

Roald Dahl: The Man Who Believed in Magic



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About The Letterpress Project

At The Letterpress Project we believe that there is something very special about reading books. Holding them in your hands, turning the pages, catching the smell of paper old and new, marveling at the skills of the illustrator and letting the weight of all those pages settle in your hand or on your lap – it's an invitation to a journey that can take you anywhere.

We think that books are a gateway to ideas and adventures that expand our understanding of the world and ourselves. All reading can do that but nothing does it better than the collation of paper and ink bound between two covers that, when you open it, transforms into a relationship between you and the author.

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Roald Dahl: The Man Who Believed in Magic

*“Those who don’t believe in magic
will never find it”*

From Roald Dahl The Minpins 1991

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Acknowledgments

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The names of all the contributors can be found at the back of this publication.

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*“When you grow up and have children of your own, do please remember something important: A stodgy parent is not fun at all! What a child wants – and **DESERVES** – is a parent who is **SPARKY!**”*

Roald Dahl: Danny the Champion of the World

Front cover photograph by Barbara Partridge

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Preface

It seems that just about everybody is talking and writing about the author Roald Dahl in this 2016 centenary year of his birth and we wanted to add a Letterpress Project publication to the mix. We sent round a flyer to invite any of the many Roald Dahl fans to send us pieces of writing, poetry, pictures and photos that summed up why he was so influential and special. As a result, we were really delighted to receive several contributions from children's authors, students, children, friends and family and what you read on the following pages is the splendid result.

Every written piece in this collection tells a different personal story but all are affectionate and pay homage to the author's impressive skills with language and storytelling. Contributors – whether as readers or teachers – admire his ability to lift children and adults into vivid imaginative worlds that remind us of the best traditional fairy tales and that are peopled by memorably described characters that are as powerful as those created by Charles Dickens. Many of his child protagonists are wise, assertive and give us a deeply moral view of the world. Several adult contributors explain how Roald Dahl somehow manages to convey layers of danger, cruelty and laugh out loud humour alongside tenderness and compassion in all of his stories. Others reflect on how he continues to shape their own writing for children and also how they now as adults reflect on their roles as parents and teachers. It seems that he has undoubtedly had a profound and lifelong effect on everyone concerned.

And let's not forget all the children who have captured his magic in their marvellous drawings of characters like The BFG, Fantastic Mr Fox and scenes from Esio Trot and Matilda. Sometimes a picture drawn by an enthusiastic child in response to a story can express so much more than words can. It seems that so many children continue to be spellbound by his stories, respond imaginatively to his words and recognise themselves in his child characters, a remarkable set of achievements for any author.

Most of all we hope that all the pieces in this collection about a man who believed in magic and that reading it will bring a big smile to your face. Perhaps it will help you to remember your own fond memories of Roald Dahl's many books with their larger than life characters and cautionary tales. We also hope that you might be inspired and encouraged to reread particular favourites, or even to discover ones you never quite got round to.

Karen Argent: Project Director

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Photograph by Barbara Partridge

Teaching Dahl

By Alan Gibbons

Two things made me a writer. The first was obviously books. Books and writers. Because writers make books. The second was readers. Children who read. Because children read books. Now once upon a time, when Nicky Morgan was still a fresh-faced law student with startled eyes and Michael Gove was being constructed out of bits of rejected Pinocchio dolls, teachers were much more free to read books aloud for the sheer pleasure of sharing a wonderful story. That is when I started teaching, somewhere between Margaret Thatcher deciding to snatch children's milk and Margaret Thatcher deciding to close lots of coalmines. I used to do something very, very bad back then. I used to read aloud to the children in my class and I didn't care whether it was called shared or paired or pared reading or whether it came in a literacy hour or a literacy ten minutes or a literacy forever. I read aloud at the end of every lesson and the start of many, regardless of what the lesson was and got the children to join in. They always wanted more and it helped to make them lifelong readers and lifelong learners. Quite simply, at every level, it worked.

Now, those days came to an end. Successive education ministers ministered and bullied and sent in busy, suited people with nine-subject curriculums (or is it curricula, lardy-dum, lardy dah?), literacy hours and translucent hundred word sheets to analyse reading, first, fast and only phonics and fronted adverbials and the time to read aloud shrivelled and shrank and schools became dark and dank and PISA them as you might, standards neither rose nor fell, but sat there like fat hornswogglers, hornswoggling away. OK, all this is history, but reading aloud should not be history. Even in these prescriptive, data-doodled, age-related Great Expectations, Pip Dangling, Neo-Wackford Squeering days, good teachers can and should read aloud to children and hook them on reading for pleasure, laughter, gasping and subversion. So here comes the towering, booming, imagination-extending Mr Dahl

I discovered Roald Dahl's wonderful, inventive children's books the moment I started teaching. The instant I saw Quentin Blake's illustrations, I could not wait to read them to my class and read them I did, putting on all the voices and contorting my face to convey the characters. Most of Dahl's work is perfect to read out loud. There is something structured and systematic and mythic and sequenced about the way these tales unfold. They are satisfying because the bits fit together like lego. Things click and hook up with the reliability and recognisability of fairy tales. Take Charlie and the Chocolate Factory. Not once did I ever have to shush a child when I was reading that book. As each of the wayward, selfish children got their comeuppance, each slice of the fearsome, dark morality tale ended with a perfect sense of closure. (I have to admit the Glass Elevator was less successful and felt like a sequel demanded by a publisher). The names of the chocolate bars were enough to have my young charges salivating. There were bright eyes. There was laughter. There was engagement at the very highest level. I felt like a real teacher because the air was buzzing with an electric charge that made the children want to read. Hear that, not be told to read, not be dragooned through an age-inappropriate systematised and codified grammar plucked from Edwardian England, but magically entwined, immersed and braised in reading. There

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Drawing by Ellie-May Vincent

was no trick, no con. I loved these books and my love of them communicated naturally and organically to the children in my care.

OK, so there was structure, but there was so much more. There was shock. There was surprise. There was life. With Dahl, you weren't going to feel safe. There was all the precariousness and insecurity of childhood. All too often, schools now spin webs of policy-prestidigitated protections, but life is not safe. It is a tragicomedy and it can end in death. Dahl's is a prickly, rollercoaster world of dread doings. Here is the legendary opening of *James and the Giant Peach*:

“Until he was four years old James Henry Trotter had had a happy life. He lived peacefully with his mother and father in a beautiful house by the sea. There were always plenty of other children to play with and there was a sandy beach for him to run about on and the ocean to paddle in. It was the perfect life for a small boy. Then one day James's mother and father went to London to do some shopping and there a terrible thing happened. Both of them suddenly got eaten up in full daylight mind you and on a crowded street by an enormous angry rhinoceros which had escaped from the London zoo.”

Much of Dahl is here, the sense of a kind of fairy tale, the systematic unfolding, the punch in the solar plexus scariness of life and, behind it all, the author's mischief.

Most of all, there is the language, rich, inventive, robust and ribald.

