SOFTWARE & TECH

20 Facts About Roald Dahl

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The Marvellous World of Roald Dahl: 20 Facts That Reveal the Man Behind the Magic

Roald Dahl is one of the most beloved storytellers of all time, a name that conjures images of giant peaches, friendly giants, and chocolate factories. His books have delighted children and adults for generations, selling over 300 million copies worldwide. But the man himself was just as fascinating, complex, and sometimes surprising as the characters he created. From his days as a fighter pilot in the Second World War to his career as a spy, and from personal tragedy to linguistic invention, Dahl's life was a story in itself. This article explores 20 intriguing facts about Roald Dahl that go beyond the books, offering a deeper look at the author whose imagination knew no bounds.

Whether you are a lifelong fan or a curious newcomer, these facts about Roald Dahl will enrich your understanding of the man who gave us Matilda, the BFG, and Willy Wonka. We will journey through his childhood, his war years, his writing habits, and the legacy he left behind. Let us step into the wonderful world of Roald Dahl.

1. A Norwegian Heart in a Welsh Village

Roald Dahl was born on 13 September 1916 in Llandaff, a village in Cardiff, Wales, to Norwegian parents. His father, Harald Dahl, and mother, Sofie Magdalene Hesselberg, had emigrated from Norway. This Scandinavian heritage was a powerful influence throughout Dahl's life. He spent many summer holidays with his mother's family in Norway, visiting the coastal areas that would later inspire settings in books like *The Witches* and *Kiss Kiss*. The family spoke Norwegian at home, and Dahl always felt a strong connection to his Norse roots, which informed the folklore and dark humour in his stories.

2. The Great Mouse Plot of 1924

One of the most famous episodes from Dahl's childhood is the "Great Mouse Plot." When he was eight years old, he and his friends played a prank on the local sweet shop owner, Mrs. Pratchett, who was notoriously mean. They placed a dead mouse in a jar of gobstoppers. When Mrs. Pratchett discovered it, she screamed, and the boys were caught and severely punished by the headmaster at Llandaff Cathedral School. Dahl later wrote about this incident in his autobiography, *Boy: Tales of Childhood*, and it remains one of the most frequently cited facts about Roald Dahl among his fans.

3. A Repton Education and the Chocolate Connection

After his mother decided he should attend an English public school, Dahl was sent to Repton School in Derbyshire. It was here that a truly magical connection was born. The Cadbury chocolate company would occasionally send boxes of new chocolate bars to the school for boys to test and provide feedback. Dahl, who loved sweets, later said that this experience of tasting new, secret chocolate creations fired his imagination. He would dream of working in a chocolate factory and inventing new bars. This childhood daydream eventually became the core of his brilliant story, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*.

4. A Fighter Pilot in the Royal Air Force

When the Second World War broke out, Dahl joined the Royal Air Force (RAF). He trained as a fighter pilot in Nairobi, Kenya. In 1940, he was posted to Libya and flew a Gloster Gladiator biplane. He was involved in a fierce air battle during the Anglo-Iraqi War, but his most dramatic moment came during a routine flight. His commanding officer gave him incorrect coordinates for the location of his squadron, which led to him running out of fuel over the desert. He was forced to crash-land, suffering severe injuries to his skull, nose, and spine. This crash shaped the rest of his life and left him with chronic pain.

5. A Brush with Ian Fleming and MI6

After recovering from his crash injuries, Dahl was posted to Washington, D.C., as an assistant air attaché. It was here that he was recruited by a British intelligence officer named Ian Fleming, who would later create James Bond. Dahl worked as a spy for MI6, providing information and helping to shape British intelligence efforts in the United States. He also wrote propaganda pieces. His connection with Fleming continued after the war; the two became good friends, and Dahl even wrote the screenplay for the James Bond film *You Only Live Twice*.

6. From Crash to Writing Career

Dahl's writing career began almost by accident. After his plane crash in Libya, he was sent to recover in Alexandria, Egypt. While there, he met the writer C.S. Forester, author of the *Hornblower* series. Forester asked Dahl to make notes about his RAF experiences, thinking he might turn them into a story. Dahl wrote a detailed account, and Forester was so impressed that he sent it directly to the *Saturday Evening Post*, which published it as "Shot Down Over Libya." This was Dahl's first published work, and it launched his career as a writer.

7. He Married an Oscar-Winning Actress

In 1953, Roald Dahl married the American actress Patricia Neal. Neal was a highly respected Hollywood star who had won an Academy Award for Best Actress for her role in *Hud*in 1963. The couple had five children: Olivia, Tessa, Theo, Ophelia, and Lucy. Their marriage was a passionate but turbulent partnership, marked by great joy and terrible tragedy. Neal suffered a series of severe strokes in 1965, and Dahl took charge of her recovery, creating a rigorous rehabilitation program that eventually helped her regain her speech and mobility.

