

At a glance

Author profile: Roald Dahl

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Literacy Hour resources

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Roald Dahl's letter to his mother, written from his boarding school when he was nine years old.

on target for literacy

Author profile: Roald Dahl

October 11th 1925

St. Peters
Weston-super-mare

Dear Mama

I am sorry I have not writting before. ~~We~~ There was a foot-hall match yesterday, ~~not~~ against clarence, and the first eleven lost by 2 goals, the score was 3 goals to 2, but the second eleven won by 5 goals the score was 5 nil. We playd Brien house on Wednesday, and the score was 1 all. I hope none of you have got coalds. It is quite a nice day to-days, I am just going to church. I hope mike is quite all right now, and Buzzo Major Cottam is going to recite something caled "as you like it" to night. please could you send me some conkers as quick as you can, but ~~don't~~ dont send to meny, ~~the~~ just send them in a tin. and wrapit up in paper.

Love from
BOY



Author profile: Roald Dahl

Author profile

Why Roald Dahl makes such an ideal subject for an author study:

- Range of writing
- Fast narrative drive
- Rich, inventive language
- Humorous writing
- Larger-than-life characters
- Straightforward plots
- Detailed descriptions
- Modern-day fairy stories

Dahl's ability to see the world as children do.

'Matilda and Lavender saw the giant in green breeches advancing upon a girl of about ten who had a pair of plaited golden pigtails hanging over her shoulders.'

Teaching issue

Roald Dahl's incredible popularity, his rich and varied writing and his unerring ability to see the world as children do, all make him an ideal subject for a Literacy Hour author study

Favourite author

Roald Dahl is, without doubt, most children's favourite author. In numerous surveys into children's reading habits, his titles top the polls as the best-loved and most widely read stories. Dahl's rich and varied work encompasses picture books, storybooks, poetry and autobiography - and some of his books have also been adapted for the cinema and theatre.

What is Dahl's appeal?

His stories entertain, offering a freshness and excitement hard to match. They are characterized by a fast narrative drive and a flair for language. He catches readers from the first sentence, holding their attention to the very end. He taps into children's imagination and sees the world as children do - from a perspective which is self-contained, subjective and unambiguous in the delineation of right and wrong. His plots are focused, stripped to essentials, his characters larger than life and his descriptions

powerful - and his superb storytelling is complemented, for the most part, by Quentin Blake's exuberant illustrations.

Fiction

Dahl's stories are modern-day fairy tales. His universe is one of magical happenings, peopled by characters who are obviously good or obviously bad. This polarization of characters is reinforced by detailed descriptions, usually of their physical attributes. His characters do not mature or experience a spiritual crisis through the development of the plot. On the contrary, their actions and responses to each other trigger the events. Try using Dahl's characterization as a model for children to write their own character sketches, focusing on details which evoke instant sympathy or dislike.

Plots

The plots in Dahl's stories are straightforward and linear, culminating in satisfying, unambiguous endings in which the 'baddies' get their comeuppance. They provide ample opportunities for exploring essential ingredients of narrative - from introduction to build-up to conflict and conflict resolution. Key incidents are easily recognizable and can be charted through the use of simple storyboards.

Viewpoint

The viewpoint is crucial to the way we interpret the text - which means that a story can be read in different ways, depending on who is telling it.



Danny the Champion of the World

is told by Danny in the first person narrative so that the reader empathizes with Danny and sees things from his perspective. A third person narrative usually offers a neutral standpoint - providing an overview of all the characters and events. However in Dahl's stories, his third person narratives are often more complex. He breaks them down with another, anonymous voice - whose function is to disrupt the smooth unfolding of events and make the reader see things from a definite slant. Using asides and running commentary, the anonymous narrator introduces beliefs, opinions, likes and dislikes which colour our view of the story. Encourage children to try to identify who is telling the story and to examine how this affects the way they see the characters. In their own writing, they can explore point of view by retelling a story from another character's standpoint.

Comparing stories

In Dahl's stories, the main characters are often children from one-parent families like Danny or orphans as is James in *James and the Giant Peach*, Sophie in *The BFG* and the narrator in *The Witches*. The child symbolizes innocence and a force for good, and is pitted against adults who embody negative forces - of evil, brutality, stupidity or simply incompetence.

