

# Roald Dahl Comprehension Text



Roald Dahl's life reads like one of his stories: fabulous tales of the unexpected that somehow end with him as a giant of the publishing world, one of the most-loved authors of all time who has sold more than 250 million books.

It started inauspiciously enough, in Wales. On the other hand, his Norwegian heritage meant that there was always something a little otherworldly about Dahl. His father had settled in the UK in the late nineteenth century and wanted his children to receive a British education, which he considered to be the best in the world; based on his unhappy experiences at boarding school and his vicious depiction of educators such as Matilda's Miss Trunchbull, it is doubtful whether

Roald would have agreed with his father. Sadly, they never had opportunity to disagree on the subject because Harald Dahl died of pneumonia when his son was just three years old.



If Dahl's early life shared some of the tragedy and misfortune of his fictional heroes and heroines, such as James Henry Trotter and Matilda Wormwood, then the young Dahl also shared their sense of adventure and mischief, as detailed in the autobiographical account of his childhood, *Boy*. Sorry, not autobiographical, 'an autobiography is a book a person writes about his own life and it is usually full of all sorts of boring details', whereas *Boy* is a curious selection of memories which, despite his vivid imagination, its author insists are entirely true. Indeed, the Great Mouse Plot of 1924 is substantiated by a commemorative blue plaque on the otherwise unassuming building in Llandaff, Cardiff that was once Mrs Pratchett's sweet shop, where Dahl and his infant pals played a number of tricks on the surly shop-owner, including putting a mouse in a jar of gobstoppers!

Dahl's escapades took on a more daredevil turn when he joined the Royal Air Force in 1939, with World War II just over the horizon. His adventures as a fighter pilot and carrying out espionage missions for British intelligence are chronicled in *Going Solo*, the grown up (if such a term could ever be applied to Dahl!) sequel

to Boy. Asked to provide some war stories for an American newspaper, Dahl's yarns were supposed to be edited by a journalist but it was decided to print them exactly as they were, resulting in his first published work. This was followed shortly after by his first children's book, *The Gremlins*, a short story about the little devils who, as RAF folklore had it, were guilty of tampering with the mechanics of faulty aircraft.



Cast as a flying ace for his war-time exploits, the dapper Dahl seemed destined for Hollywood. Film rights to *The Gremlins* were optioned by Walt Disney but the proposed animated film was never made. In 1953 he married American actress Patricia Neal. The celebrated actress and fledgling writer had five children together,

including Chantel Sophie "Tessa" who became an author and actress, and Ophelia who is a British-American social justice and health care advocate.

The sixties brought mixed emotions, blending personal tragedy with professional success. In December 1960 the pram carrying four-month old Theo Dahl was struck by a New York City cab, causing the baby to suffer from hydrocephalus, an accumulation of fluid in the brain. As part of his treatment, his ever-inventive father helped to design the Wade-Dahl-Till (WDT) valve, which is still used to alleviate the condition. In 1962 his first daughter, Olivia, died of measles aged just seven. And then in 1965, while pregnant with their fifth child, Lucy, Patricia Neal suffered from cerebral aneurysms which left her severely debilitated. The couple's struggles as she learned to walk and talk again were dramatised in *The Patricia Neal Story*, in which Dahl himself became a character on the big-screen, portrayed by matinee idol Dirk Bogarde.

Meanwhile, Hollywood had come calling for Dahl the screenwriter. He had befriended Ian Fleming, the creator of James Bond, during their service years and was responsible for adapting

two Fleming novels into the classic films *You Only Live Twice* and *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*. He was less impressed with what Hollywood did to his own *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, which had been published in 1964, disowning the film version for changes that it made to the narrative, although Charlie and Willy Wonka remain beloved by generations of children.

Dahl continued to write prolifically, though his adult work was increasingly outshone by his work for children, his eccentric creations given life by quirky illustrator Quentin Blake, with whom he formed a fertile partnership. The pair hit a hot streak in the 1980s, producing *The Twits*, *George's Marvellous Medicine*, *The BFG*, *The Witches* and *Matilda*, all of which quickly became regarded as children's classics. They were mostly written from his shed in Great Missenden, Buckinghamshire, where he had settled with new wife Felicity, following his divorce from Neal. The famous shed today forms part of the Roald Dahl Museum, celebrating his life's work. Dahl died in 1990, aged seventy-four, from a rare cancer of the blood. Hopefully the numerous stage and screen adaptations that continue to bring his memorable creations to new generations would have met with the great man's approval.