



Farewell to the Big Friendly Giant

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Chris Powling pays tribute to **Roald Dahl**.

Last November, almost all our national newspapers noted the death of the world's most famous children's author - many of them with full-dress obituaries. Roald Dahl's reputation with adult critics, though, was always problematic. Eight years ago, before the many awards Dahl later went on to win, **BfK 17** (November 1982) included an article by our present Editor which suggested the children had been right all along. We're reprinting it now, unchanged, as a tribute to the man whose unswerving belief that books should be *fun* did so much to promote the reading habit. He'll be sorely missed.

ROALD DAHL

13th September 1916 - 23rd November 1990

Viewed in terms of his sales figures, Dahl himself is the Big Friendly Giant. Take **Charlie and the Chocolate Factory**, for example. According to Puffin's Barry Cunningham, this still sells in excess of 100,000 copies a year-some eighteen years after it was first published. Other Dahl books on the Puffin list, Cunningham says, have a similar standing as 'permanent children's classics'. He expects the most recent, **The Twits**, to have sold 200,000 copies by the end of its first year in paperback. No other Puffin author can match this. Not merely is Dahl 'at the very top of Division One', there's what Cunningham calls 'a quantum difference' between him and his closest rivals. Dahl's hardback publisher sits just as pretty. Rupert Lancaster estimates that **Revolt Rhymes** has done 'a good twenty times better than any other Cape children's author published this year' and for a comparable bestseller to **The BFG** it's likely he'll have to look to the new John Fowles on Cape's adult list.

Which is quite enough to make the rest of us gangrenous with envy. Personally, I'd love to console myself with that handy standby for all impoverished writerly-types: a Big Sale must equal a Bad Book. Unfortunately, this formula has a couple of snags. Firstly, in the immortal words of Ira Gershwin, 'it ain't necessarily so'. Secondly, it implies a massive dim-wittedness on the part of Dahl's young readers - the sort of dim-wittedness normally to be found only amongst persons who are too clever by half, such as adult critics. Consider, for instance, Eleanor Cameron who some while ago wrote thus on the subject of **Charlie** in **Children's Literature in Education 21**:

'What I object to is the book's tastelessness, expressed through its phoniness, its hypocrisy, its getting laughs through violent punishment... Dahl caters to the streak of sadism in children which they don't realise is there because they are not fully self-aware and are not experienced enough to know what sadism is.'

Mind you, Ms Cameron can still recognise a lost cause when she sees one. Resignedly, she sums up:

*'We all know that children are going to get to **Charlie** eventually; why need we make a special effort to bring it to their attention? For what purpose?'*

Her own special efforts, she tells us, are made on behalf of books which bring 'enlargement and illumination', namely the works of Philippa Pearce, Alan Garner, C S Lewis, Joan Aiken, Lucy Boston, Mary Norton, Nina Bawden, John Rowe Townsend, K M Peyton, Mollie Hunter, William Mayne, Penelope Farmer, [Leon Garfield and Penelope Lively.

Now all these authors, let it be said, have come up with good quality stuff in their time. Yet two facts about the list will be obvious at once to any practising primary teacher - that it's pitched at a discernibly older age group than **Charlie** and that it consists of writers who for the most part and for the great bulk of children *presuppose an established reading habit*. It will be news only to Ms Cameron that teachers direct children's attention to Dahl for the very good reason that better than anyone else they know *he establishes that habit*.

What, though, of Ms Cameron's claim that Dahl's unique ability to get kids hooked on books comes at too high a price - that it actually stunts a child's development? Can it really be true that **Charlie** represents a threat to civilization as we know it? 'A book that diminishes the human spirit', she insists, 'that emphasises all those Clockwork Orange qualities which are destroying the society that children are growing up in: callousness, lack of any emotion but the hyped-up one of getting kicks out of the pain and misfortune of others and depicting all this as funny and delightful', etcetera, etcetera. She's referring, would you believe, to Augustus Gloop, Verucca Salt, Violet Beauregard and Mike Teavee ... that is, to a greedy fat boy who becomes less so by way of a thin pipe; a spoilt little rich girl who ends up (along with her spoiling parents) amidst a load of old rubbish; a chewing gum vandal who goes permanently purple in the face; and a TV addict doomed to remain ten feet tall and 'sought after by every basketball team in the country'. All of which may well be a vast disappointment to seekers after enlargement and illumination but scarcely suggests the double-dyed Decadence Ms Cameron has led us to expect. So how come she's gone so plonkingly over the top?

There are two reasons, I think. Taken together they blind her not only to Dahl's exemplary success as a writer for children but also to why, by his own highest standards, this maestro can so suddenly and strikingly flop.