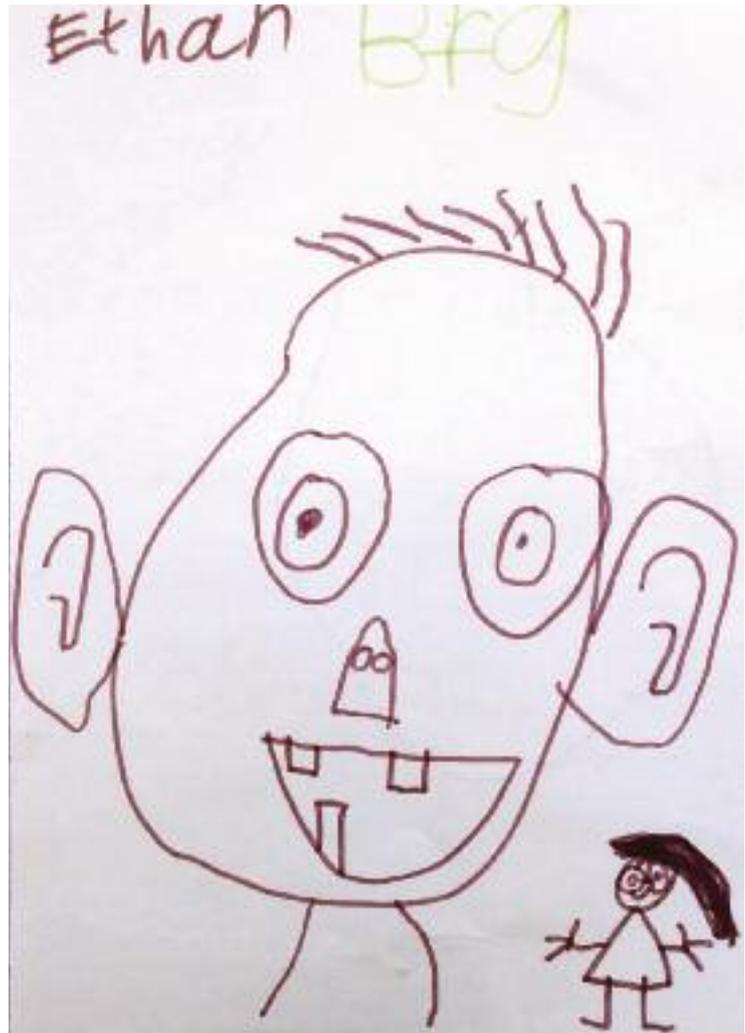
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There is this from 'George's Marvellous Medicine':

'George couldn't help disliking Grandma. She was a selfish, grumpy old woman. She had pale brown teeth and a small puckered-up mouth like a dog's bottom.'

We have taunts at grizzly old grunions and hags. Some modern adult readers find instances of misogyny and cruelty in Dahl and he does walk a line in his gyroscopic grotesqueries, but it works a gazillion times more than it offends (and, what the hell, did he care one jot whether he offended those bloody adults? He was writing for kids.)

The Twits are ugly. Mr Twit's beard is teeming with all kinds of grotesque gobbets of food. The 'Vitches' are revolting. The description of their feet and scalps could keep a legion of kids up at night, checking under the bed and behind the curtains.



Drawing by Ethan Argent

There is the alliteration: Boggis, Bunce and Bean. There are the rollicking, rapid-racing rhythms of his poems and stories like the Giraffe, the Pelly and Me and The Enormous Crocodile. Who can forget the unfortunate reptile being hurled into the sun to sizzle like a sausage? Perfect. As perfect as this:

“The small girl smiles. One eyelid flickers.

She whips a pistol from her knickers.

She aims it at the creature's head

And bang bang bang, she shoots him dead.”

I could feel the buzz of appreciation from the children sitting cross-legged on the mat. They asked for it to be read again and again and again and I obliged, with a suitable pause before unleashing that dangerous word knickers. I used to turn and glance furtively at the door.

“Do you think Mrs Giubertoni will let me say that, knickers? I mean head teachers don't

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like teachers saying knickers. I could get sacked for saying knickers. I don't think I said it. Did I say knickers?"

And on it went. And we got 100% of our kids to Level 4 a few years later under Mr Jorgensen's reign. (Interesting that these two head teachers in working class Knowsley had foreign-sounding names, one Italian, one Danish. Norwegian-descended Dahl would have appreciated that.)

And the language, the names, the naughty nouns, acrobatic adjectives and viral verbs. We luxuriated in words like razztwizzler, scrotty, snozzcumber and the all-time favourite, the elevating power of the whizzpopper. What about the giants? There were the Fleshlumpeater, the Bonecruncher, the Manhugger, the Childchewer, the Meatdripper, the Gizzardgulper, the Maidmasher, the Bloodbottler, and the Butcher Boy.

How we trembled at the Bloodbottler's terrifying snarl: "Runt! Is you there, Runt? I is hearing you jabbeling!"

Amid the invention and the fun, there was always a sense of danger and impending loss. Dahl was injured himself and suffered personal tragedies. One of his daughters died from measles and his son had a very bad accident. I am sure the pain leaked and oozed into the fabric of his stories. Something else infuses the pages of his books, however, and that is love. No matter how much the macabre stalks Dahl's universe, no matter how many Rabelaisian characters leap forth, there is always a huge affection for the young protagonists picking their way through his universe.

Whether it is impoverished, true-believing Charlie Bucket, book-loving Matilda or wide-eyed Sophie stolen away in the night, Dahl treasures his heroes. Many people reflect on Dahl's hostility to adults, but not all adults. For all the retribution he deals out to the wheeler-dealers, the cruel, the bullies, the giants, Dahl has many adults who care, who nurture, who offer a protective arm: the BFG, Grandpa in Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, Miss Honey in Matilda and Grandma in the Witches. A personal favourite of mine is the relationship between father and son in Danny the Champion of the World. All the classic Dahl themes are there: danger, a self-satisfied villain, rich, fat Mr Hazell hosting a party for dukes, lords, barons, baronets and wealthy businessmen, in short 'fancy folk.' There is the invention of the pheasants and raisins, the systematic plotting. Right at the heart of the book is Danny and his dad.

As the book says: "Grown-ups are complicated creatures, full of quirks and secrets."

But they're not all bad.

Even teachers.

The Whoopsy-whiffling World of Mr Dahl

(In the manner of Revolting Rhymes)

By Denise Hayes

Here's a poem to laud the glories
Of Mr Dahl's fantastic stories.
From gremlins to the BFG
Just step inside and you will see:
A peach that's flying over mountains,
Oompa Loompas, chocolate fountains.
On each page the magic lingers,
Spells and potions, pointing fingers.
And Miss M's telekinesis –
Just read on – the fun increases.

Meet villains dumb and mean and bonkers
Boggis, Bunce and Bean and Clonkers.
See witches wearing gloves and pearls,
Bloodbottlers hunting juicy girls.
The rotters are so plain to spot.
Take Mr Twit, beard full of grot –
Like Stilton and the odd sardine –
And Wormwood with his ties of green.
They're all so vile we don't give tuppence.
When each one meets an apt comeuppance.

Crummy kinsfolk soon get banished,
Blown-up, shrunk-down, eaten, vanished.
Matilda's pa was in with crooks,
But worst of all he hated books.
So in the end he had to flee
Pursued for auto-larceny
And children, piggy, spoilt and rude
Risk ending up as squirrel food;
Augustus Gloop, Veruca Salt
Meet nasty endings – all their fault.

