

Critic at Large

The dark heart of Roald Dahl

A streak of pure nastiness runs through the author's anarchic, beloved children's literature – just as it did through his life

By Anna Leszkiewicz

In Roald Dahl's story "The Great Automatic Grammatizator", Adolph Knipe, an engineer and frustrated, unpublished writer, is fixated on "revengeing himself in a most devilish manner upon his greatest enemies". Knipe devises a machine that can produce stories of any style at the twist of a knob. The programmer selects a genre ("political, romantic, erotic, humorous"), theme ("world war, racial problem, Wild West, country life") and style ("whimsical, racy, Hemingway"). Pre-written plots are fed into the machine's "plot-memory". If a short story is being produced, the machine can mimic the tone of the magazine that has commissioned it.

Knipe is thrilled by his creation: "We'll undercut every writer in the country! We'll corner the market!" He sets up a literary agency, attributing stories to fictional writers – but also signs up many existing ones, who are lured in by the promise of a guaranteed bestselling novel every year. The reading public are none the wiser: by the story's end, "half of all the novels and stories published in the English language were produced by Adolph Knipe upon the Great Automatic Grammatizator", Dahl writes. "As I sit here listening to the howling of my nine starving children in the other room, I can feel my own hand creeping closer and closer to that golden contract."

The story was published in 1953 in *Someone Like You* – a collection of enjoyably malicious tales, including "Lamb to the Slaughter", in which a wife murders her husband with a frozen leg of lamb, then serves it cooked to investigators, and "Skin", in which art dealers scheme to slice off and sell a tattoo from a man's back. By then the 37-year-old Dahl had successfully placed stories in prestigious magazines – but this satire of assembly-line

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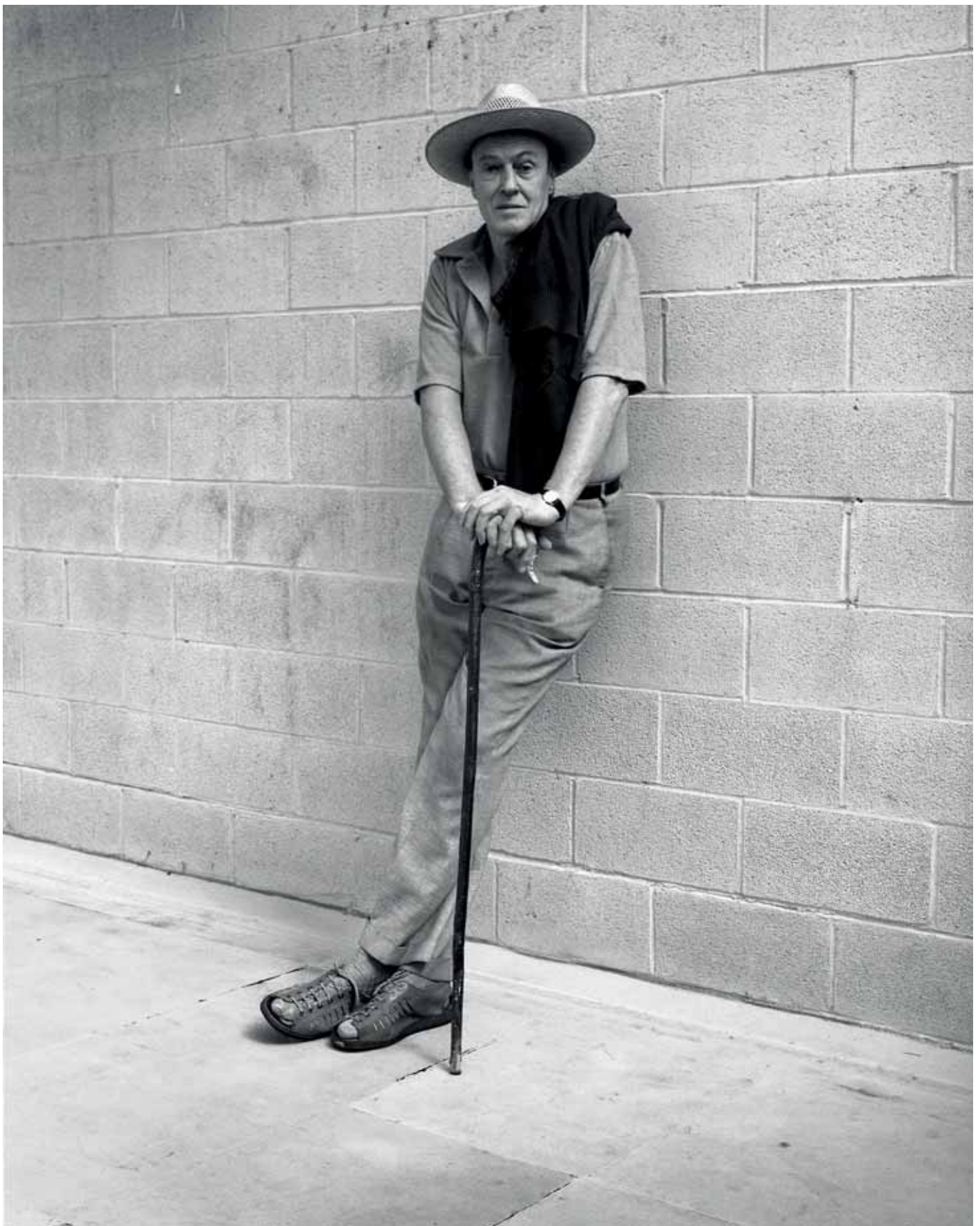
fiction reveals some frustration. It followed a bumpy couple of years of rejections, including from the *New Yorker*, which found some of Dahl's stories "too unpleasant". But Dahl had recently signed with the publisher Alfred Knopf (satirised in the Knipe story for his appetite for profit-making fiction), and *Someone Like You* would become Dahl's most successful book yet, with newspapers calling him "a master of the macabre".

