie was one of the finest ghost stories ever written. While he was still a youngster, his mother, Sofie Dahl, would relate traditional Norwegian myths and legends from her native homeland to Dahl and his sisters. Dahl always maintained that his mother and her stories had a strong influence on his writing. In one interview, he mentioned: "She was a great teller of tales. Her memory was prodigious and nothing that ever happened to her in her life was

forgotten." When Dahl started writing and publishing his famous books for children, he created a grandmother character in *The Witches* and later stated that she was based directly on his own mother as a tribute.

The popular children`s books

1. Charlie and the Chocolate Factory

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory is a 1964 children's novel by British author Roald Dahl. The story features the adventures of young Charlie Bucket inside the chocolate factory of eccentric chocolatier Willy Wonka. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* was first published in the United States by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. in 1964. The book has been adapted into two major motion pictures: *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory* in 1971, and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* in 2005. The book's sequel, *Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator*, was written by Roald Dahl in 1971 and published in 1972. Dahl had also planned to write a third book in the series but never finished it.

1. Fantastic Mr. Fox

Fantastic Mr. Fox is a children's novel written by British author Roald Dahl. It was published in 1970, by George Allen & Unwin in the UK and Alfred A. Knopf in the U.S., with illustrations by Donald Chaffin.

1. Matilda

It was published in 1988 by Jonathan Cape in London, with 232 pages and illustrations by Quentin Blake. It was adapted as an audio reading by actress Kate Winslet. In 2012 *Matilda* was ranked number 30 among all-time children's novels in a survey published by *School Library Journal*, a monthly with primarily US audience. It was the first of four books by Dahl among the Top 100, more than any other writer.

1. The Witches

The Witches was originally published in 1983 by Jonathan Cape in London, with illustrations by Quentin Blake (like many of Dahl's works). The book was adapted into an unabridged audio reading by Lynn Redgrave, a stage play and a two-part radio dramatisation for the BBC, a 1990 movie directed by Nicolas Roeg which starred Anjelica Huston and Rowan Atkinson, and an opera by Marcus Paus and Ole Paus.

1. The Enormous Crocodile

The story of how clever and bloodthirsty the Great Crocodile dreamed of eating little children and how it didn't work.

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