For a start, there's her curious assumption that the Best Fiction must have a built-in betterment factor - a sort of star-rating on some scale of moral hygiene. Why? What's wrong with literature that's pitched squarely at *celebrating* the human condition? An obvious and apposite example would be Chaucer's **Miller's Tale**. This story for adults is much akin to Dahl's stories for children in that it's gloriously riotous, rollicking, rude... and highly unlikely to set any readers on the path to a Duke of Edinburgh Award. It's her second assumption that clinches the Cameron crassness, however: that writing for adults and children can be assessed in terms of the same model of excellence. What Dahl is so good at is exploiting the tastes he has in common with his young readers - for farce, for pantomime, for the sort of slapstick normally associated with circus and stage and cinema screen. These are seldom catered for on the printed page, not because they can't be reproduced there but because doing so is usually regarded as being beneath writerly dignity. I fence the sheer daftness of wincing at the come-uppance dealt out to Gloop, Salt, Beau regard, Teavee and Company. These aren't fully-rounded human beings and were never intended as such. *They're 'bad' clowns*. To give vent to moral indignation on their behalf is about as sensible as blaming Tweety-Pie for duffing up Sylvester the Cat, or Stan Laurel for getting Oliver Hardy into yet another fine mess (and him supposed to be a friend, too). When Ms Cameron quotes with approval the critic who regards Charlie Bucket as 'a cipher ... pushed right to the edge of mawkishness as he slowly starves', both she and the critics have missed the point by a mile. This is *melodrama*, lovely blood-and-thundering melodrama with a central character designed to touch us with two-dimensional pathos in the manner of that other infinitely greater and more varied Charlie with the cane and the bowler hat. To put it another way, once Charlie is seen as Cinderella, with Grandpa Joe as a senior-citizen Buttons and Mr Wonka as a Factory/Fairy-Godmother, the appeal of the story becomes clear. What's mawkish is the attempt to extort a tear on behalf of the Ugly Sisters.

Any critique of Dahl, then, must first take account of his superb talent for enlisting and combining non-literary and pre-literary idioms from a ragbag of sources. These he brings smack up-to-date in the service of stories that from the outset are accessible, intelligible and fun. Simple enough? Alas, no. If it were, we'd all be having a bash. There's so little of the literary show-off about Dahl that his skills and scope are revealed only when he's put alongside the one writer who can match him in popularity: Enid Blyton. What follows is a thumb-nail sketch only, but in three obvious ways, it seems to me, Dahl demonstrates that he's in a different class.

Storytelling. Only a fool would deny the turn-over-the-page impetus Blyton builds up - a healthy reminder to all writers for children that if you've got this you don't need anything else. But who can recall her books afterwards? They merge and blur interchangeably. Dahl's stories, even at their weakest, have a sharpness and quirkiness that sticks in the memory.

Style. There's no better writer for the voice than Roald Dahl. Nobody ever fell asleep reading him aloud whereas with our Enid it's impossible after a while to stay awake. When, in **George's Marvellous Medicine**, he describes Grandma as having 'a small puckered-up mouth like a dog's bottom' the description is at once hilarious, exact and quite beyond anything she could muster. Her prose is like gum that's lost its flavour though not quite enough to stop you chewing. In Dahl, children come across a prose and a verse that's as punchy and populist as a TV ad. and yet out to sell only itself. The refreshingly lowfalutin' quality of his fee-fi-fo-fum rhetoric gets it across to the widest possible audience that words actually *matter*.

Subversiveness. Asked how he can communicate so readily with eight-year-olds, Dahl once replied, 'I am eight years old.' Exactly! He makes almost every other writer for kids - not least Miss B - look as if they're dressing down for the part. In form, content and manner his are the kind of books children would write for each other if they had the necessary stamina and language experience. They recognise at once that he shares their ketchup and-candyfloss relish for sharp contrasts, their preference for laughing out loud-at themselves, at grown-ups, at stuffiness in all its aspects. No wonder so many adults find Dahl such a threat. He's a perpetual underminer of their status.

He has to work at it, of course. And even for him it's a risky business. Once in a while he trips himself up (as with the first-version Oompa Loompas for which he's never been forgiven by commentators who want to make this the only sort of issue that Counts). Sometimes, too, the exuberance and inventiveness fail to get airborne (**Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator**), or, after a promising take-off, only just stay aloft (**The Twits**). Worse still, it's easy enough for the whole joy-ride to nosedive out of control (**George's Marvellous Medicine**).

Even **The BFG**, in many respects a blessed return to vintage Dahl, snacks a little of one of those self-intoxicated drama improvisations that go on a fraction too long. In my opinion, that is. Dahl himself won't care a fig for my opinion. lies the complete antithesis of the kind of children's author who tells you 'I only write for myself, meaning, all too often, for the critics. For Dahl it's the kids who are kingpin. In a recent newspaper interview he remarked: 'I suppose I could knock at the door of any house where there was a child - whether in the US, Britain, Holland, West Germany, France - and say "My car's run out of petrol. Could you please give me a cup of tea?" And they'd know me. That *does* make me feel good.'

It should make us feel good, too. Also it should make us feel uneasy. Take another look at Ms Cameron's approved list of literary practitioners for the littlies. She includes several recipients of the industry's highest awards - deserving winners every one. But aren't they all just a little bit ... well, *respectable*? Aren't these the very names you'd expect to conjure with if you wanted to win friends and influence people amongst those who like books a lot but aren't necessarily so keen on kids? Dahl, needless to say, hasn't won a Top Prize in his life. His situation reminds me of certain superstars in bygone Hollywood - the ones who could pack cinemas year after year but who watched the Oscars get handed out to classier performers thought to bring 'tone' to the movie business, to help it upgrade its own desperately insecure image of itself. A Children's Book World that was truly confident would have recognised and acknowledged Roald Dahl's achievement long ago.

For if the Big Friendly Giant didn't exist, then those of us who care about books *for their own sake* and about children *as they are* would've been forced to invent him. Thank God he invented himself.

Roald Dahl's books are published in hardback by Cape and in paperback' by Puffin.

Chris Powling 's **Roald Dahl** (Puffin, 0 14 03.1752 X, X.1.95), first published in 1985, is a biographical anti literary study for children of primary age.

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