What buttons and levers would one push on the Great Automatic Grammatizator to produce a truly Dahlesque work? A *New York Times* review of *Someone Like You* argued Dahl blended "four notable talents": an "antic imagination", an instinct for plot twists, a "savage sense of humour" and an "economical" style.

When we think of Dahl today, we think of his glittering, anarchic books for children – *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *The BFG*, *Matilda*. In 1975, Dahl produced his own list of ingredients for children's stories: a "first-class plot", pranks, the finding of treasure, chocolates, toys, money, magic, inventions. Children, Dahl wrote, "love being spooked... They love seeing the villain meet a grisly death... They like stories that contain a threat." Evil tricks, grotesque villains and humiliating acts of revenge unite his tales for readers big and small. "When writing stories, I cannot seem to rid myself of the unfortunate habit of having one person do nasty things to another person," Dahl once admitted. This habit is key to his enduring popularity: he has sold more than 300 million books, a number that no doubt would have delighted a man who always defined his success in sales. To write like Dahl, the nastiness dial must be cranked up to 11.

One company hoping to reproduce Dahl's stories with algorithmic efficiency is Netflix. In September 2021, the corporation acquired the Roald Dahl Story Company, run by Dahl's grandson Luke Kelly, for more than £500m, in order to create "a unique universe" of Dahl content. (Three years earlier, the streaming service reportedly paid as much as \$1bn for the rights to 16 of Dahl's stories.) Alongside the newly released feature film of *Matilda the Musical*, projects already announced include Wes Anderson's film of *The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar* starring Benedict Cumberbatch, an animated series based on *The Twits*, and two series directed by Taika Waititi: *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, and an animation based on the "origin story" of the Oompa Loompas. (An origin story for Willy Wonka, starring Timothée Chalamet, is also expected from Warner Bros in 2023.)

It was during this time of multi-million dollar negotiations that the Roald Dahl Story Company quietly put out a statement on its website, apologising for anti-Semitic comments made by Dahl in an interview with Michael Coren in this magazine in 1983. Dahl told Coren, "there is a trait in the Jewish character that does provoke animosity... even a stinker like Hitler didn't just pick on them for no reason". It was later announced that proceeds from the Netflix deal would be used to found anti-racism and children's health charities. The sinister side of Dahl's personality had to be disowned to ensure that his legacy remained profitable, while the dark heart of his stories were fed into the Netflix machine. ▶



DIMITRI KASTERINE / CAMERA PRESS

Big unfriendly giant: the author Roald Dahl has been described variously as a “devoted family man”, a “bully” and as an anti-Semite

Dahl's complex personality has confounded biographers. Jeremy Treglown wrote that Dahl was "contradictory" – a "war hero", "philanthropist" and "devoted family man" who was also an adulterer, "bully" and an "anti-Semite". "Many people loved him," Treglown wrote. "Many – some of them the same people – frankly detested him." His "official" biographer and friend Donald Sturrock painted a richly detailed, if kinder, portrait of Dahl – but he too used the word "bully". Kathryn Hughes, in her review of Sturrock's book, put it more bluntly: "Roald Dahl was an absolute sod. Crashing through life like a big, bad child he managed to alienate pretty much everyone he ever met with his grandiosity, dishonesty and spite. Tempered by the desire to be very wealthy, he was able to finesse this native nastiness into a series of compelling books."

