

Symbol and Meaning in the Imaginative Worlds of Roald Dahl
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When my grandsons were younger, they and I all enjoyed when I read to them. A favorite was Dr. Seuss, but then one day I brought home If I Ran the Zoo. I am going along reading when I find negative caricatures of a Chinese man and Africans in the pictures and in the text the idea that the narrator will put an Arab chieftain in the zoo along with the animals. I had to stop, tell the boys the book was racist and that I was returning it to the library. I said something to the librarian when I returned it. I am not generally one for banning books, but I think I would take that one off the public library shelves. The librarian did not share my concern. I would have appreciated a warning label at least like they have for videos telling you they include violence, sexually explicit scenes, vulgar language, etc. This book includes racist stereotypes and ideas.

The boys loved watching the movie version of C. S. Lewis's The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe. I began reading them the whole Chronicles of Narnia series. All was fine until I got to the last book. The Calormenes, the enemy in the book, are portrayed as dark-skinned and as having a "bad" religion which seems to be based on a negative stereotype of Islam over against the heroes of the book, the fair-skinned followers of Aslan, the lion Christ figure.

I love all JK Rowling's Harry Potter books and have read them all, though those I have not read to my grandsons. I also know about her anti-transgender views and comments.

All of this to get to Roald Dahl, whom I had never read at all until one of you at a meeting a few months ago suggested a service based on his writing. Getting ready for this service, I read Matilda, The BFG, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, and a book of adult short stories, The Umbrella Man and learned a little something about the author. Dahl had friends, a publisher and an agent who were Jewish, but he made antisemitic remarks. The article on Dahl on Wikipedia notes that "In 2020, Dahl's family published a statement on the official Roald Dahl website apologising for his antisemitism. The statement says 'The Dahl family and the Roald Dahl Story Company deeply apologise for the lasting and understandable hurt caused by some of Roald Dahl's statements. Those prejudiced remarks are incomprehensible to us and stand in marked contrast to the man we knew and to the values at the heart of Roald Dahl's stories, which have positively impacted young people for generations. We hope that, just as he did at his best, at his absolute worst, Roald Dahl can help remind us of the lasting impact of words.' The apology was received with appreciation by Jewish groups but some Jewish organizations, such as the Campaign Against Antisemitism, said that: 'For his family and estate to have waited thirty years to make an apology, apparently until lucrative deals were signed with Hollywood, is disappointing and sadly rather more comprehensible,'" [Roald Dahl - Wikipedia](#).

The Wikipedia authors also note that, "In 1972, Eleanor Cameron, also a children's book author, published an article in The Horn Book criticising Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, stating: 'What I object to in Charlie is its phony presentation of poverty and its phony humour, which is based on punishment with overtones of sadism'. She took issue with the depiction of the Oompa-Loompas as imported African slaves and suggested that teachers look for better literature to use in the classroom. In 1973, Dahl posted a reply, calling Cameron's accusations 'insensitive' and 'monstrous'. The Horn Book published Cameron's response, where she clarified that she intended her article not to be a personal

attack on Dahl, but to point out that though the book is a work of fiction, it still influences reality. She again objected to the Oompa-Loompa depiction, writing, 'the situation of the Oompa-Loompas is real; it could not be more so, and it is anything but funny'. The debate between the two authors sparked much discussion and a number of letters to the editor. A 1991 article by Michael Dirda published in The Washington Post, echoed Cameron's comments, writing 'the Oompa-Loompas... reveal virtually every stereotype about blacks,'" [Roald Dahl - Wikipedia](#). For those of you, who like me until recently, have not read Charlie and the Chocolate Factory the Oompah Loompas are small people whom Willie Wonka finds starving in a jungle and "rescues" to work in and never leave his chocolate factory where they are happy and are constantly singing.

Still, many people love Dahl's stories. In them the main characters may be abused and downtrodden, but they always come out ahead in the end. I often help my grandsons with their homework. Recently the 6th grader had English homework that involved analyzing pieces of a story. The passages in his homework were from the book, Boy: Tales of Childhood, Roald Dahl's autobiography. Many of the passages included the abuse Dahl and the other boys experienced from the matron and the headmaster at their school. As small boys there was little they could do to defend against cruel grownups, but I expect that may have been what influenced Dahl in his stories where the villains **always** get their comeuppance.

"A UK television special titled Roald Dahl's Revolting Rule Book which... aired on 22 September 2007, commemorated Dahl's 90th birthday.... It... featured eight main rules he applied on all his children's books:

1. Just add chocolate
2. Adults can be scary
3. Bad things happen
4. Revenge is sweet
5. Keep a wicked sense of humour
6. Pick perfect pictures
7. Films are fun...but books are better!
8. Food is fun!" [Roald Dahl - Wikipedia](#).

On just add chocolate, Dahl was a lover of sweets. "During his years at Repton (boarding school), the Cadbury chocolate company occasionally sent boxes of new chocolates to the school to be tested by the pupils. Dahl dreamt of inventing a new chocolate bar that would win the praise of Mr. Cadbury himself..." [Roald Dahl - Wikipedia](#).

