

Roald Dahl: Popular, Prolific, Controversial

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Best-selling British author Roald Dahl (1916-1990) is often cited as one of the most popular and beloved writers for children. However, the author of children's classics such as *James and the Giant Peach* (1961), *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964) and *Matilda* (1988) is also regarded as controversial. Over the years his writing has often been dismissed as "vulgar, meretricious, racist, misogynistic" (1), full of grotesque humour and violence deemed inappropriate for young readers. Despite all these (and many other) alleged shortcomings, Dahl's work has nevertheless managed to garner critical support: his scholarly admirers are vocal in celebrating his linguistic craft and subversiveness, as well as his ability to "[get] children reading" (2).

Catherine Butler, one of the editors of the new collection of essays dealing with Dahl's literary output (entitled simply *Roald Dahl*), voices her surprise at the scarcity of critical writing on Dahl. Furthermore, existing scholarly texts are quite limited in their scope, focusing mostly on "Dahl's suitability as a writer for children, the relationship between his life and opinion, and his status as a 'phenomenon'" (2). This essay collection is therefore an attempt to revitalize the somewhat stale area of Dahl studies by introducing novel approaches to his body of work and, ideally, by stimulating future discussions.

The *Roald Dahl* casebook includes ten thematically and methodologically diverse essays which deal with various aspects of this prolific author's works. Though authors sometimes turn to his autobiographical writings and short stories for examples, all essays are primarily focused on writings for children (novels and poetry). Apart from analyzing Dahl's narrative strategies and techniques, thematic preoccupations and characters, many of the essays deal with controversial aspects of his corpus such as the (inappropriate?) use of language and (alleged) glorification of violence. Representation of Dahl's work in other media (illustrations, film) as well as the interplay between his life and work present further points of interest for the authors featured in this collection.

In the opening essay, Deborah Thacker analyzes Dahl's relationship to folk and fairy tales, and oral storytelling in general. The author explores the ways in which Dahl (ab)uses folk and fairy tale conventions, as well as the strategies he employs in his attempt to re-create storytelling sessions and challenge traditional power relations between adults (authors, tellers) and children (readers, listeners). Finally, Thacker calls for a re-evaluation of Dahl's work in light of new approaches to folk tales and storytelling and their role in the process of acculturation.

Jackie Stallcup explores the fine line between humour and disgust found in Dahl's novels and poems for children. The author focuses on figures or objects that become the butt of Dahl's jokes, and the strategies used to generate humour (incongruity, taboo and derision).

David Rudd's essay focuses on Dahl's linguistic innovations and examines various techniques adopted by the author on both the micro and macro levels of language. In addition,

Rudd challenges what he perceives to be two misconceptions about Dahl's vocabulary: the notion that it is limited to slang and colloquial language, and the notion that it is outdated.

The aim of Pat Pinset's essay is to examine the role of education in Dahl's books, and the role of Dahl's books in education. Identifying the roots of Dahl's (mostly negative) views of formal education in his personal experience, Pinset goes on to analyze the portrayal of education (both formal and informal) and the representatives of education (teachers, headmasters/mistresses) in Dahl's fictional and autobiographical writings. Despite the negative portrayal of education in his novels, Dahl's works are often explicitly didactic; Pinset links this didactic string with medieval morality plays and Paul Bunyan's allegory *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

Ann Alston discusses the role and depiction of families in Dahl's novels. On the plus side, claims Alston, Dahl's novels regularly portray the triumph of the underdog child (the oppressed) over the adult (the oppressor), thus becoming "empowering wish-fulfilment fantasies" (92). However, Alston also finds faults with Dahl's fictional families: adults are often portrayed as abusive, cruel and emotionally unresponsive (this might account for the fact that he is not very popular with parents and teachers), the parent-child relationship (in its many disguises) is privileged over all others, and childless families are heavily ostracized.

Though feminist critics have not, for the most part, looked favourably on Dahl's work, Beverly Pennell's analysis of the representation of women and girls in *The Magic Finger*, *The BFG* and *Matilda* provides a more positive outlook on the subject.

Heather Worthington's essay deals with another controversial aspect of Dahl's work: the frequent and often grotesque depictions of violence. Providing select examples from Dahl's children's, adult and juvenile fiction, Worthington maintains that violence, by being "contained in fantasy and made safe by the fictional status of the narratives" (138), becomes a source of empowerment and vent for negative and repressed emotions. In this way, Dahl's "escapist and cathartic fantasy meets an emotional need in child readers to which few other writers are prepared to cater" (11).

Essays by June Pulliam and Carole Scott provide an insight into how Dahl's literary output translates into other media. Pulliam focuses on film adaptations of Dahl's children's novels, from Mel Stuart's *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (1971) to Wes Anderson's *The Fantastic Mr. Fox* (2009). The author is particularly interested in the extent and nature of cinematic departures from the original texts, and the ways in which these attempt to cater to the needs of both child and adult audiences. Carole Scott analyzes the fruitful relationship between Dahl and illustrator Quentin Blake whose artistic creations, maintains Scott, both "complement and expand Dahl's expression" (166).

The last essay in the collection, that of Peter Hunt, provides a more sceptical outlook of Dahl's position within the cannon of children's literature. According to Hunt, Dahl's only 'contribution' to children's literature is a "visible vulgarization of children's books" and "the commodification of fantasy and its genres" (176). Set apart from other essays in this collection which, while acknowledging certain problems and drawbacks, remain generally enthusiastic and positive about Dahl, Hunt's undisguised criticism demonstrates the diversity of critical opinions on the popular children's author.

The *Roadl Dahl* casebook is an interesting, thought-provoking, and, in many ways, long-overdue book. Dahl studies are still a largely unexplored and "underpopulated" area

(12). As editor Carol Butler notes, a single volume of essays can hardly be expected to remedy such a state of affairs singlehandedly, but it undoubtedly presents a successful and effective first step.

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