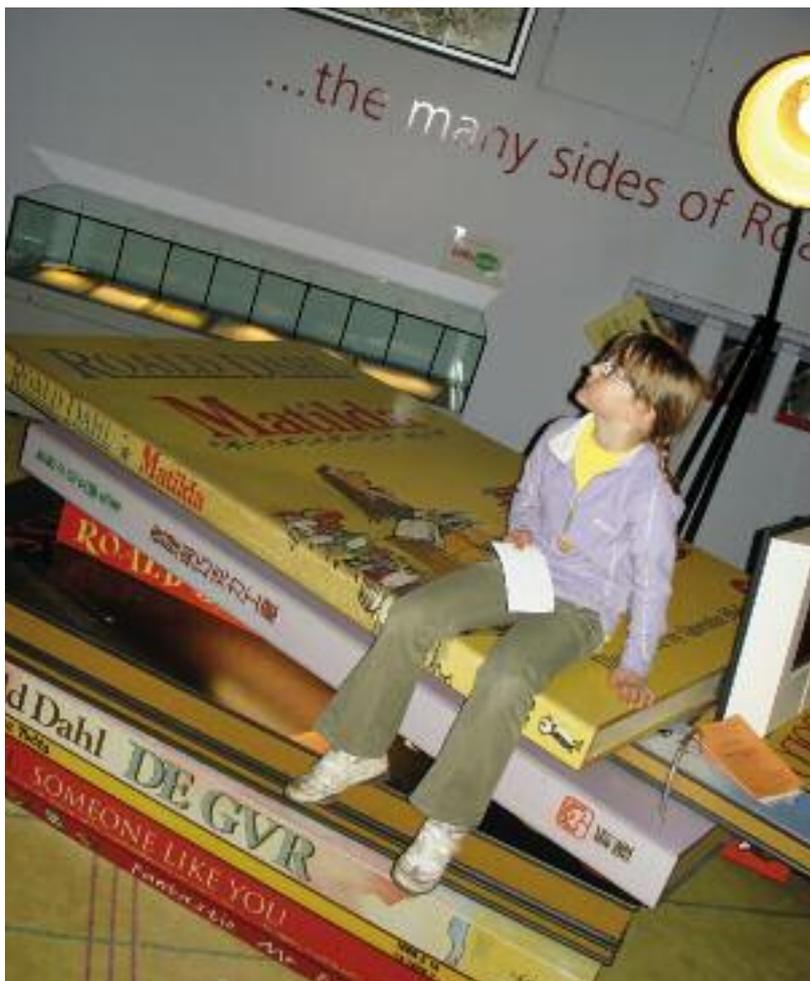
The good guys are a world apart:
Charlie B has a golden heart.
And though her pa thinks books are beastly,
Matilda reads both Wells and Priestley
Mr Fox is such a trickster
And George – he makes a marvellous mixture.
Sophie meets a friendly giant
Who speaks a language very pliant.

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Gobblefunk words emerge non-stop
Like gloriumptious and whizz-pop.
It's all such whoopsy-flunkers fun
For kiddles, grown-ups – everyone.

Read on read on and you will find
Dyslexia – the backward kind:
An esio trot and cars that krap,
Oodles of nuf in every trap.
Such linguistic playful fiddling
Make these stories so time-twiddling.
Our quibbler simply has no equal.
How we long for one more sequel.

At six foot six our Mr D
Was a real life BFG.
His whispered dreams in books unfurled
Take children to another world.



Photograph by Barbara Partridge

Roald Dahl and the Magic of the World

By Mike Revell

“And above all, watch with glittering eyes the whole world around you because the greatest secrets are always hidden in the most unlikely places. Those who don't believe in magic will never find it.”

Roald Dahl

When I was a kid, I really didn't like reading – and even being read to seemed like a waste of time. It felt too much like school work to me, and I'd rather be playing computer games or watching TV or kicking a ball around in the park. But Roald Dahl stories were different. When my teacher read a Roald Dahl book, I didn't daydream or wish I was elsewhere: I was captivated by the story.

I think the reason why is simple. The books were fun. Darkly fun, riotously fun, usually deliciously fun, with outrageous sweets and explosive potions. But most of all, they were magical. Whether it was *The BFG*, with giants like the Fleshlumpeater and the Bloodbottler wandering around, or *James and the Giant Peach*, with the evil aunts and the adventurous insects, Roald Dahl managed to capture magic in a way that few other authors did.

Magic played a large role in his stories because he knew how to look for magic in the world. It lurks everywhere, if you look for it. Roald Dahl was a big believer in looking at the world, really looking, and that's something that's always stuck with me. When I realised that I wanted to be a writer myself, I remembered his words. I remembered that those who don't believe in magic will never find it, and knew that if I wanted to come up with stories of my own that were as exciting as his, I would have to find the magic that's hidden all around us.

When I was writing *Stonebird*, my first book, I was working in Cambridge. As I walked around the city, I remembered Roald Dahl's words, and when I looked at the old buildings so full of history, I noticed gargoyles looking down on the streets and the shops. Peering up at them, you could almost feel the magic. It got me wondering ... what if gargoyles could come alive? If gargoyles are on old buildings to protect them from evil spirits, what else could they protect? Who else could they protect? Looking for magic gives you these questions, and questions are where stories come from.

Magic was at the heart of so many of Roald Dahl's stories, and it created such a sense of wonder that it was impossible not to like them. That's why his books were loved by children and adults alike, and why they're still enjoyed by so many people today. So watch with glittering eyes the whole world around you, and keep believing in magic. I know I will!



Drawing by Ethan Argent

Roald Dahl in Brief

Matilda

Tudor Popa, 11, Romania

"Matilda" was my first encounter with Roald Dahl's books. It was so interesting, I couldn't let it out of my hand. I was at the seaside when reading it and all the other children around me were swimming and playing in the sand. Yet, the book was so captivating, funny and ingenious that it was better than the sea, which I love so much. After that I continued with "The Witches" (watch out, children!), "The BFG" (I couldn't stop laughing, it's incredible), "James and the Giant Peach" (I wish I have a giant peach!) and the "Fantastic Mr Fox" (so ugly to steal!).

The summer holiday just begun in Romania. On my book shelf wait for me "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory" and "Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator". I know my summer holiday will be better because of them!

Drawing by Tudor Popa



What I like about Roald Dahl's writing

Anna Partridge

I love words. Roald Dahl loved words, too, and saw them for what they are: a bunch of letters randomly arranged, funny things to be played around with. The language and words he created, 'Gobblefunk', consists of obscure half-words and almost-words stuck together, sometimes with extra bits in between.

In the BFG, we are introduced to two different kinds of dreams - Dahl refers to them as either a 'ringbeller' or a 'trogglehumper'. It is very easy to work out which kind is good and which kind is bad, and for me, this is delightful. All it requires is a little imagination. Lexically, Roald Dahl does not play by the rules - his words are magical, funny, sometimes onomatopoeic, and above all, very befitting of the creative and playful universes in which they exist.

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Remembering Charlie

Barbara Partridge

I read Charlie and the Chocolate Factory to my Y2 class in 1994. This was a school in a deprived area- shabby housing, low incomes. The children had a scheme book and a library book to take home and these were often the only books in their house. My class had never heard of this book. I felt honoured to read it to them. They adored it. Above all they became ferociously attached to Charlie Bucket almost immediately. Story time was anticipated from morning registration onwards *“Miss – you are gonna read that book, later yeah, that Charlie book, ennit? Yeah Miss? Yeah?”*

I began Chapter 11 trying to keep my voice calm – that pivotal moment in Charlie's life was about to unfold. How would they react?

“Charlie picked it up and tore off the wrapper...and suddenly..from under the wrapper..there came a brilliant flash of gold.”

My class erupted in cheers and incredulous shouts, standing up and punching the air, hugging each other. Several minutes elapsed before they could compose themselves and listen to the rest. Which was fortunate because I was rather tearful myself after witnessing this spontaneous outpouring of emotion. Writing this now I have a lump in my throat 22 years later.