Recurring themes

Night-time, especially the aspect of moonlight, is an important element in the books. Moonlight plays havoc with our senses and infuses the landscape with fluidity and soft shapes. It heralds a world of magic and dreams and is the perfect fantasy setting. It is in the moonlight that Sophie first lays eyes on the BFG while the main events of *Danny the Champion of the World* take place at night under the spell of the moon.

Poetry

Dahl's poetry is rich in rhyme, rhythm and humour. *Dirty Beasts* and *Revolting Rhymes* will encourage children to seek out poetry. It will also help them to develop listening and oral skills. Sounds and word patterns are almost as important as the content of Dahl's poems. Enjoyment often comes from his fusion of incongruous, disparate and unexpected images. Use the fairy tale characters in *Revolting Rhymes* as models to trigger children's own alternative poems.

Wit

Humour permeates all of Dahl's work and takes different forms. An unexpected turn of events, exaggeration, absurd behaviour, wordplay, nonsense words, the grotesque and dark humour are just some of the ways by which Dahl holds his young audience.

Non-fiction

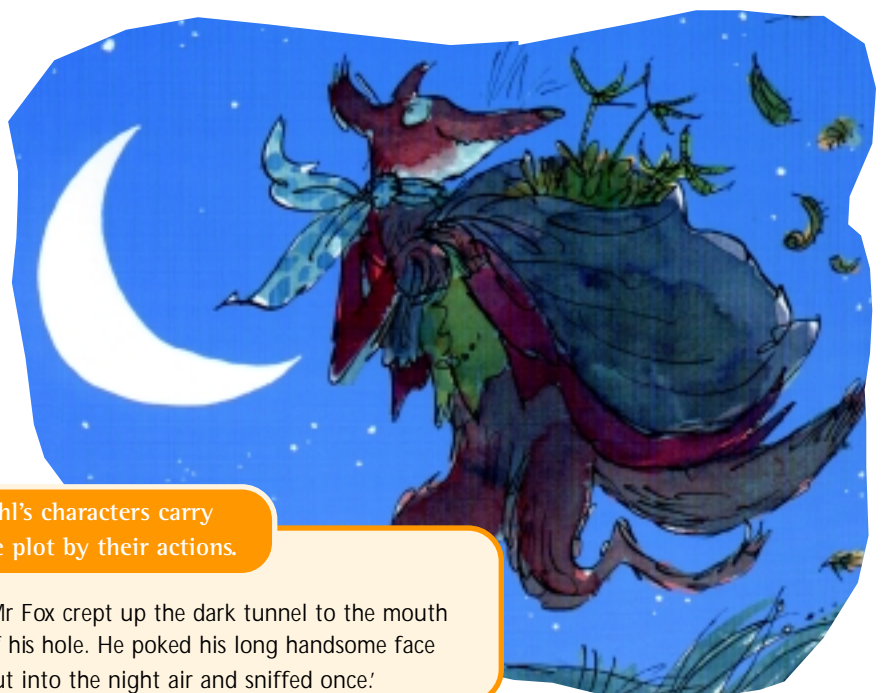
Dahl's account of his childhood is set out in his autobiography, *Boy*. The events and situations which he describes here are the basis for themes which he develops in his fiction - punishment at the hands of grown-ups, a fascination with

Moonlight is an important element in Dahl's stories.

'The wood was murky and very still. Somewhere in the sky the moon was shining.'



sweets and confectionery and a burgeoning love of nature, fully developed in later years in *My Year*. His own strong, individualist personality, an integral part of all of his main characters, is rooted in personal experiences of growing up in a world dominated and frustrated by adult values.



Dahl's characters carry the plot by their actions.

'Mr Fox crept up the dark tunnel to the mouth of his hole. He poked his long handsome face out into the night air and sniffed once.'