8. Personal Tragedy and the Death of a Daughter

One of the most heartbreaking facts about Roald Dahl is the death of his eldest daughter, Olivia, in 1962. She died from measles encephalitis at the age of seven. Dahl was devastated and never fully recovered from the loss. He dedicated *The BFG*to Olivia, writing at the front of the book: "To Olivia." After her death, Dahl became a strong advocate for vaccination, urging parents to have their children immunised against measles. He later wrote a powerful essay titled "Measles: A Dangerous Illness," in which he described the horrific experience of watching his daughter die from a preventable disease.

9. The Magical but Painful Writing Hut

Dahl wrote all of his major works in a small, cluttered shed at the bottom of his garden at Gipsy House, his home in Great Missenden, Buckinghamshire. The writing hut was a modest, chaotic space filled with books, papers, and knick-knacks. He sat in a large, comfortable armchair that had a specially designed writing board attached to it. He would write for two hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon, using a pencil on yellow legal pads. The hut was heated by a small gas fire, and he often covered his legs with a sleeping bag to keep warm. He said that

the hut was his "secret place," a sanctuary where he could let his imagination run wild.

10. He Was a Master of the Twist Ending

Before he became famous for his children's books, Roald Dahl was a highly respected writer of short stories for adults. His stories were often dark, cynical, and macabre, with shocking twist endings that left readers stunned. These stories were collected in volumes like *Someone Like You* and *Kiss Kiss*. They were so popular that they were adapted into a television series called *Tales of the Unexpected*, which ran from 1979 to 1988. Dahl presented the series himself, which cemented his reputation as a master of the unexpected narrative turn.

11. A Giant Inventor of New Words

Roald Dahl had a magnificent talent for inventing words. He called his made-up language "Gobblefunk," which appears most prominently in *The BFG*. Words like "whizzpopping," "snozzcumber," and "frobscottle" have become part of the vocabulary of millions of children. Dahl loved to play with language, creating neologisms that were both humorous and evocative. He believed that children appreciated being challenged by new and unusual words, and his linguistic creativity is one of the reasons his books feel so fresh and exciting to read aloud.

12. He Suffered from a Phobia of Beards

Dahl had a well-documented and intense dislike of beards and long hair on men. This phobia was so strong that he included it in his writing. In *The Twits*, he wrote that "a man with a hairy face" was "a disgusting sight." The Twits themselves, Mr. and Mrs. Twit, are hideous characters who are covered in filth, and Mr. Twit's beard is described as a breeding ground for food scraps and nastiness. Dahl's phobia is a quirky but memorable fact about Roald Dahl that sheds light on how his personal dislikes could inspire his creations.

13. He Was a Hypochondriac with a Love for Pain

Despite his robust appearance and adventurous war record, Dahl was something of a hypochondriac. He was constantly worried about his health and visited doctors frequently. He also suffered from chronic back pain for much of his life, a legacy of his plane crash. To manage this pain, he underwent multiple surgeries and experimented with various treatments. He also had a controversial interest in alternative medicine and homeopathy. His hypochondria is a fascinating contradiction to his image as a tough, adventurous, and stoic figure.

14. A Prolific Collector of Art

Roald Dahl was a passionate collector of art, particularly modern and contemporary works. He amassed a significant private collection that included pieces by Picasso, Matisse, Chagall, and Francis Bacon. His love for art was shared with his wife, Patricia Neal. The walls of Gipsy House were covered in paintings, and he enjoyed discussing art with friends and visitors. This side of Dahl is less well-known than his writing, but it shows a man of broad cultural interests and deep appreciation for creative expression in all its forms.

15. He Wrote the Screenplay for Chitty Chitty Bang Bang

In addition to his work on James Bond, Dahl wrote the screenplay for the classic family film *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* (1968), which was based on Ian Fleming's book. The film, starring Dick Van Dyke, became a beloved musical. Dahl also wrote the screenplay for the film adaptation of his own book, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, although the finished film (the 1971 version starring Gene Wilder) used a different screenplay by David Seltzer. Dahl was

reportedly unhappy with the changes made to his story.

16. A Champion of the Underdog

A consistent theme running through Dahl's children's books is the championing of the underdog. His heroes are almost always children who are small, clever, and kind, who must outwit cruel, stupid, or greedy adults. Matilda stands up to the terrifying Miss Trunchbull. James Henry Trotter

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