SOFTWARE & TECH

Watch Roald Dahl The Witches

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Unmasking the Grand High Witch: A Complete Guide on Why and How to Watch Roald Dahl's The Witches

There are few children's stories as delightfully subversive, darkly comic, and genuinely terrifying as Roald Dahl's *The Witches*. Published in 1983, this masterpiece of children's literature has captivated audiences for decades, proving that the best stories for young readers don't talk down to them. Instead, they acknowledge that fear, danger, and even tragedy exist in the world, wrapping these truths in a package of wit, fantasy, and ultimately, triumph. For anyone looking to revisit a childhood classic or introduce a new generation to its magic, the burning question is not just **who** to watch Roald Dahl's *The Witches* with, but **which version**to choose? This comprehensive guide explores the universe of this beloved tale, from its pages to the silver screen, offering everything you need to know before you sit down to experience the story.

The story follows a young, unnamed British boy who, after the tragic death of his parents, goes to live with his wonderful, cigar-smoking Norwegian grandmother. She is a storyteller, and her most thrilling tales involve revealing the terrible truth about the world: that real witches are not fairy-tale creatures in black hats and warts. Real witches are ordinary-looking women who despise children with a burning passion and spend their lives plotting their destruction. When the boy and his grandmother accidentally stumble upon the annual meeting of all the witches in England, presided over by the terrifying Grand High Witch herself, the boy is turned into a mouse. This is not a spoiler; it is the catalyst for the story's brilliance. What follows is a thrilling, high-stakes adventure of a boy and his grandmother as they vow to stop the witches' nefarious "Formula 86 Delayed Action Mouse-Maker" from wiping out the children of the entire country.

The Legacy of a Dark Fairy Tale: Why the Story Endures

Before diving into the specifics of which adaptation to **watch Roald Dahl's The Witches**, it is essential to understand the story's unique place in literary history. Dahl does not sanitize his world. The boy loses his parents. He pays a permanent price for his bravery by remaining a mouse. This sense of consequence is what gives the story its weight. It treats its young audience with respect, assuming they can handle complex emotions like grief, fear, and defiance.

Furthermore, the story is a masterclass in perspective. Dahl empowers the boy by turning him into a mouse. As a small creature, he is vulnerable, but he is also quick, clever, and now invisible to the very witches who hunt him. This is a powerful metaphor for childhood itself: feeling small in a world of giants, yet possessing a unique vantage point and inner strength that adults often lack. The relationship between the boy and his grandmother is the emotional core of the story. She is not a passive, gentle elder. She is fierce, knowledgeable, and unflinchingly loyal. She believes her grandson without question and immediately shifts from mourning his transformation to plotting revenge. This bond of unconditional love and shared adventure is what makes the story so heartwarming despite its macabre setting.

The Unforgettable Villain: The Grand High Witch

No discussion about watching any version of *The Witches* is complete without highlighting its antagonist. The Grand High Witch is arguably one of the greatest villains in children's literature. She is a figure of pure, operatic evil.

She is vain, cruel, and terrifying in her grotesque physicality—with her clawed hands, bald head, and wide, nostril-less feet crammed into stylish shoes. Her voice is a thunderclap of fury, and her plan to drown the world's children in a flood of mouse-hood is chillingly methodical. A great adaptation hinges entirely on the portrayal of this character. She is the storm around which the entire narrative revolves, and seeing her brought to life is the primary reason most fans choose to **watch Roald Dahl's The Witches**.

The Two Major Cinematic Adaptations: A Tale of Two Visions

For most viewers, the decision of what to **watch Roald Dahl's The Witches** boils down to a choice between two major film adaptations: the classic 1990 version directed by Nicolas Roeg and the 2020 version directed by Robert Zemeckis, produced by Guillermo del Toro, and starring Anne Hathaway. They are radically different films, each with its own merits and drawbacks, and understanding their differences is key to choosing the right one for your viewing experience.

The 1990 Adaptation: A Cult Classic of Practical Horror

The 1990 film is a strange, beautiful, and often genuinely frightening movie. Directed by Nicolas Roeg, known for his arthouse sensibilities (*Don't Look Now*), it brings a distinctly Gothic and surreal vision to Dahl's world. The film stars Anjelica Huston as the Grand High Witch, delivering a performance of stunning, scene-chewing malevolence.