Author profile: Roald Dahl

Word Level

Roald Dahl has an extraordinary and inventive way with language. In his hands it sparkles with wit and assumes a life of its own - open to endless possibilities of meaning

Feel for language

Roald Dahl delights in the sounds and music of words, their meaning and rhyme. He enriches his fiction with a whole vocabulary of invented words - gobblefunk, uckyslush, lickswishy - whose meanings derive from their sounds. His prose sizzles with wordplay, giving his language a freshness, spontaneity and vigour. His non-fiction writing, especially in *My Year*, is lyrical, fluid and precise, with simple descriptions of the nature he so loved. The richness of both his fiction and non-fiction makes them perfect for reading aloud.

Wordplay

Humour in Dahl's work derives from his obvious relish for words. Dahl uses language to create humour, often playing havoc with our sense of logic and order. His fiction is brimming with spoonerisms - transposing the initial letters or syllables of two or more words, malapropisms - using a word in mistake for one sounding similar, and deliberate misspellings.

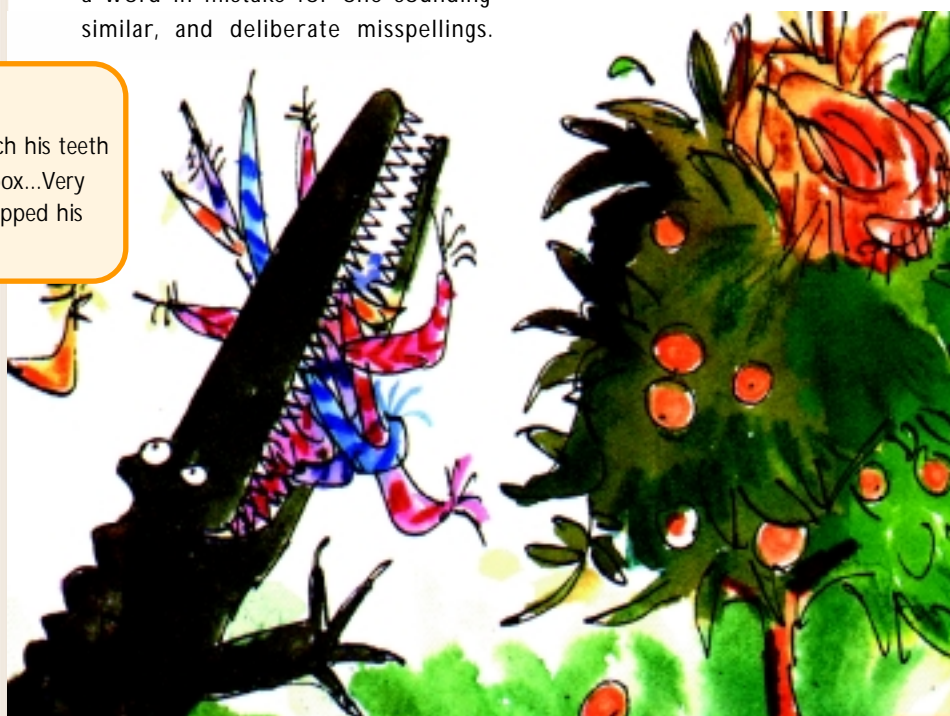
The BFG, one of the wittiest children's books ever written, exemplifies Dahl's extraordinary zest for language. The BFG has had little education, he claims. Besides, he lives in a world of his own and models language to his own purpose. His hearing is acute and so, naturally, his understanding of language is phonic-based to produce words such as langwitch and vegitibbles. Some words and phrases become muddled - a mixture of spoonerisms and malapropisms: curdbloodingling, skin and groans, catasterous disastrophe, squeakpips, elefant and squarreling. His explanations often culminate in Am I right or left?

Onomatopoeia

Dahl's sensitivity to the richness of language is most obvious in his use of onomatopoeia - the formation of words by imitating sounds. Prevalent in all his work, it is at its most creative in the character of the BFG, who constructs a whole new language from sound-words.

Dahl's relish for words and wordplay and zest for language.

'The Enormous Crocodile laughed so much his teeth rattled together like pennies in a moneybox...Very quickly, the crocodile reached up and snapped his jaws at the Roly-Poly Bird.'