Roald Dahl – Memories of Favourite Books

Claire Monk

As a child Roald Dahl was one of my favourite authors. I have particular memories of his books, for instance: I remember buying and reading George's Marvellous Medicine while on holiday in St. Ives when I was eight; I also remember Rik Mayall reading this book fantastically on Jackanory; being given The Witches for Christmas one year (which I think I read in a matter of days); my Dad reading Danny the Champion of the World to my brother; and, of course, sniggering with friends at School over the line “she whipped a pistol from her knickers” from Revolting Rhymes.

One memory though that sticks with me in particular – and for which makes this my favourite book – my First School teacher, Mr. Roper, reading “The BFG” to us. As a child Mr. Roper was perhaps one of the best and yet scariest teachers I had. He is over 6 foot tall (I don't know his exact height) but as a small child, he seemed enormous, and he had a great, booming voice – if he ever told someone off, the whole class knew about it!, yet these features seemed to make him perfect person to read “The BFG” to a group of young, impressionable children. I don't remember him reading any other stories to us (of course, he did) but the way he read the BFG just sticks in my mind. It was the summer term, and we used to sit on the carpet of the temporary classroom with the sun shining through the windows. We were all eager for the next storytime for our very own BFG, Mr Roper, animatedly reading about Sophie and “snozzcumbers”, “froboscottle” and “whizpopping”. I don't think anyone could ever read this book to me in the same, memorable way.

A Tribute to Roald Dahl

Katrina Jan

From chocolate factories to giant peaches,
From sly foxes to giants' speeches,
In a world full of fun and wonder,
Where little girls and boys do wonder,
And wander.
From cars that go chitty, chitty
And twits who are so witty, witty
Life can never be dull,
When there's so much to ponder.
From bloodthirsty witches to golden tickets,
From murderous housewives to forest thickets,
In a realm full of vice and hunger,
Where little girls and boys do wonder,
And wander.
From cars that go bang, bang
To Brucie's cram, cram
Life can never be dull,
When there's so much out yonder.
From magical orphans to transforming mice,
From marvellous medicines to a chocolate paradise,
Written for those wild, free and younger.
Their caught dreams,
Twirled and swirled.
We are all Dahl's champions of the world.

My Favourite Dahl

Yushra Fatima

As a child, I remember picking these books after their quirky illustrations caught my eye in the school library. I thoroughly enjoyed these books and with each book read, it was increasingly difficult to choose a firm favourite.

Although it is extremely difficult to choose a favourite Roald Dahl book, I have settled on four of my most favourites; The Witches, The BFG, Matilda and finally, James and the Giant Peach. Roald Dahl is probably one of the best children's author, having written many extremely popular books, some of which adapted into movies.

Even though I haven't actually picked up a Dahl book for years, I still remember what happens in each book and the unique characters that Dahl brought to life.

I feel very lucky to have siblings and cousins who love Dahl's work as much as I do. In fact, one of my cousins won all of Dahl's books in a competition after he was the one who did the most reviews. He has even promised to give me some books!

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Currently, I have just finished listening to the audio book for *The BFG* and feelings of nostalgia rushed through my veins as I lay back, eyes shut and ears open. To say it was amazing doesn't do Dahl any justice. His writing skills are out of this world, making his work entertaining while making the story so smooth and easy to grapple.

I don't think adults are ever going to outgrow such books, I know I won't! I am going to spend the rest of my summer listening to more audio books.

Matilda

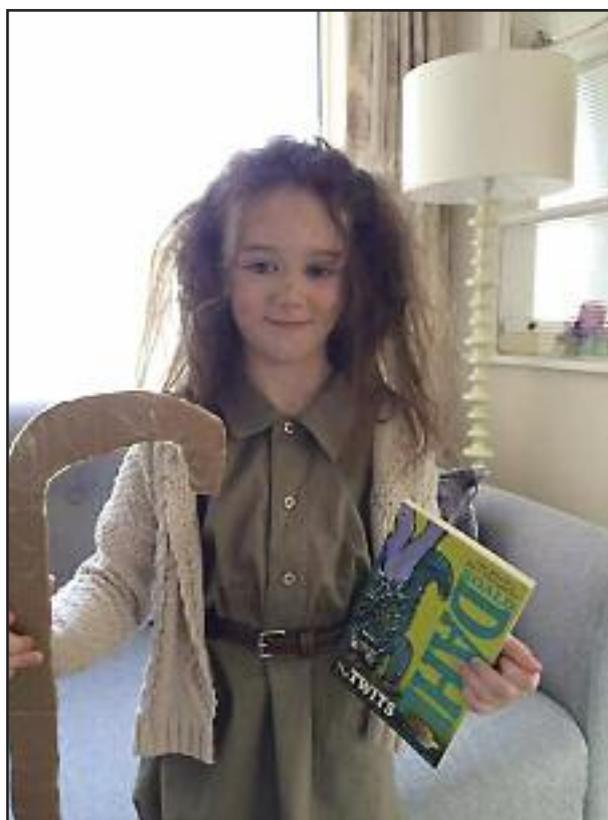
Victoria Hingley

As the eldest child of a large family I found huge comfort in the escapism of reading. I can still vividly remember receiving *Matilda* in hardback for Christmas the year it was released. I took it to school and sat in the playground reading it rather than playing with my friends. From the first page I was hooked and devoured everything I could by Roald Dahl from there on.

The fantastic language and character descriptions in all of his books, coupled with Quinton Blake's drawings were like nothing I had ever read or seen before. I don't believe any other children's author has managed to capture that exact mixture of magic, imagination and marvelous disgusting-ness that define Roald Dahl's work.

Looking back I didn't have the happiest of childhoods but I distinctly remember feeling an affiliation with *Matilda* and her love affair with books and the solace and joy that she gained from them. Even as a child I was aware that in Roald Dahl books the underdog always got their moment to shine or their happy ending and the positivity and reassurance that can give to a child is priceless.

As an adult I have gifted many children with Roald Dahl books for birthdays and Christmas over the years and started reading them to my daughter, Evelyn, when she was in pre-school. Aged 6, she now gets them off the bookshelf to read herself and I love hearing her chuckle away and the imagination she gained from immersing herself in the world of Roald Dahl.



Photograph by Victoria Hingley

Necessary moments of menace

Beth Collett

I've never been one for horror films; anyone who knows me could tell you that. I don't see the point in being scared stiff during a film – you just don't enjoy it. But the funny thing is, what I remember as the biggest thrill when watching Roald Dahl's fantastical creations in their original cinematic glory was the bubbling sensation of fear in the pit of my stomach – but the sort of fear that keeps your eyes glued to the screen, not the sort that has them peering through sweaty fingers.

Granted, there are some genuinely scary bits in his stories. Charlie & the Chocolate Factory, for example: when the tour group are racing through the tunnel at break-neck speed, faster and faster, with no indication of slowing; when Charlie and Grandpa Joe are nearly sucked through the fan blades in the fizzy lifting room; when Willy Wonka cracks and loses his temper with Charlie at the end. But these fleeting moments of menace punctuate the story perfectly; without them, my eyes might've glazed over slightly or wandered out the window.

This is perhaps why I wasn't wholly enamoured of the latest BFG adaptation, which fails to take the necessary leap into fearful territory and instead favours comic value. In the original 1989 version, the giants' depiction lives up to their terrifying names (Bloodbottler, Bonecruncher, Meatdripper etc.); they are visual monstrosities, with red eyeballs and sharp teeth. In contrast, Steven Spielberg's interpretation features clumsy human-like giants that fall over each other and whose stupidity renders them essentially harmless. Yes, the physical comedy may be amusing to children, but do these characters create the same lasting impact – the one that had me and so many others returning to the 2D original time and time again? The two sprogs sitting next to me in the cinema played musical chairs for the duration and got up for the toilet at least twice, so I'm inclined to think not.