- Practical Effects Mastery: This version is a testament to the power of practical effects. The makeup by the Jim Henson Creature Shop is astonishing. When the witches remove their wigs and masks, revealing their true, monstrous forms, it is a moment of pure, visceral horror. The transformation of the boy into a mouse is also achieved through brilliant, uncanny animatronics and puppetry that feel tangible and real.
- A Darker, Grittier Tone: Roeg's film is darker and more atmospheric. The hotel where the witches meet feels genuinely creepy. The sound design is unnerving. This is not a film for very young or highly sensitive children. It leans into the terror of the story, making the boy's vulnerability palpable.
- Faithful to the Spirit: While it takes some liberties (notably changing the ending and the boy's name to Luke), the 1990 film captures the spirit of Dahl's story. It understands that the real horror is the deception. The witches look like ordinary, even beautiful women (a key point from the book), which makes them all the more threatening.
- Why Choose This Version? If you appreciate classic horror, practical effects, and a film that treats its source material with darkly artistic respect, this is the version to watch. It remains a cult classic for a reason and is often considered the definitive visual interpretation by purists. To watch Roald Dahl's The Witches (1990) is to experience a piece of cinematic history.

The 2020 Adaptation: A Modern, Glossy Spectacle

The 2020 reboot, directed by Robert Zemeckis (*Back to the Future*, *The Polar Express*), took a very different approach. Starring Anne Hathaway as the Grand High Witch, Octavia Spencer as the grandmother, and introducing a new backstory for the hero (now named Charlie), this version aimed to modernize the tale for a new generation.

- CGI and Glamour: The 2020 film is a visual effects extravaganza. The Grand High Witch's transformation is a morphing, CGI spectacle. Her true form is less a creature of the Henson Creature Shop and more a monstrous, elongated ghoul. Anne Hathaway's performance is highly stylized, using an exaggerated, shifting European accent that ranges from comedic to sinister.
- A Less Threatening Tone: Zemeckis' film is undeniably more family-friendly. The scares are reduced in intensity, with more emphasis placed on comedy and spectacle. The emotional beats are broader, and the film includes a new backstory that attempts to explain the boy's parents' death in a more conventional way.
- Significant Plot Changes: This version makes major changes to the ending and the mythology. Without providing a full breakdown, it fundamentally alters the boy's fate, which was a controversial decision for many fans

of the book. It also changes the rules of how the witches operate, adding a new way to reverse the mouse transformation.

- Why Choose This Version? If you are looking for a brightly colored, star-studded, less intense introduction to the story for younger children, this is a valid option. Anne Hathaway’s performance is undeniably entertaining in its own way, and the production design is lush. It is a different beast entirely from the 1990 film, more of a "loosely inspired by" adaptation than a direct retelling. For a family movie night that prioritizes spectacle over scares, you might choose to watch Roald Dahl's The Witches (2020).

Beyond the Big Screen: Other Ways to Experience the Story

While the films are the most prominent entry points, they are not the only ways to immerse yourself in this world. For a truly authentic experience, considering other mediums provides a richer understanding of the story's power.

The Audiobook: A Masterclass in Narration

Many critics and fans agree that the single best way to experience the story, perhaps even better than reading it, is to listen to the audiobook narrated by the author himself. Roald Dahl was an extraordinary reader of his own work. His voice is perfectly suited to the material—dry, wry, and full of dramatic timing. He gives the Grand High Witch a uniquely guttural, snarling voice that is absolutely unforgettable. Listening to Dahl read the story is like sitting at the feet of a master storyteller. This is the version that most closely adheres to his original vision and rhythm. Before you choose a film to **watch Roald Dahl's The Witches**, it is highly recommended to first hear Dahl speak his own words. It provides the definitive baseline for comparison.

The Stage Adaptation: A Live Theatrical Experience

In recent years, the story has been adapted for the stage. A notable production by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 2023 brought a new musical and theatrical version to life. This adaptation, running live in a theater, offers a unique communal experience. The magic of live performance—the collective gasps of the audience, the tangible tension in the room—can make the story feel immediate and terrifying in a way that film cannot replicate. If you have the opportunity to see a professional stage production, it is a thrilling way to **watch Roald Dahl's The Witches** come alive in a new dimension.

A Head-to-Head Comparison: Choosing Your Viewing Experience

To help you decide which screen adaptation to commit to, here is a clear breakdown of their key differences.

Feature	1990 Film (Nicolas Roeg)	2020 Film (Robert Zemeckis)
Tone	Dark, Gothic, genuinely frightening	Lighter, more comedic, family-friendly
Special Effects	Practical, puppetry (Jim Henson's Creature Shop)	Computer-generated imagery (CGI)
Grand High Witch	Anjelica Huston (serious, regal, terrifying)	Anne Hathaway (campy, theatrical, exaggerated)
Faithfulness	Faithful to the spirit, changes ending and hero's name	Loosely inspired, major plot and ending changes
Suitable For	Older children, teens, and adults who love dark fantasy	Younger children, families wanting a gentler story

Thematic Depth: More Than Just a Scary Story

Both films, and the book itself, are built on a foundation of powerful themes. Understanding these themes enhances the experience for any viewer choosing to **watch Roald Dahl's The Witches**.

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