He sorts the dreams he collects into good and bad - soft, sonorous words denote the good dreams, consonant-heavy, stressed vowels and lumbering sounds describe the nightmares - trogglehumpers, bogthumpers and grobswitchers as opposed to the melodious winksquiffers and phizzwizards. In **Charlie and the Chocolate Factory**, Loompaland, the original home of the Oompa-Loompas who work in Willy Wonka's factory, is infested with dangerous beasts including hornswogglers, snozzwangers and whangdoodles.

Similes and metaphors

Similes, comparing one thing with another using the words 'like' and 'as', and metaphors, where one thing is another, abound in Dahl's writing. He uses them to colour his descriptions of characters, bringing them vividly to life like the Bloodbottler in **The BFG**, who has two purple frankfurter lips, or the BFG whose toes are as big as bumblehammers. Aunt Sponge in **James and the Giant Peach** is like a great white soggy overboiled cabbage. Grandma in **George's Marvellous Medicine** has a small puckered up mouth like a dog's bottom. The BFG calls Sophie quacky as a duckhound and asks her to be still as a starfish. Comparisons, too, are vivid; twilight shadows, the setting for **Danny the Champion of the World**, are darker than a wolf's mouth.

Alliteration

Alliteration, having the same letter or sound at the beginning of several words, adds spice to a text and heightens comic effect. Muggle-Wump refers to the Twits as two fearful frumptious freaks while Miss Trunchbull addresses Matilda as you clotted carbuncle. The BFG describes himself as brimful of buzzburgers while the wicked giants regard him as a shrivelly little shrimp! Mucky little midget! Squaggy little squib! Grobby little grub!

Puns and nonsense words

'Humans beans from Wales is tasting whooshey of fish' the BFG declares in the first of many puns based on different word meanings (homonyms) and spellings (homophones). Nonsense words combine into meaningful sentences - 'You must be cockles to be guzzling such rubbsquash' booms the Bloodbottler, referring to the BFG's favourite vegetable, the snozzcumber. Place and character names are richly symbolic, carrying humour and meaning even further. Proper nouns conjure an instant image - Crunchem Hall primary school, Mr Wormwood, Mr Kranky, the Twits, Miss Trunchbull,

aunts Spiker and Sponge - not forgetting the dim-witted farming trio Boggis, Bunce and Bean and, of course, the mellifluous, gentle Miss Honey.

Poetry

Dahl's poetry is humorously written from a child's perspective and is strongly rhythmic with simple rhyming patterns. Both **Revolting Rhymes** and **Dirty Beasts** have clear, energetic rhyming patterns and strong, catchy rhythms. Rhythm and rhyme encourage children to play with sounds - and help instil a love of language and its possibilities. Introducing children to Dahl's poetry will provide enormous pleasure while helping them to develop their own language and thinking skills and to choose words and phrasing with care.

Rhyming couplets

Dahl's poetry is based on rhyming couplets, that is a pattern of two successive end-words that rhyme. The end-words often consist of only one syllable - feel/meal, hat/that, fell/well. Rhyming couplets, based as they are on word expectation, add further humour to his light-hearted subjects.



Dahl's ability to construct a whole new language from sound-words.

'When all the other giants is galloping off every what way and which to swollop human beans, I is scuddling away to other places to blow dreams into the bedrooms of sleeping children.'

Author profile: Roald Dahl

Dahl demands that his readers suspend belief from the moment they enter his world.

'Every one of these "creatures" was at least as big as James himself, and in the strange greenish light that shone down from somewhere in the ceiling, they were absolutely terrifying to behold.'



Fiction/Poetry

To fully appreciate the richness and complexity of Dahl's stories, they should be placed firmly within the fairy tale tradition - of magic, good and evil, punishment and revenge

Fairy tale genre

Taken at face value, as descriptions of reality, Dahl's stories may appear outrageous, dark, cruel and amoral. Situated within the fairy tale tradition - of psychological happenings, eternal truths and the struggle of good over evil - they become powerful, optimistic, believable and moral. Ingredients essential to the fairy tale genre - magic, fantasy characters, wish-fulfilment, punishment, revenge and a happy ending - are all to be found in Dahl's fiction.