George's Marvellous Medicine

by Lily Cronin

In the story are George Kranky, Mr Killy Kranky, Mrs Kranky and Grandma. The Grandma is a bit mean to George as she makes him feel scared, telling him things that aren't true. George thinks he wants to trick his Grandma and decides to make some medicine. First he goes into the bathroom to get some ingredients and the second place he goes is the garage. He puts lots of different things into the potion like lipstick, animal pills, brown pain, perfume and lots of other weird things. When he gives her the medicine she grows very big. When his Mom and Dad get home his dad goes 'walacaboo!' because he thinks they are going to be famous. Then they make some more medicine and test it on the chickens.

I like this story because at first you think it is going to be horrible because the Grandma is mean but then you really like it because it was funny when George gave the Grandma the medicine.



Drawing by Lily Cronin



Author Roald Dahl: Impact and Potential

Bev Brenna, University of Saskatchewan

**Thanks to students in Drama 285.3 for their recent responses to Dahl's work

This paper begins by summarizing my experiences thirty years ago as a classroom teacher in a rural Saskatchewan setting. In that context, I elicited and observed grade-six students' responses to Roald Dahl's work offered as a teacher read-aloud and then independent reading. The paper then explores the contemporary responses of Canadian university students to Dahl's writing. The combination of past and present perspectives offers insights for educators regarding the impact and potential of an author whose work is truly timeless.

Dahl Connections, 1986

It was a Canadian winter in 1986. I was a novice grade six teacher in a rural Saskatchewan school, challenged to engage a diverse and notably unruly class of eleven and twelve-year-olds. I believed strongly in the power of adult read-alouds, modelling vocabulary and structural conventions of text as well as love of literature, but with this crowd I struggled to find a just-right book. Fortunately for all of us, I eventually fastened upon Roald Dahl's novel *The Witches*.

The grade-six students hadn't previously experienced any of Dahl's writing, and some of them hadn't yet found enjoyment in literature at all. Dahl's sense of humour and dark undertones were exactly what I was hoping for. His book proved spellbinding, especially the section where the narrator asks the listening audience to speculate on how the teacher reading to them right now could very well be a witch.

The glorious subversity of Dahl's messages about authority, particularly working against adult authority, were not lost on this group of adolescents, nor were these messages lost on me as a teacher whose ability to control the class constantly fluctuated. I soon found myself in the ironical situation of managing student behavior consistently only when I was reading to them about children who triumphed over adults.

As the students begged daily for more book time, I soon developed the if/then strategy: if we could complete such and such, then we would be able to add in minutes with Dahl. Other Dahl titles placed in the classroom library became markedly popular, supporting students' independent reading and building the kind of "literacy garden" I hoped to promote. Roald Dahl thus unknowingly became a lifeline for classroom management as well as encouraging literacy development through wide reading, two things that essentially saved my life as a teacher.

Going beyond reading one book and teaching children to enjoy one author, Dahl taught me that once you have accomplished a positive activity with children, you can use it to establish other positive experiences—much as a snowball rolled in a field of wet snow continues to expand. Although his English climate would not have strongly supported a snow metaphor, I'm going to claim here that Dahl was, in fact, one of my most effective snowballs. His writing came to me early in my career when I needed it

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most, but what its successful use taught me has been instrumental in my teaching at all levels. I'm delighted to see the snowballs continue to come whizzing past from the new teachers with whom I work. The big snowballs with rocks in the centre that hit me square in the back of the head are very likely Dahl inspired.

Dahl Connections 2016

It is the spring of 2016. Thirty years after my earliest teaching experiences in elementary school, I am a university instructor involved in a module of children's theatre with a new group of university students in a Canadian Study Abroad Course located for the most part in London, England. The play adaptation of *Matilda*, commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company and re-imagined for the stage by Dennis Kelly, is on the course schedule. Beginning this module, I recalled my classroom experiences with Dahl's work, and wondered how this group of university students would respond to *Matilda*.

From an initial survey (see Appendix A), I learned that a quarter of this group of students had not previously heard of Dahl or his work; another quarter had some familiarization with his work, either through the movie version of *Matilda* or the books *Matilda* and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. About half of the students had more extensive experience with Dahl's writing, listing a plethora of titles previously read. This latter group used the following words to describe his style: boisterous, daring, evocative, magical, fantastical, creative, imaginative, unique, visionary, descriptive, dark, real, exciting, scary, tantalizing, and revolutionary.

Following the reading of part of Chapter One from the story and a related discussion and improvisation opportunity, a viewing of the stage version of *Matilda* occurred on May 11, 2016, at the Cambridge Theatre. The university student group was then invited to respond to a second survey (see Appendix B) that asked for their further responses to Dahl's work. It is important to note that the responses to both surveys were voluntary, provided anonymously, and offer insights from adults with various levels of experience with Dahl's work. A combined WordCloud, created with the words from both surveys (see Appendix B), has been pasted below as Figure 1:

Note the wide range of different words suggested as descriptors of Dahl's craft, and the larger, bolded words that represent words used by multiple respondents. The positivity with which this group of adults engaged with Dahl's writing, both in retrospect as they mined their memories of past reading, and through this current experience, was very apparent. In this way, their responses encourage teachers to consider including Dahl's work in contemporary classrooms.

As teachers work to increase their reading repertoire with students in mind, Dahl's writing can be important for a number of reasons. It can offer teachers a tremendous resource with which to engage children. And it can entertain teachers as adult readers who might then model authentic responses to work that is shared with their classes. Both of these attributes—engaging to children and entertaining to adults—are important as educators seek to find material to include on their reading lists or share as read-alouds with young people. By reading aloud work that prompts mutual enjoyment, a true classroom literacy club can be developed.

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Figure 1: WordCloud of Descriptive Words Applied to Dahl's Work by University Students

When asked about particular purposes a viewing of *Matilda* might serve, a number of alternatives emerged in the responses of the university student group. The most popular response involved a model for children that involves standing up for what is right and defending yourself. Two other more common responses associated with Dahl's work included a heightened potential to encourage reading and to present key life lessons and values inspirationally learned from another child through fictional characterization.

Other responses contained ideas about the importance of visual information as supports for comprehending complex vocabulary, and the value of a safe escape provided by theatre in which to explore ideas about learning, storytelling, and the imagination. Serious, mature themes were acknowledged here that spoke to adults as well as children. *Matilda*, said one respondent, encourages children not to be "in a hurry to grow up" while at the same time "allows adults to rediscover a respective sense of play". Another respondent mentioned a "balance between order and rebellion"—it's okay for children to know that they can "revolt a little bit"; it's also important for adults to realize that "order works but can be counterproductive". Through the exaggerated characterization of Dahl's writing, we see through humour aspects of ourselves that bear consideration.

Advice for teachers who might be considering the inclusion of Dahl's work in classroom programs was varied but always positive, often centring on qualities related to humour and respect for children as well as writing qualities such as the use of descriptive words in context. Teachers were invited to "trust the writing" because it brings out playfulness. "You don't have to go overboard to make it 'fun' for kids" ... "teachers should capitalize on the fact that Dahl's work is so fun to read." Teachers

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were encouraged to “keep it fun” and remember that teaching can occur “through entertainment” as children’s thinking is provoked.

Dahl’s writing was seen by these respondents to support creative reactions and extensions with a richness that encourages children to go beyond the story in terms of their responses. Teachers were encouraged to “read it to them as written...storytell...” and through Dahl’s work “...break the tension and the routine” of classroom life. A warning was also given, with educators reminded that deep responses to Dahl’s text could also be extinguished through vocabulary worksheets and “the kind of busy work common in schools.”

