

Roald Dahl

He was born in Wales in 1906, of Norwegian parents and died in 1990. After an unhappy adolescence (he was good at sports, but his schoolteachers considered him totally useless) he left Britain to work in East Africa (then a British colony) for Shell Oil. When the Second World War broke out, Dahl joined the RAF and spent the first half of the war flying combat planes in Iraq, Lybia (where he crashed and spent seven months in hospital) and Greece.

He was then sent to work at the British Embassy in Washington, where he began to write and married a Hollywood actress. He started as a writer of short stories for adults. His adult stories, some of them collected in *Tales of the Unexpected*, are characterized by his use of black humour and twists-in-the-tail (unexpected endings). “Lamb to the Slaughter” is one of his most famous stories for adults. Some appeared in the TV series *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*.

His first children’s books began to appear in the late 1940s, and their popularity gradually increased both in Britain and the USA. *The Gremlins*, Dahl’s first children’s book came out in 1943, but it was not until the publication of *James and the Giant Peach* in 1961 that he became a well-known children’s author. He went on to publish more books for children including *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964), *The Magic Finger* (1966), *The BFG* (1982), *The Witches* (1983) and *Matilda* (1988). Until the time of his death in 1990 they were selling at the rate of a million a year. Dahl’s illustrator is Quentin Blake.



Regarding his concern with children’s literature he said: “Had I not had children, I’d not have written books for children, nor would I have been capable of doing so”. Actually, most of his stories grew out of bedtime tales he made up for his children every night. Most of the books were written in a shed in the garden of Dahl’s house in the south of England. The second half of his life was filled with tragedy –his wife’s heart attacks, the death of two of his children, the cerebral disease of another- but he never lost the optimism and creative energy that we find in all his works.

Unlike Milne, Dahl was very pleased with his writing for children: “I’m probably more pleased with my children’s books than with my adult short stories. Children’s books are harder to write. It’s tougher to keep a child interested because the children don’t have the concentration of adults. The child knows the television is in the next room. It’s tough to hold a child, but it’s a lovely thing to try to do”.

The story *The BFG* (Big Friendly Giant), from which you will read some selections, is about a race of giants who live in a different world and regularly visit ours, usually to eat people. These creatures were probably inspired by the Norwegian myths that Dahl’s mother told him as a child. The story is also about a little orphan called Sophie, who is captured by the BFG, who takes her to live with him. This allows Sophie to experience at first hand the cruelty of the other giants. Then we move to Buckingham

Palace. Sophie and the BFG have decided that the only person who can help them to get rid of the nine cruel man-eating giants is the Queen.

A favourite trick of Dahl's is the use of nonsense words and altered words.

Although much loved by children, Dahl's books have often met with adult disapproval. A number of his books have been accused of being vulgar, excessively violent, and disrespectful toward authority figures. Of all his books, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *The Witches* are the more controversial.

► **Task.** Below are extracts from an interview of Roald Dahl, where he speaks about his views on children's literature. The answers are jumbled up. Rearrange them, matching questions and answers:

Questions

1. "Have any of your other children's books [besides *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*] caused an uproar?"
2. "Many people feel that children's books should serve some higher purpose, such as teaching moral lessons to children. What do you see as the purpose of your children's books?"
3. "Some people say that the adults in your books come across too negatively. How do you respond to this charge?"
4. "Another complaint that one sometimes hears about your books is that they are too violent. What are your thoughts on the inclusion of violence in children's books?"
5. "You are one of the few children's authors to write about bodily functions. Why do you sometimes refer to these subjects?"
6. "You clearly place a lot of emphasis on humour. Could you say a bit more on the value of humour in children's literature?"

Answers

- a) "My only purpose in writing books for children is to encourage them to develop a love of books. I'm not trying to indoctrinate them in any way. I'm trying to entertain them. If I can get a young person into the habit of reading and thinking that books are fun, then, with a bit of luck, that habit will continue through life. The person who is what I call a fit reader has a terrific advantage over people who are not readers. Life becomes richer if you have the whole world of books around you".
Question _____.
- b) "The one magic ingredient you can find in virtually all first-rate children's books is humour. There are a few exceptions –*The Secret Garden*, for example.

But most good children's books make children laugh. I am trying to follow in this tradition. If children find my books amusing, if they laugh while they're reading them, I feel I have succeeded. If I offend some grownups in the process, so be it. It's a price I'm willing to pay".

Question _____.

- c) "Children regard bodily functions as being both mysterious and funny, and that's why they often joke about these things. Bodily functions also serve to humanize adults. There is nothing that makes a child laugh more than an adult suddenly farting in a room. If it were a queen, it would be even funnier".

Question _____.

- d) "I generally write for children between the ages of seven and nine. At these ages, children are only semicivilized. They are in the process of becoming civilized, and the people who are doing the civilizing are the adults around them, specifically their parents and their teachers. Because of this, children are inclined, at least subconsciously, to regard grown-ups as the enemy. I see this as natural, and I often work it into my children's books. That's why the grown-ups in my books are sometimes silly or grotesque. I like to poke fun at grown-ups, especially the pretentious ones and the grouchy ones".

Question _____.

- e) "I do include some violence in my books, but I always undercut it with humour. It's never straight violence and it's never meant to horrify. I include it because it makes children laugh. Children know that the violence in my stories is only make-believe. It's much like the violence in the old fairy tales, especially the Grimms' tales. These tales are pretty rough, but the violence is confined to a magical time and place. When violence is tied to fantasy and humour, children find it more amusing than threatening".

Question _____.

- f) "The one that has been attacked most frequently is *The Witches*. It has been banned from school libraries in several cities in England because some feminists claim that it presents women in a bad light. They base their claim on a quote from the beginning of the book in which I say, "A witch is always a woman". They, of course, ignore the next line that says, "A ghoul is always a male". They also ignore the lovely grandmother, who is one of the major characters in the story".

Question _____.

Source of interview: *Trust Your Children: Voices Against Censorship in Children's Literature*. Ed. Mark West, 1988, pp. 109-114.

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