Dahl's world

In true fairy tale tradition, Dahl demands that his readers suspend belief the very moment they enter his world. Reality is topsy-turvy. Unusual and improbable events are presented as ordinary, everyday happenings which could be experienced by anyone at any time.

Good and evil

There is a strong delineation of good and bad in Dahl's work, and his characters are strongly polarized. What interests him is the juxtaposition of opposing forces. Each good person is balanced by an evil character. Spiritual growth and the attainment of self-knowledge have no place in his work.

Those who are powerless or deprived in suffering family



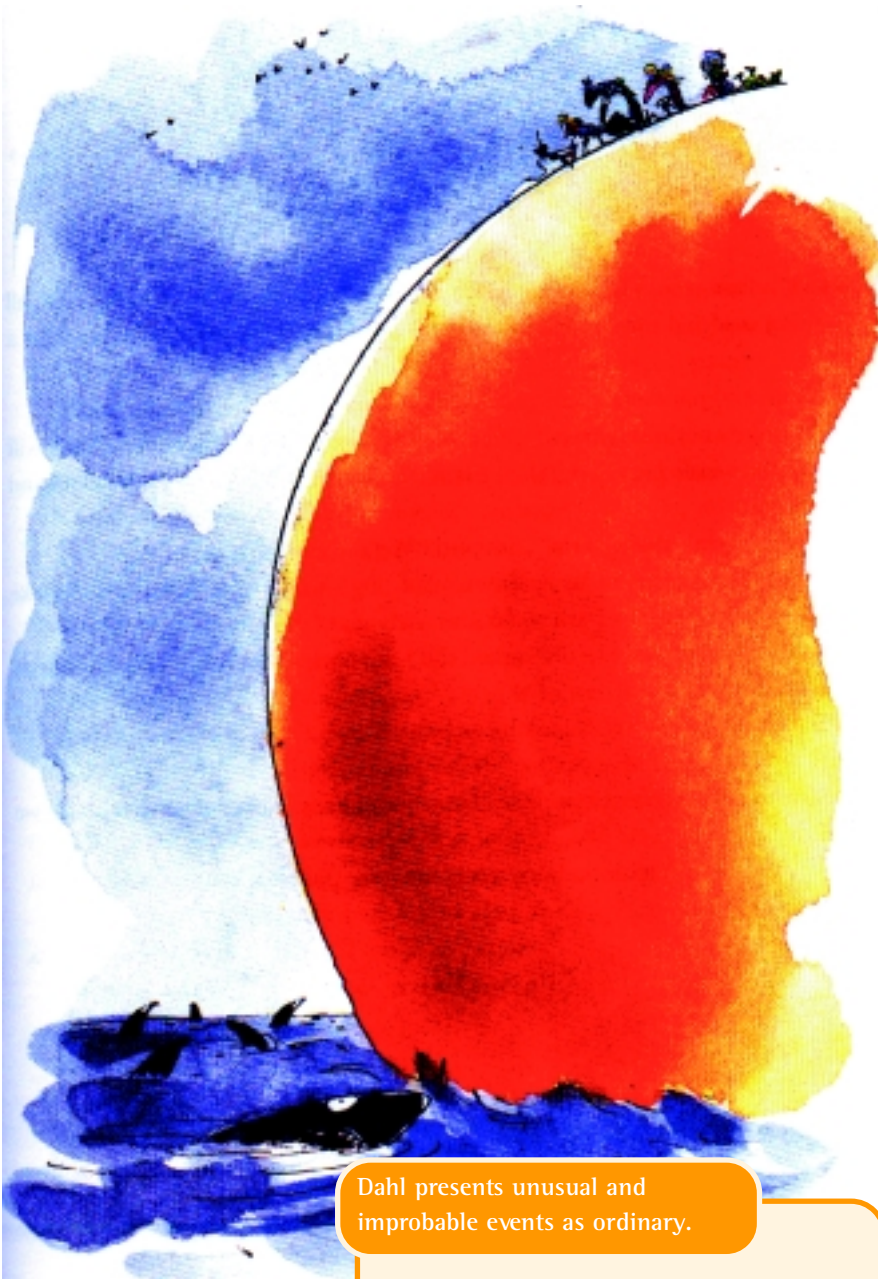
Dahl's stories are modern-day fairy tales.