One respondent said, “As...an early reader, I really connected with Matilda, and it made me feel that being different was a superpower, not something to be ashamed of.” Another commented on the tone of Dahl’s work—promising that children will definitely navigate his dark territory just fine. It’s clear that this group of university students hopes teachers will consider the potentiality of inviting Roald Dahl into their classrooms. As another respondent advised: “Commit to it.”

Happy 100th Birthday, Roald Dahl! May your timeless work see many more birthdays in the hands of readers young and old!



The BFG and the snowcumber

Drawing by Mara Popa

Danny, Still My Champion of the World

By Mark Cronin

The many works of Roald Dahl have undoubtedly left an indelible mark on me and I still feel the same excitement and wonder when I think about Charlie revealing the golden ticket after fortuitously finding some money in the gutter or the incredible world James encountered inside the stone of the giant peach that I did the first time I heard these stories. But by far the story which I treasure the most is Danny the champion of the world as it continues to provide me with inspiration to this day.

My earliest memory comes from being read the story at the age of 8 or 9 whilst my classmates and me sat on a carpet in our classroom in Primary School. I'll never forget the description of Danny and his father preparing the raisins laced with sleeping powder that would later decimate the evil Mr Hazel's pheasant shoot. The intricate needlework involved and the sense of excitement at their impending glory was tantalising. It felt perfectly justified to me that such an arrogant and cruel man be dealt this fate as a lesson for his selfish ways. The response of those people in Danny's local community as he distributed the pheasants seemed to convey a sense of shared values and belief that such arrogant and selfish behaviour should be challenged. I also remember feeling the thrill and excitement of Danny driving to his father's rescue and prevailing as the hero of the day. I admired Danny's bravery and contemplated such heroic acts of salvation for my own friends and family.

The story has continued to be a source of inspiration for me as I use it as a vehicle to explore how attitudes towards children and their relationships with adults has changed in the last thirty years. In particular how we have limited the adventures of our children in an increasingly risk-averse society. The undergraduate students who read this story as part of their Early Childhood studies are genuinely shocked and concerned for Danny as he takes apart engines with his father instead of going to school for a 'proper' education. They fixate on the incidents where Danny is left home alone and is allowed to go poaching with his father who is encouraging his son to steal. Often they fail to appreciate the potential value of learning to fix cars and the excitement involved in Danny's adventures. They do not connect with a sense of shared outrage at the behaviour of Mr Hazell or seem to accept that such inequality is inevitable and they are helpless to challenge it. The story also acts as a reminder of the value of intimacy between a father and son in an age where we are encouraged to be suspicious of men around children.

For me this story makes some important statements about the need to challenge inequality in society and the power of community cohesion. It reminds me of the need for children to explore, take risks and get involved in adventures. These themes are woven into a wonderful story of the intimate relationship between a father and son and is beautifully written in a way which transports me to their caravan in the country.

Finding Esio Trot

by Terry Potter

Scene: Customer enters bookshop and heads for the section marked 'Children's Books' and starts to take books off the shelf, quickly replacing them after a cursory look at the back cover. It becomes evident that she is getting a bit frustrated or even a little panicked by not being able to settle on something to buy. The bookshop owner decides it's time to try and help.

Bookseller: Are you looking for something in particular? Can I help?

Customer: I don't know really. I'm looking for something I can use with younger children... and I want it to be quite easy to read, quite gentle and kind and maybe something which will help them understand more about how adults behave.

Bookseller: Hmm.. That's quite a specific list. Maybe something from the Lauren Child Charlie & Lola series?

(Takes book from the shelf and passes it to the customer – who has a look inside)

Customer: No, not really. Too child-centred. Maybe a bit too quirky?

Bookseller: Or possibly, a Michael Foreman / Michael Morpurgo collaboration?

(Again, passes the customer a couple of titles. She flips through them again but shakes her head in the negative)

Customer: Too wordy for my lot, I'm afraid. They are lovely but I need something we can all read together and which won't take too long to get through.

(The Bookseller frowns and begins to move along the shelves more systematically examining the titles)

Bookseller: That's it! I know just the thing! How about Roald Dahl?!

Customer: (in a voice reminiscent of Oscar Wilde's Lady Bracknell) ROALD DAHL!? ARE YOU QUITE MAD?

Bookseller: No, really. I was thinking that maybe Esio Trot might be just what you're after.

Customer: But Roald Dahl? Everyone knows he's not gentle and that his adults are evil or stupid and that his children often find themselves in terrible danger. And he seems to hate so many women!

Bookseller: Yes, it's true – people do say many of these things and in lots of instances that's the case. But not in Esio Trot.

Customer: What's that title again? I don't really know that one. I've heard of the big

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Drawing by Ellie-May Vincent

ones – Charlie and Danny and James but not this Esme Trot – what’s it about and who is she?

Bookseller: Sorry – not Esme but Esio. Esio Trot is tortoise backwards. (He plucks the book from the shelf and holds it up for her to see) It’s a love story involving two older people who are neighbours and who live alone. The man is too shy to tell the woman that he loves her but he knows she’s devoted to her pet tortoise. She tells him the thing that would make her the most happy woman in the world would be if her beloved tortoise would grow more quickly. So he hatches a cunning plan to make this happen.

Customer: No, don’t tell me. Something terrible goes wrong?

Bookseller: No, not at all. It all works perfectly.

Customer: I suppose some selfish child turns up to spoil it all?

Bookseller: No, nothing like that. There aren’t any children in the book at all.

Customer: So, this is a children’s book – for children – with no children in it. Just old people?

Bookseller: That’s right. Unusual hey? And a happy ending! Even all the tortoises live

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happily ever after.

Customer: But Dahl's books can be quite long. Is that going to be a problem?

Bookseller: Not in this case. It's only about 60 pages and most of those have drawings on. And that's a bonus too because it's illustrated by Quentin Blake.

Customer: Oooh. I like his stuff – and the children have seen his drawings before. So all that sounds great.

Bookseller: I think we've got this one copy here on the shelf – will that be ok?

Customer: Goodness no. I need 20 copies please.

Bookseller: Ah, That might take a little longer to sort out. Perhaps you'd like to come over to the till?

(As they walk back to the till the customer is already engrossed in reading the one copy that was on the shelf and she has a broad grin on her face)

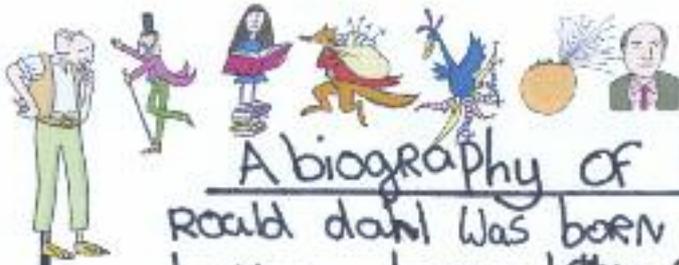
Fade out...

Roald Dahl: The Man Who Believed in Magic



Drawing by Lily Cronin





A biography of Roald Dahl.

Roald Dahl was born in Wales
he was born on 16th of September 1916
his parents were both from Norway. He
was raised by his mother because
unfortunately his father passed away when
he was 3 years old.

He had a fairly bad time at boarding school
which had some inspiration for his later stories.
After leaving boarding school he worked for
the Shell oil company based in Africa until
the outbreak of World War II. So he signed
up for the R.A.F. Unfortunately he was injured
and eventually went home and then sent to
Washington DC to work as a journalist.