On adults can be scary, bad things happen, and revenge is sweet, many of his books contain stories of pranks played by the main character on their adult tormentors. Matilda puts superglue on the rim of her father's hat and places a talking parrot up her family's chimney to convince them the house is haunted. A particular prank of Dahl's own obtained an important place in his own life story. He and his friends called it the Great Mouse Caper of 1924. "From the age of eight, Dahl attended Llandaff Cathedral School in Cardiff. He and his friends thoroughly disliked the local sweet-shop owner, Mrs. Pratchett, an unpleasant, elderly woman who gave no thought to hygiene ... They played a prank on her by placing a dead mouse in a gobstopper jar while his friend Thwaites distracted her by buying sweets. They were caned by the headmaster as a punishment, after Mrs. Pratchett identified Dahl and his friends as the pupils who were responsible for the mouse in the jar.

“Mrs. Pratchett, who sat in the headmaster's office to watch the canings, was not satisfied after the first stroke was delivered and insisted the headmaster should cane much harder which he did: six of the hardest strokes he could muster while Mrs. Pratchett beamed with great delight as each boy suffered his punishment. Dahl's mother was outraged when she discovered that her son had been caned, and went to confront the school's headmaster, who advised her to transfer Roald to another school if she disapproved of his methods,” which she did, [Boy \(book\) - Wikipedia](#).

I think his rule to keep a wicked sense of humor is even clearer in his adult short stories than in his children's books. They are often described as macabre, and that wicked sense of humor is part of that. In one such story a much put-upon elderly wife whose husband is apparently purposely keeping her waiting so that she will not make her flight to Paris to see her daughter and grandchildren realizes on trying to go into the house to hurry him up that the elevator is stuck. She doesn't say anything, tells the cab driver to leave without him, writes him regularly from Paris and comes home to the empty house six weeks later to call and report the lift stuck between floors.

Probably the best example of his rule that Films are fun...but books are better! Is *Matilda*. *Matilda's* family is always watching television including at dinner, but *Matilda* devours books from the public library toddling there alone from the age of three.

His rule: Food is fun! Is clear in most of Dahl's children's books. There are, of course, all the wonderful sweets in [Charlie and the Chocolate Factory](#). In [The BFG](#) the big friendly giant, since he will not eat humans, must eat the loathsome food the snozzcumber, the only thing that grows in the land of the giants. And when the other giants are captured, it is snozzcubers on which they are fed. James' adventures take place in a giant peach. And in [Matilda](#) one schoolboy who is caught stealing cake and is punished by being made to eat a whole cake is cheered on by all the other children as he manages to do it. Dahl writes, “As the very last mouthful disappeared, a tremendous cheer rose up from the audience and children were leaping on to their chairs and yelling and clapping and shouting, ‘Well done, Brucie! Good for you, Brucie! You've won a gold medal, Brucie!’”

I skipped over Dahl's rule to pick perfect pictures, but pictures are an important part of his children's books. The illustrator Quentin Blake was the illustrator for eighteen of Dahl's books. Blake notes that Dahl can write that the BFG hit his head on a chandelier at Buckingham Palace but it a different thing altogether to see it in a picture.

Dahl always seemed to want justice and fair treatment for himself and for his antagonists. But, of course, in real life, that does not always happen. “In November 1962, Dahl's daughter Olivia died of measles encephalitis, age seven. Her death left Dahl ‘limp with despair’ and feeling guilty about not having been able to do anything for her. Dahl subsequently became a proponent of immunisation and dedicated his 1982 book *The BFG* to his daughter. After Olivia's death and a meeting with a Church official, Dahl came to view Christianity as a sham. While mourning her loss, he had sought spiritual guidance from Geoffrey Fisher, the former Archbishop of Canterbury. He was dismayed by Fisher telling him that, although Olivia was in Paradise, her beloved dog Rowley would never join her there. Dahl recalled years later: ‘I wanted to ask him how he could be so absolutely sure that other creatures did not get the same special treatment as us. I sat there wondering if this great and famous churchman really knew what he was talking about and whether he knew anything at all about God or heaven, and if he didn't, then who in the world did?’” [Roald Dahl - Wikipedia](#). Perhaps because of the loss of his daughter, in his lifetime Dahl made charitable commitments in the fields of neurology and hematology as well as in literacy. After his death, his widow continued those commitments through Roald Dahl's Marvellous

Children's Charity. The charity provides care and support to seriously ill children and young people throughout the United Kingdom, [Roald Dahl - Wikipedia](#).

“Roald Dahl died on 23 November 1990... According to his granddaughter, the family gave him a ‘sort of Viking funeral’. He was buried with his snooker cues, some very good burgundy, chocolates, HB pencils and a power saw. Today, children continue to leave toys and flowers by his grave,” [Roald Dahl - Wikipedia](#).

So, what are we to do with Dahl and other writers of our beloved stories who are far from perfect? I would suggest that we not give up on their books but that we do read them with a critical eye. Last week for Yom Kippur we were reminded of the Maya Angelou quote, “Forgive yourself for not knowing what you didn’t know before you learned it.” Perhaps we can forgive our literary forebears as well, but that does not mean that we can forget what we know now. My grandsons are past the point where they want me to read to them, but I hope that in the years when I did, I taught them to question and to read critically. Even in our recreational reading we need to remember our Unitarian Universalist principle of “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.”