'A great round ball as big as a house had been sighted hovering high up in the sky over the very centre of Manhattan.'

deprivation like Sophie in **The BFG**, or poverty like Charlie in **Charlie and the Chocolate Factory**, embody goodness. Those who hold power but abuse it, like Mr Wormwood and Miss Trunchbull, or who use it to bully or subjugate the defenceless, like the Gregg family in **The Magic Finger**, are wholeheartedly bad. To adults, Danny and his father may seem outside the law and therefore 'bad': to children they embody the principle of fair play, especially when pitted against the obnoxious and flashily rich brewer, Mr Hazell.

Justice

Upholding the fairy tale tradition, evil is always punished. Punishment feeds into a child's sense of justice, of what is right and wrong, and from this perspective it is an essential ingredient. Revenge, too, is both sweet and necessary.



Dahl presents unusual and improbable events as ordinary.

'They all peered down anxiously at the sharks who were cruising slowly round and round the peach.'

Magic

Many of Dahl's characters are endowed with supernatural powers. The girl narrator in *The Magic Finger* has the ability to transform the Gregg family into birds. Her extraordinary talent is triggered by a red hot tingling feeling which concentrates in the tip of her finger. Matilda can conjure a feeling of hotness which gathers in her brain, allowing her mind to shift objects at will. Spells are also cast by the mixing of ingredients. In *George's Marvellous Medicine*, George stirs a concoction

of snails and lizards, shaving soap and shampoo into a powerful potion which stretches his granny before shrinking her to nothing. The Grand High Witch relies on a brew to turn the boy narrator into a mouse in *The Witches*, while a strange, little old man offers James a bagful of magic in *James and the Giant Peach*. The BFG mixes magic powders, arranging them into dreams and nightmares - the good dreams to be blown into children's ears at night, the nightmares exploded into nothing.

Fantasy characters

Dahl's fictitious world abounds in giants, wizards, witches and fantastical creatures. In *The Witches*, the gruesome gang are symbols of dark, irrational forces out to change the world to favour their evil purpose. They may appear ordinary but, as the anonymous voice warns, in reality they are bent on destruction. The BFG is the least threatening of the giants. The Bloodbottler, the Fleshlumpeater, the Meatdrinker, as their names suggest, prey on human beings, especially chiddlers. Willy Wonka, from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, epitomizes the modern-day wizard. In *James and the Giant Peach*, James' fate is determined by the grotesquely oversized minibeasts.

Magic wishes

Wish-fulfilment is essential to many of Dahl's stories and provides his characters with the means to realize their dreams. A wish may take the form of personal, material enhancement - such as Charlie's dreams coming true - or of vendettas against the adult world, as in *The Magic Finger*.

Happy ending

In all of Dahl's books, the protagonist endures a series of ordeals but comes through unscathed. The just are rewarded - saved by their wits, as is Matilda, or by external circumstances, as is James, in his extraordinary adventure. The happy ending demands the punishment of the bad - and Dahl revels in descriptions of the punishments he hands out.

Heroes

Dahl's heroes are always unambiguously good. His boy heroes are usually passive, prey to external forces which propel them into adventure. His girl heroes, Matilda and the little girl in *The Magic Finger*, are active and the catalysts for the unfolding of events.

Author profile: Roald Dahl

Non-fiction

Roald Dahl's autobiography focuses on his early life and gives an intriguing insight into the ideas, experiences, people and themes that came to dominate his stories and poems

Biography and autobiography

Biography and autobiography provide factual information about a person's life. They are both examples of recount writing. A recounted text includes details of who, what, why, where, when and how. In a recount, key events are set in chronological order and the text is usually written in the simple past tense.