In 1943 he wrote his first children's book,
'The Gremlins' which was meant to be made into
a movie as well as a book. But he stopped
writing children's books until the 1960s.

By this time he was a father himself and
started making stories himself to entertain
his children. Roald Dahl died on the 25th of
November 1990, however his books are still
read and enjoyed by people of all
ages.

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by Daisy YR3

Roald

DAHL

My favourite character is the turtle because I love how slow they are and how cute they are so that is why I love the turtle



eslo trot

Roses are red
vults are blue

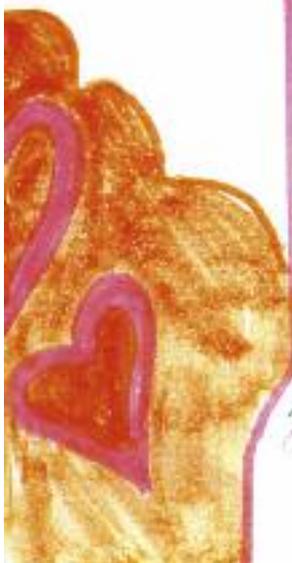
Umpalumpers are chasing you one one strange one s green they are not very clean. they work in the chocolate factory maby they should work in a animal Sanctuary

My favourite book is Matilda because she is into reading and she is a funny and she has magical eyes that can make stuff move and make stuff smash she also plays tricks

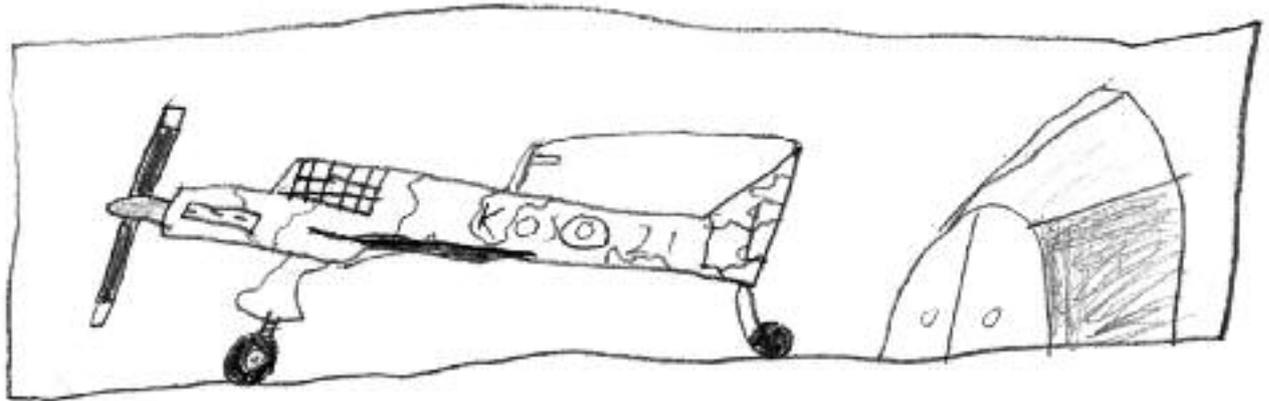
If Roald made another book and I think it would be a mystery like where the character has to go and see what is making a cuff

My favourite film is also Matilda because I like watching her do tricks and tricking Mrs Trunchbull

by Ann



Roald Dahl: The Man Who Believed in Magic



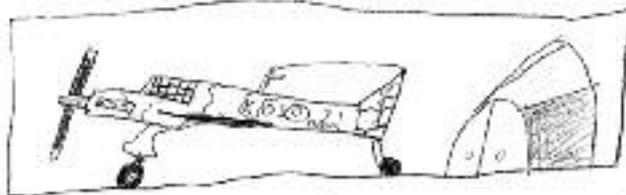
^{Tom H}
Roald Dahl was a Hurricane fighter pilot during
WWII

My favorite character is the BFG in The BFG because he
^{is kind and looks after the other girls}
he wrote the screen plays for James Bond you
only live twice. 23 books were written by Roald

Roald Dahl
lived 1916-1990

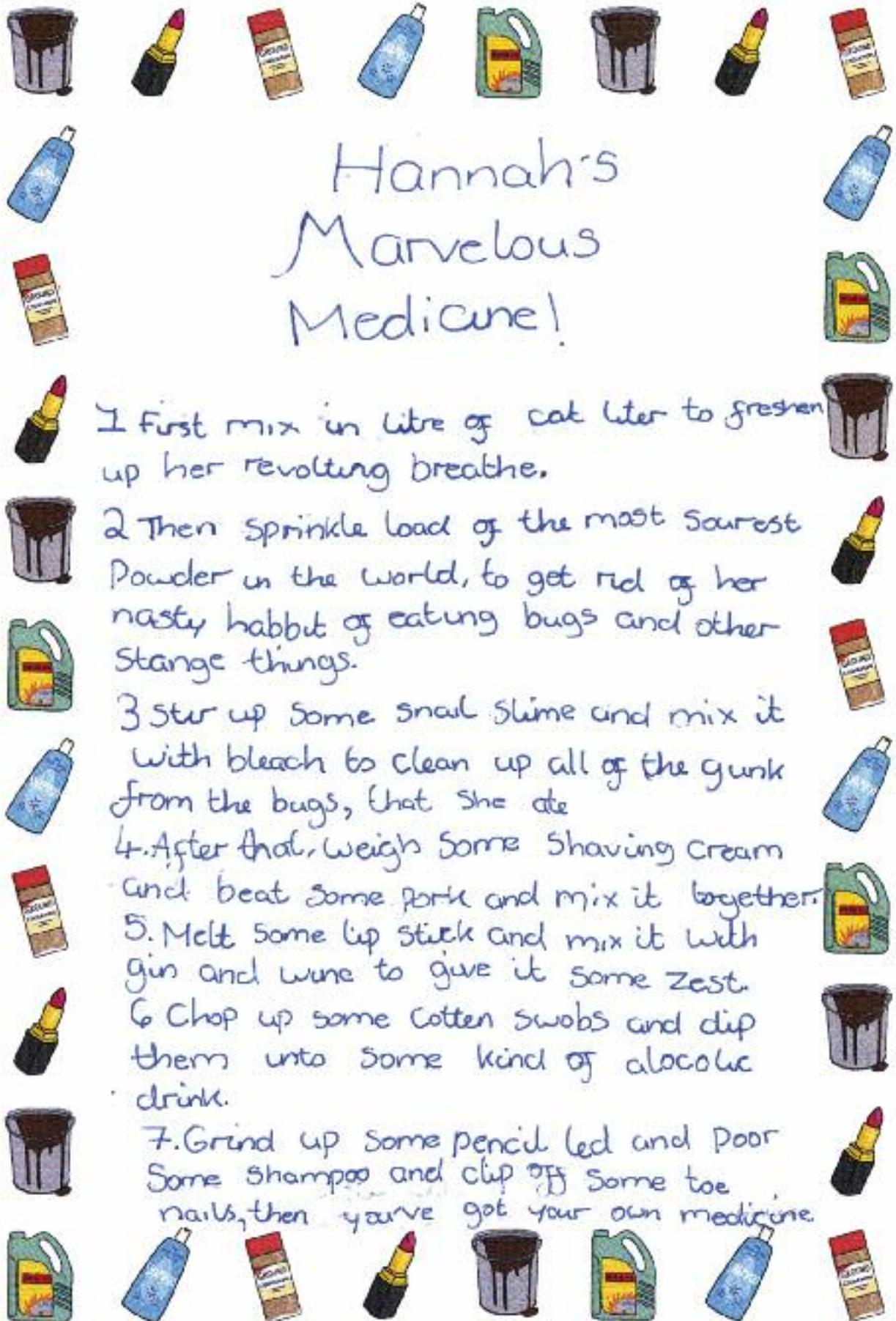
Roald Dahl Hurricane

Roald Dahl
bid e fof
blood bise



QUIZ

1. What plane did Roald Dahl fly in WWII?
2. How many books were written by Roald Dahl?
3. What Bond did Roald Dahl write the screenplays for?