Matthew Dennison also finds a man "of contradictions" in his short and rather flimsy new biography, *Teller of the Unexpected*. Dennison is alert to the tragedies in Dahl's life which might be seen as mitigating circumstances: his bereavements as a child; the plane crash which left him in constant pain; the accident that disabled his young son Theo; the death of his daughter, Olivia, at seven years old; the strokes suffered by his wife, the Oscar-winning actress Patricia Neal. But he also gives a sense of how domineering the 6ft 6in writer could be: the punishing recovery regime he subjected Neal to after her strokes, his infidelity (including a decade-long affair with Felicity Crosland, who would become his second wife), his ungracious dealings with publishers, fallings-out with friends, rudeness. Dennison admits Dahl could be, in the words of the three-year-old Theo, "a wasp's nest". And yet he still awkwardly insists that for child readers, Dahl's personality has "no part in the writing" they love – a view that seems naive at best.

Dahl's childhood was not happy. Born in Wales to Norwegian parents, he was only three years old when his father passed away, weeks after his eldest sister Astrid died aged seven. It was his father's last wish that his children go to English schools. Beaten by teachers, and bullied by older boys, Dahl's schooldays were traumatic. In his memoir, *Boy*, he devotes pages to the "searing agonising unbearable burning" of the cane. He was "appalled" that "masters and senior boys were allowed literally to wound other boys... I never have got over it."

Perhaps Dahl was motivated by revenge in his fictionalised depictions of sadistic adults – a parallel to what Matilda inflicted on her tormentors. "Devising and dishing out these splendid punishments", Dahl writes, was a "safety-valve" for Matilda's anger.

Roald read Beatrix Potter, *The Secret Garden* and Hans Christian Andersen as a child, but his favourite was Hilaire Belloc, whose *Cautionary Tales* he had memorised by aged nine. Belloc's wicked verses about heedless children meeting grisly ends had a lasting impact. Several of Dahl's books bear their imprint – the comic verses in *James and the Giant Peach*, the poetry of *Revolting Rhymes* and *Dirty Beasts*, and the unfortunate fates of the children in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* – though in his stories, it is just as often patronising

adults who fail to abide his sensible young heroes.

At the outbreak of the Second World War, Dahl joined the RAF. In 1940, he crashed over the Sahara – receiving "a monumental bash on the head", the effects of which were lifelong. He moved to the British embassy in Washington DC and, like his friend Ian Fleming, supplied information to the British Security Coordination. Dahl's first published story, "Shot Down Over Libya", was essentially a piece of wartime propaganda, as was his first for children, *The Gremlins*.

Perhaps it is unsurprising that Dahl's writing career began in this way. His larger-than-life children's books share certain qualities with propaganda: exaggeration, moral certainty, an amplified sense of threat, and monstrous enemies who possess a physical repulsiveness that betrays their inner malice. In *The Twits*, Dahl writes that "If a person has ugly thoughts, it begins to show on their face" until "you can hardly bear to look at it." Quentin Blake's illustration shows a woman with an increasingly large and crooked nose, and an ever angrier expression.

In *Matilda*, an older child, Hortensia, relishes recounting Ms Trunchbull's crimes against children. "Its like a war," Matilda gasps. "You're darn right," Hortensia replies, "And the casualties are terrific. We are the crusaders, the gallant army fighting for our lives with hardly any weapons at all and the Trunchbull is the Prince of Darkness, the Foul Serpent, the Fiery Dragon with all the weapons at her command."

In this war, Ms Trunchbull is engaged in her own propaganda campaign, accusing innocent children of extraordinary evils. "This clot," she declares of Bruce Bogtrotter, "this blackhead, this foul carbuncle, this poisonous pustule that you see before you is none other than a disgusting criminal, a denizen of the underworld, a member of the Mafia!" A chronic exaggerator with a taste for extravagant hyperbole, Dahl saw, and wrote, in black and white. "The only way to make my characters really interesting is to exaggerate all their good or bad qualities," Dahl once said. "If a person is nasty or bad or cruel, you make them *very* nasty and *very* bad and *very* cruel. And if they're ugly, you make them *extremely* ugly."

Dahl's cartoonish villains are drawn with venom. Take his first book for children, *James and the Giant Peach*, published in 1962. Dahl married Neal in 1953, and by early 1960 they had two girls, Olivia and Tessa – *James and the Giant Peach* developed from the nightly stories he told them. James's "enormously fat" Aunt Sponge is "a great white soggy overboiled cabbage" of a woman, while "bony" Aunt Spiker "had a screeching voice and long wet narrow lips" from which flew "little flecks of spit". These gleefully depicted grotesques were like little else in children's fiction. They would be matched by the nauseating, vindictive Mr and Mrs Twit, the horrible grandmother in *George's Marvellous Medicine*, with her "puckered-up mouth like a dog's bottom", the bone-crunching, child-chewing giants of *The BFG*, and the bald, bloodthirsty Witches. *Matilda*, Dahl's last full-length novel for children, published in 1988, contains particularly memorable antagonists: Matilda's materialistic father (who

In his memoir, *Boy*, Dahl describes the "searing agonising unbearable burning" of the cane

resembles “a low-grade bookmaker dressed up for his daughter’s wedding”) and vain mother (a platinum blonde addicted to TV and bingo), and the tyrannical teacher Ms Trunchbull, a mannish former Olympian in tweeds who could “tear telephone directories in half”.