Similarities

Both biography and autobiography start from the premise that the subject is worth writing about. In both cases, the title usually offers clues about the content. Chris Powling's excellent biography is simply called **Roald Dahl** while Dahl's own account of his childhood is **Boy**. The illustrative material in both biography and autobiography consists of photographs, letters, maps and other reference material which relates directly to the subject. Setting is entirely at the mercy of what is being narrated. It can be omitted altogether, or expanded, depending on the point which is being made in regard to the central character. Characters have a definite function - to throw light on the events and behaviour of the central person - and can be introduced and dismissed at whim.

Differences

A biography aims to take an objective stance and to be accurate and truthful about its subject. It is based on knowledge of and, often, discussion with the person being written about. It takes a well-rounded approach and is more likely to be critical.



An autobiography is more likely to be selective as the author dips into memories which have fluctuated with time. The biographer is more likely to adopt a detached tone while the autobiographer, intent on drawing the reader in, uses a warm and direct voice. In biography, the narrative voice is the third person and in autobiography, the first person.

Dahl's autobiography

In his autobiography, **Boy**, Dahl traces the formative years of his life, beginning with his parents and his primary and secondary school life and ending with the excitement of his first job and the beginnings of adulthood. In these pages we can trace the incidents and preoccupations which Dahl later reworked into his fiction. His delight in the sweet shop and in chocolate bars, his fascination with flying, his interest in nature and his brush with bullying and corporal punishment are just some of the personal experiences which stayed with him and which he wove into his stories.

Above right: Quentin Blake's drawing of himself with Roald Dahl.

Below: Dahl working at home with Quentin Blake.



Biography

Read Dahl's autobiography, *Boy* and then use our biography to compare some of the aspects of his life.

Roald Dahl was born in Cardiff in 1916. His parents were Norwegian but were living in Britain because his father was a shipbroker. He had one brother and four sisters and when he was seven years old, he went to Llandaff Cathedral School. Two years later he became a boarder at St Peter's School in Weston-super-Mare - and then at 13 he moved to Repton School, in Derbyshire.

Roald Dahl was not interested in going to university. He wanted to travel and so joined the Shell Oil Company with the ambition of becoming part of their foreign staff. In 1938 he got his wish to go abroad - the company sent him to Mombasa, in Kenya, where he sold oil to the owners of diamond mines and sisal plantations.

In 1939, when World War II broke out, he joined the RAF in Nairobi and learned to fly aircraft. He was sent to Cairo, then ordered to go into the Libyan desert, ready for action.

It was here that his plane crashed, leaving him with spinal injuries from which he was to suffer all his life. After convalescence in an Alexandria hospital, he rejoined his squadron and saw action in Greece, Crete, Palestine and the Lebanon.

In 1942, after a short stay in England, he was posted to Washington as an assistant air attaché at the British Embassy.

There he met the author CS Forrester who was instrumental in getting Dahl's first short story, *The Gremlins*, published. The book attracted the attention of Walt Disney, who soon invited him to Hollywood to write the script for the film version.

In 1952, Dahl met actress Patricia Neal. They were married in the following year and returned to England to live at Gipsy House in the village of Great Missenden, Buckinghamshire. He lived there for the rest of his life.

Dahl and his wife had five children - Olivia, Tessa, Theo, Ophelia and Lucy. But between 1960-65 tragedy struck the Dahl family. Baby Theo was brain-damaged in a traffic accident, Olivia died from a complication of measles and then Patricia suffered a stroke. It was during these years that *James and the Giant Peach* (1961) and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964) were published.

In the late 1970s Dahl met Quentin Blake, who was to illustrate his latest story, *The Enormous Crocodile*. This collaboration marked the beginning of a flourishing partnership.

In 1983 he won the Children's Book Award for *The BFG* and the Whitbread Award for *The Witches*. He won the Children's Book Award again in 1989 with *Matilda*. In 1983 Patricia Neal and Dahl divorced. Later that year, Dahl married Felicity D'Abreu, with whom he was to remain for the rest of his life.

Roald Dahl died in 1990 at the age of 74.



A young Roald Dahl with his mother.



Roald Dahl on the beach at Weston-super-Mare.



Dahl learned to fly aircraft in Nairobi.

As I grow old - by Roald Dahl
As I grow old and just a trifle frayed
It's nice to know that sometimes I have made
You children and occasionally the staff
stop work and have instead a little laugh.