Dahl was born in Llandaff, South Wales, to Norwegian parents, and spent his childhood summers visiting his grandparents in Oslo, Norway. After his father died when Dahl was four, his mother abided by her late husband's wish that Dahl be sent to English schools. Dahl subsequently attended Llandaff Cathedral School, where he began a series of academic misadventures. After he and several other students were severely beaten by the headmaster for placing a dead mouse in a cruel storekeeper's candy jar, Dahl's mother moved him to St. Peter's Boarding School and later to Repton, a renowned private school. Dahl would later describe his school years as "days of horrors" which inspired much of his macabre fiction. After graduating from Repton, Dahl took a position with the Shell Oil Company in Tanganyika (now Tanzania, Africa). In 1939 he joined a Royal Air Force training squadron in Nairobi, Kenya, serving as a fighter pilot in the Mediterranean. Dahl suffered severe head injuries in a plane crash near Alexandria, Egypt; upon recovering he was transferred to Washington, D.C., as an assistant air attaché. There Dahl began his writing career, publishing a short story in the Saturday Evening Post. In 1961, he published his first work for children, *James and the Giant Peach*, and for the remainder of his life continued to write for both children and adults. He died in 1990.

Critical response to Dahl's children's books has varied from praising him as a genius to declaring his works racist and harmful. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is his most popular and most controversial children's story. Many critics have censured this work for its alleged stereotyping and inhumanity, and have accused Dahl of racism for his portrayal of the Oompa-Loompas: in the original version of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, they are described as black pygmies from deepest Africa who sing and dance and work for nearly nothing. In a revised edition, Dahl changed their appearance and gave them a mythical homeland. Dahl's supporters have argued that in *Charlie*, as in his other children's books, Dahl follows the traditional fairy tale style, which includes extreme exaggeration and the swift and horrible destruction of evildoers; they contend that children are not harmed by this approach.

Dahl was born on September 13, 1916, the son of an adventurous shipbroker. He was an energetic and mischievous child and from an early age proved adept at finding trouble. His very earliest memory was of pedaling to school at breakneck speed on his tricycle, his two sisters struggling to keep up as he whizzed around curves on two wheels. In *Boy: Tales of Childhood*, Dahl recounted many of these happy memories from his childhood, remembering most fondly the trips that the entire family took to Norway, which he always considered happy memories from his childhood, remembering most fondly the trips that the entire family took to Norway, which he always considered

Though Dahl's father died when the author was four, he had a mother who was a born storyteller. His mother abided by his wish to have the children study English at his school and the major themes of his adult work. Each day on the way to and from school the seven-year-old Dahl and his friends passed a shop owned by an old grouchy storekeeper, Mrs. Pratchett, scolded the children as they dug her hands into the jars of candy; one day the kids had had enough of her abuse, and Dahl hatchet the perfect plan to get back at her. The very next day, when she reached into the jar of Gobstoppers she clamped her hand around a very stiff, dead mouse and flung the jar to the ground, scattering Gobstoppers and glass all over the store floor. Mrs. Pratchett knew who to blame, and when the boys went to school the next day she was waiting, along with a very angry Headmaster Coombes. Not only did Coombes give each of the boys a severe beating, but Mrs. Pratchett was there to witness it. "She was bounding up and down with excitement," Dahl remembered in *Boy*, "'Lay it into 'im!' she was shrieking. 'Let 'im know it's a lesson!'"

Dahl's mother complained about the beating the boys were given, but was told if she didn't like it she could find another school. She did, sending Roald to St. Peters Boarding School the next year, and later to Repton, a renowned private school. Of his time at St. Peters, Dahl said: "Those were days of horrors, of fierce discipline, of not talking in the dormitories, no running in the corridors, no untidiness of any sort, no this or that or the other, just rules, rules and still more rules that had to be obeyed. And the fear of the dreaded cane hung over us like the fear of death all the time."

Dahl received undistinguished marks while attending Repton, and showed little sign of his future prowess as a writer. His end-of-term report from Easter term, 1931, which he saved, declared him "a persistent muddler. Vocabulary negligible, sentences mal-constructed. He reminds me of a camel." Nevertheless, his mother offered him the option of attending Oxford or Cambridge when he finished school. His
In 1939, Dahl's adventures took on a more dangerous cast as he joined the Royal Air Force training squadron in Nairobi, Kenya. World War II was just beginning, and Dahl would soon make his mark as a fighter pilot combating the Germans all around the Mediterranean Sea. While strafing a convoy of trucks near Alexandria, Egypt, his plane was hit by machine-gun fire. The plane crashed to the ground and Dahl crawled from the wreckage as the gas tanks exploded. The crash left his skull fractured, his nose crumpled, and his eyes temporarily sunk shut. After six months of recovery he returned to his squadron in Greece and shot down four enemy planes before being invalidated out of the service as a result of his earlier injuries eventually rendered him unable to fly.