Some of these portraits might well be considered misogynistic, classist or otherwise unacceptable in today’s cultural landscape. In at least one instance, Dahl’s caricatures were condemned as bigoted by contemporaries. *Charlie’s Oompa Loompas* were first depicted as black pygmies from “the African jungle”, happily enslaved by Willy Wonka. In 1972, Eleanor Cameron critiqued Dahl’s portrayal of their enforced servitude as “fun and games” when “the situation of the Oompa Loompas is real” and “anything but funny”.

Dahl wrote the screenplay for *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*: the film’s terrifying Child Catcher is not in Fleming’s novel. With his black clothes, enormous prosthetic nose, and appetite for imprisoning children, the Child Catcher is an anti-Semitic trope – though it’s not clear if he should be attributed to Dahl or the director Ken Hughes, who later claimed to have written the character. Sturrock finds it “hard to believe” Dahl wasn’t “directly involved”: “He is Willy Wonka’s evil doppelganger, treading that line between the creepy and the comic that Dahl had already made distinctively his own.”

The new film *Matilda the Musical* – adapted from the stage version that has been running since 2010 – both underscores and softens the harsh lines of Dahl’s book. Emma Thompson is duly strapped into a fatsuit, with her jaw widened into a masculine square; her Trunchbull is terrifying, then risibly pathetic. Mr and Mrs Wormwood are working-class caricatures – the film condemns them for their taste in leopard-print dresses, bad suits, frilly curtains and tacky furniture as much as their odious treatment of Matilda. But there is more sentimentality, a greater focus on nice characters, and an emphasis on the potential of all children – Matilda’s triumph over Ms Trunchbull is not hers alone, but a galvanising group act of solidarity, complete with rousing dance number.

Matilda the Musical hints at what’s to come from Netflix’s Roald Dahl “universe”. The film contains references to Dahl’s other books – at the end, the school is renamed the “Big Friendly School”, for example – in the style of Disney, Pixar or Marvel’s “cinematic universes”. At the time of the acquisition, Netflix suggested its adaptations would focus on the books’ “pertinent” themes of “kindness” and the “possibility of young people”. New generations may be introduced to a warmer writer than their predecessors.

It’s hard to imagine Roald Dahl would have been concerned by lingering distaste for his character. Unlike the Roald Dahl Story Company, he never apologised for his nasty side. In an interview filmed eight years before his death, Dahl is asked how he’d like to be remembered. A sly smile crosses his face. “You can quote Oscar Wilde,” he says, miscrediting a quote from his childhood hero, Hilaire Belloc (another writer who made anti-Semitic remarks). “When I am dead, I hope it may be said: His sins were scarlet, but his books were read.” ●

Childhood Notes

By Tom Gatti



Child’s-eye view: a 1930s painting by 12-year-old Tony Bonada, featured in *A Gift*

My six-year-old daughter put a sign on her door: “I’m ANGRY! Please do not enter without my permission”

Two summers ago, I was in the west of Ireland with my family, feeling very lucky that Covid travel rules had allowed our trip. At one point in our fortnight away, my six-year-old daughter had taken exception to some unreasonable adult demand. She retreated to her bedroom and soon a sign appeared on the door: “I’m ANGRY! Please do not enter without my permission.” Amused as much by her orthographic accuracy (line-breaks hyphenated; a stray capital corrected) as the sentiment, I took a photo and tweeted it with the caption: “The holiday is going well.” My daughter’s small act of protest caught the eye of the publisher Julian Rothenstein, and ended up in a book he has edited titled *A Gift*: a collection of images, poems and notes from under-13s around the globe.

The book is an attempt to help adults recall what the world looks like to a child. As you might expect, the qualities of curiosity and wonder shine through, but what’s particularly enchanting is the way in which moments of magic and high drama coexist with the quotidian. “MOM,” reads a note by one child: “I’m going to run away tomorrow at 9:30 when you and Dad are sleeping. Be sure to say goodbye forever.” “DEAR GOD,” goes another: “Thank you for the baby brother but what I prayed for was a puppy.” A felt-tipped figure with a circle around it is captioned by its six-year-old artist, “boy inside a hard-boiled egg”. A photo of a craft project shows a loo roll transformed into an octopus with a hypnotically human face and head of hair.

There are magnificent colourful paintings of American cities and Zimbabwean landscapes; quirky photographs; moving reflections on the immigrant experience. And everywhere there are reminders that children have, like Rothenstein, the sharpest of magpie eyes. As one seven-year-old poet puts it: “I don’t choose to collect these things/They just jump into my head.” ●

“A Gift” is published by Redstone Press