Hannah's Marvelous Medicine!

- 1 First mix in litre of cat liter to freshen up her revolting breathe.
- 2 Then sprinkle load of the most sourest Powder in the world, to get rid of her nasty habbit of eating bugs and other stange things.
- 3 stir up some snail slime and mix it with bleach to clean up all of the gunk from the bugs, that she ate
4. After that, weigh some shaving cream and beat some pork and mix it together.
5. Melt some lip stick and mix it with gin and wine to give it some zest.
- 6 Chop up some cotten swobs and dip them unto some kind of alocolic drink.
7. Grind up some pencil led and poor some shampoo and clip off some toe nails, then youve got your own medicine.

Do you need a healthy life?

It will clear you out bacteria in you in seconds

It's 50% better than Calpol

Do you have wrinkles?

It's only £1!

MR Y's MARVELOUS MEDICINE

Every bottle you get only 50p

If you get some medicine today get a free spoon!

There is even a free toy in every BOTTLE!!

You can even put it in your car's engine!

When taking MR Y's marvelous medicine I felt better straight away!

Tom, Liverpool

List of Contributors

The children

Ethan Argent

Archie Cronin

Lily Cronin

Evelyn Curran

Mara Popa

Tudor Popa

Ellie-May Vincent

Year Three children from Captain Webb School

The adults

Bev Brenna is an author of YA fiction and a Professor in Curriculum Studies at the University of Saskatchewan, Canada.

Beth Collett works as a Marketing Co-Ordinator for the International College at BCU.

Mark Cronin is a Senior Lecturer, a parent and an ex Social Worker.

Yushra Fatima is a volunteer, artist and writer.

Alan Gibbons is an author of children's and Young Adult fiction, an ex teacher and organiser of the Campaign for the Book.

Denise Hayes is an author and poet.

Victoria Hingley is a parent and a History student who hopes to become a teacher.

Katrina Jan is an author and poet.

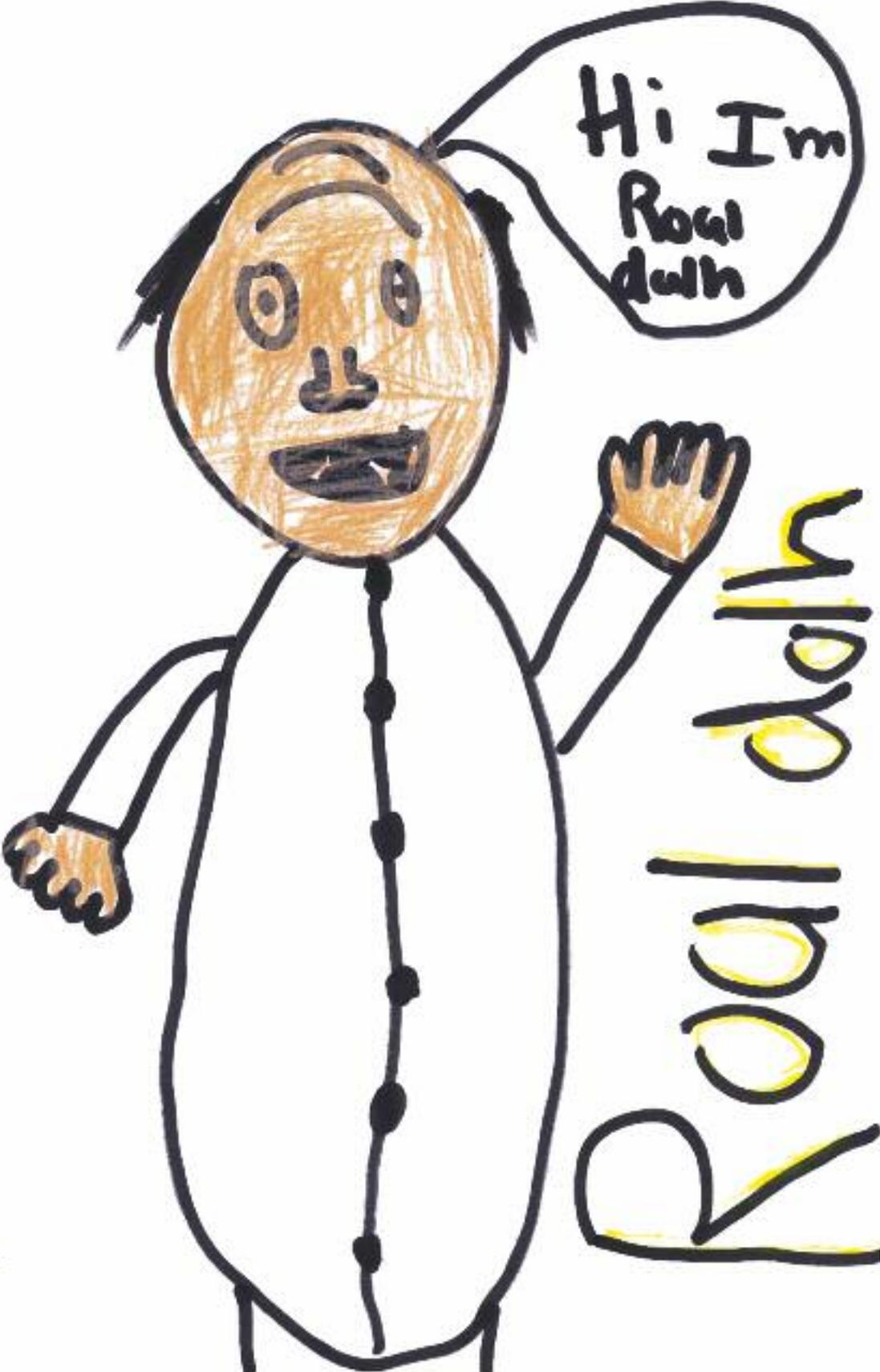
Claire Monk is a Senior Lecturer, an ex teacher and mother of two young children.

Anna Partridge is a Politics and International Relations student at LSE.

Barbara Partridge is a teacher and mother of two children.

Terry Potter is a Senior Lecturer and the co founder of The Letterpress Project.

Mike Revell is an author of children's books.



X

by Anon

Roald Dahl: The Man Who Believed in Magic

It seems that just about everybody is talking and writing about the author Roald Dahl in this 2016 centenary year of his birth and we wanted to add a Letterpress Project publication to the mix. We have collected together writing, poetry, drawings and photos that we think sum-up why he has been so influential and special to all those who wanted to make a contribution – from children’s authors, teachers students, friends and family.

Every piece in this collection tells a different personal story but all are affectionate and pay homage to the author’s impressive skills with language and storytelling. Contributors – whether as readers or teachers – admire his ability to lift children and adults into vivid imaginative worlds that remind us of the best traditional fairy tales and that are peopled by memorably described characters that are as powerful as those created by Charles Dickens.

We hope you enjoy the very broad mix of writing and drawing you’ll find here and that you’ll read it with a spirit of fun and enjoyment that Roald Dahl himself would certainly have appreciated.