Dahl was soon transferred to Washington, D.C., to serve as an assistant air attack. One day C. S. Forester interviewed Dahl over lunch for an article he was writing for the Saturday Evening Post, but was too engrossed in eating to take notes himself. The notes that Dahl took to try to keep up brought the magazine under Dahl's name. Forester contributed an article entitled "Dahl's dollars for the story, which was titled "Piece of Cake" and later published in Over to You: Ten Stories of Fliers and Flying. Soon his stories appeared in Collier's, Harper's, Ladies' Home Journal, Tomorrow and Town and Country. Dahl indicated in a New York Times Book Review profile by Willa Petschek that "as I went on, the stories became less and less realistic and more fantastic. But becoming a writer was pure fluke. Without being asked to, I doubt if I'd ever have thought of it." In 1943, Dahl wrote his first children's story, and coined a term, with The Gremlins. Gremlins were tiny saboteurs who lived on fighter planes and bombers and were responsible for all crashes. Mrs. Roosevelt, the president's wife, read the book to her children and liked it so much that she invited Dahl to dinner, and he and the president soon became friends. Through the 1940s and into the 1950s Dahl continued as a short story writer for adults, establishing his reputation as a writer of macabre tales with an unexpected twist. A Books and Bookmen reviewer called Dahl "a master of horror—an intellectual Hitchcock of the writing world." J. D. O'Hara, writing in The New Republic, labelled him "our Supreme Master of Wickedness," and his stories earned him three Edgar Allan Poe Awards from the Mystery Writers of America.

In 1953 he married Hollywood actress Patricia Neal, star of such movies as The Fountainhead and, later, Hud, for which she won an Academy Award. Dahl recalled in Pat and Road that "she wasn't at all movie-starish; no great closets filled with clothes or anything like that. She had a drive to be a great actress, but it was never as strong as it is with some of these nuts. You could turn it aside." Although Dahl was not interested in the American showdown that would lead to the Korean War, he volunteered to serve in the Royal Air Force. Dahl was only twenty-six, but he flew combat missions in the Battle of Britain and the Mediterranean. He was shot down in Africa, and wound up in a hospital. According to Myra Sandel, Dahl's secretary, "as I went on, the stories became less and less realistic and more fantastic. But becoming a writer was pure fluke. Without being asked to, I doubt if I'd ever have thought of it."

Dahl explained in the New York Times Book Review that the children who wrote to him "invariably pick out the most gruesome events as the favorite parts of the books.... They don't relate it to life. They enjoy the fantasy. And my nastiness is never gratuitous. It's retribution. Beastly people must be punished." Alasdair Campbell, writing in School Librarian, agreed that "the sense of sharing, of joining with Dahl in a game or plot, is crucial: you admire him and his characters, not for what he says, but for the entertainment he offers you. The idea is not to make you think, but to give you something to enjoy. The best writing is what you can remember, not what you can analyze." In 1943, Dahl wrote his first children's story, and coined a term, with The Gremlins. Gremlins were tiny saboteurs who lived on fighter planes and bombers and were responsible for all crashes. Mrs. Roosevelt, the president's wife, read the book to her children and liked it so much that she invited Dahl to dinner, and he and the president soon became friends. Through the 1940s and into the 1950s Dahl continued as a short story writer for adults, establishing his reputation as a writer of macabre tales with an unexpected twist. A Books and Bookmen reviewer called Dahl "a master of horror—an intellectual Hitchcock of the writing world." J. D. O'Hara, writing in The New Republic, labelled him "our Supreme Master of Wickedness," and his stories earned him three Edgar Allan Poe Awards from the Mystery Writers of America.

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Looking back on his years as a writer in Boy, Dahl contended that “the life of a writer is absolute hell compared with the life of a businessman. The writer has to force himself to go to work.... Two hours of writing fiction leaves this particular writer absolutely drained. For those two hours he has been miles away, he has been somewhere else, in a different place with totally different people, and the effort of swimming back into normal surroundings is very great. It is almost a shock. The writer walks out of his workroom in a daze. He wants a drink. He needs it. It happens to be a fact that nearly every writer of fiction in the world drinks more whisky than is good for him. He does it to give himself faith, hope, and courage. A person is a fool to become a writer. His only compensation is absolute freedom. He has no master except his own soul, and that, I am sure, is why he does it.”

Associated Works

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory (Book)

Historical Context

- The Life and Times of Roald Dahl (1916-1990)
- At the time of Dahl's birth:
  - Woodrow Wilson was president of the United States
  - Saturday Evening Post bought its first Norman Rockwell illustration
  - Easter Rebellion erupted in Ireland
  - Albert Einstein presented theory of relativity
  - Painting The Three Sisters finished by Henri Matisse
- At the time of Dahl's death:
  - George Bush was president of the United States
  - Soviet Union ended Communist Party monopoly on power
  - Nelson Mandela released from prison in South Africa
  - West Germany and East Germany were reunited
  - Vineland published by Thomas Pynchon
- The times:
  - 1914-1918: World War I
  - 1914-1965: Modernist period in English literature
  - 1939-1945: World War II
  - 1957-1975: Vietnam War
  - 1965:- Postmodernist period in English literature
  - 1982: Falkland War
- Dahl's contemporaries:
  - William Golding (1911-1993) American writer
  - Tennessee Williams (1911-1983) American writer
  - Albert Camus (1913-1960) French writer
  - Frank Sinatra (1915-) American singer
  - Indira Gandhi (1917-1984) Indian prime minister
  - Ingmar Bergman (1918-) Swedish director and filmmaker
  - J.D. Salinger (1919-) American writer
  - Ray Bradbury (1920-) American writer
- Selected world events:
  - 1917: T. S. Eliot's The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock published
  - 1920: Ireland was granted home rule and Northern Ireland is created
  - 1928: Women's suffrage enacted in England
  - 1936: Jesse Owens won four gold medals at the Olympic Games
  - 1949: George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four published
  - 1979: Margaret Thatcher became England's first female prime minister
  - 1981: Prince Charles wed Lady Diana Spencer at St. Paul's Cathedral
  - 1987: Nearly 50,000 AIDS cases reported in U.S.

Further Reading

- Farnell, Barry, Pat and Roald, Random House, 1969.