

Roald Dahl: Children's Book Author, Medical Device Inventor, Myelodysplastic Syndrome Patient, and Philanthropist



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Roald Dahl's witty, clever, and subversive children's stories — including the best-sellers *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *James and the Giant Peach*, *The BFG*, *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, and *Matilda* — have excited the imagination of young readers for more than a half century. In 2008, *The Times* of London ranked Dahl 16th on a list of “The 50 Greatest British Writers Since 1945.”

Dahl was born in 1916 in the village of Llandaff, Wales (now incorporated into the city of Cardiff), to Norwegian parents, Harald Dahl and Sofie Magdalene Hesselberg. He was named after the Norwegian polar explorer Roald Amundsen, who in 1911 had become the first person to reach the South Pole. Dahl's father moved from Norway to Wales in the 1880s, and his mother moved there in 1911.

When he was 3 years old, Roald's older sister, Astri, died of appendicitis, and shortly thereafter his father died of pneumonia. His mother remained in Wales and young Roald was first sent to St. Peter's boarding school in Weston-super-Mare in Somerset, and then at age 13 to the Repton School in Derbyshire. Dahl described his boarding school experiences as difficult, marked by corporal punishment and cruel treatment from both older students and teachers. These painful memories provided fodder for some of his later stories, almost all of which included adult villains, often teachers or school headmasters.

After graduating from the Repton School in 1934, Dahl joined the Shell Petroleum Company and worked in Africa until he joined the Royal Air Force in 1939. Not long after his military induction, he was seriously injured in an airplane crash while

enroute to Egypt and temporarily lost his vision. He recovered enough to see combat in Greece before being sent home to England as an invalid in 1941, and joining the foreign diplomatic service.

Dahl's injuries in North Africa were detailed in his first book, which was serialized in *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1942 as “Shot Down Over Libya.” His second book, *The Gremlins*, was published in 1943, and read by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt to her grandchildren. In addition to his numerous tales for young readers — many of which featured exceptionally fat children and were made into films, Broadway plays, or television shows — he wrote a few dark short stories for adults.

Dahl married American actress Patricia Neal in 1953, and together they had 5 children. Their son, Theo, was hit by a taxicab in New York City in 1960 at the age of 4 months and developed hydrocephalus. Together with a hydraulic engineer that he knew from his hobby of flying model airplanes and a neurosurgeon at Great Ormond Street Hospital in London, Dahl helped develop a neurosurgical shunt for hydrocephalus that was used for many years and became known as the “Wade-Dahl-Till valve.” The inventors made this device available at no charge to patients.

Dahl's oldest daughter, Olivia, died of measles encephalitis at age 7 in 1962. After Olivia's death, Dahl had a conversation with the Archbishop of Canterbury that he did not find comforting, and he renounced his religious faith. (He had been raised in the Lutheran church.) His daughter Ophelia co-founded the global health organization

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After divorcing Patricia Neal in 1983, Dahl married film producer Felicity d’Abreau Crosland. He was offered appointment as an Officer of the Order of the British Empire in 1986, but declined since the honor did not extend to his wife.

In November 1990, Dahl died at the John Radcliffe Hospital in Oxford at age 74 of complications of myelodysplastic syndrome. He was buried in Great Missenden, a village in Buckinghamshire where he had made his home since the early 1950s.

The Roald Dahl Foundation was started by Dahl, and is now supported by his widow Felicity, and known as “Roald Dahl’s Marvelous Children’s Charity.” This charity has funded nursing care and supported families of sick children, and has also helped fund research projects in neurology (in addition to Theo’s hydro-

cephalus, Dahl’s first wife Patricia Neal had a ruptured cerebral aneurysm and lost her speech and motor functions, but eventually recovered) and hematology, as well as literacy projects. A museum focused on Dahl’s books and literacy was opened in Great Missenden several years after his death.

In 2012, the Royal Mail issued a set of 10 stamps (Scott 2983-89) illustrating 7 of Dahl’s best-known books.

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