

ROALD DAHL 100

Still a Little Nonsense

Now & Then



ECHOES BY ASRAR CHOWDHURY

Had I been alive today, I would have celebrated my 100th birthday on September 13, 2016 with all of you. As you know, I left the world on November 23, 1990 when I was 74. Since I myself can no longer write, a scribe speaks my words on my behalf. Let's start. 'Wonderful surprises await you!'

I was born at Llandaff, north-west of Cardiff, in Wales, UK. My parents came from Norway. At home I was called 'R-oo-aald', not Roald as you know me.

My father, Harald Dahl, was a successful businessman. We lived in a large house in Radyr, outside Cardiff. My father died in 1920 when I was four. My mother, Sofie Dahl, decided to move back to Llandaff to a smaller house; one she could manage with me and my four siblings.

My first school was Llandaff Cathedral School. The experience was so horrid my mother sent me to a Grammar School in England as my father had always desired. I first went to St Peter's Western Super-Mare in Devon and then Repton in Derbyshire.

The reason why I'm saying all this is, you know me as the man who wrote wonderful stories for children, and films that were created based on those stories. There are other sides to me you never cared to know about. So, sit tight. 'A little nonsense now and then is relished by [even] the wisest [of] men.'

After Repton, my mother asked where I'd like to go: Oxford or Cambridge. I wanted to do something different. I wanted to go and see distant lands. In the



mid-1930s commercial air-travelling didn't exist. You had to travel by sea from Britain if you wanted to go to a distant place. I needed a foreign job. I joined Shell in 1934. My first posting was in 1938 in what was then Tanganyika (Tan-

zania), in East Africa. I was having a jolly good time, hunting black mambas (snakes) and learning Swahili. World War II broke out the next year and I joined the Royal Air Force. Life's adventures started.

In September 1940, I was posted in Libya. While flying an out-dated Gloster Gladiator, I crashed and narrowly survived. It became evident, I could no longer fly. I returned back to Britain in 1941. In 1942, I was posted to Washington to join the British Embassy as assistant air-attaché.

In August 1942, CS Forester, the British novelist, visited me at the embassy. He asked me to write about my experiences in the RAF. I wrote a piece that evening. It was published in the Saturday Evening Post under the title, 'Shot Down Over Libya'. I got 1,000 US dollars, a very handsome amount in those days. My life looked like it was about to change.

In 1943 I wrote 'The Gremlins'. The Gremlin character caught America like the Beatles did two decades later. The First Lady, Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, loved it so much she would read it to her grandchildren. I soon found myself having lunch with President Roosevelt and his family at The White House. Count Basie composed a Jazz tune, 'Dance of the Gremlins'. Mr. Walt Disney bought the book. A Disney animation was due in 1943. Apparently, the film didn't see daylight.

My short stories were now flowing like melted chocolate. Alfred Hitchcock featured some of them in 'Alfred Hitchcock Presents'. My friend and colleague from the services, Ian Fleming, the creator of James Bond, made proposals to which I

couldn't say no. I wrote the screenplay of the Bond movie, 'You Live Only Twice' (1967), which was Sean Connery's last as a Bond. I also did the screenplay of 'Chitty Chitty Bang Bang' (1968).

The journey to my final destination started with my children, Olivia and Theo. One night I started telling them a story about a boy and a peach. The next night, they asked for more. The story continued to grow and grow. One fine day in November 1961 came 'James and the Giant Peach'. In November 1962, Olivia died at the age of seven. Her death haunted me all my life. Since then, till I was alive, I didn't do much else but write stories for children which I relished more than the chocolate bars I'd eat each day.

I don't need to write more about myself. You know what happened after 'James and the Giant Peach'. My scribe tells me, I have to bid adieu. All I'd like to say on my 100th birthday is, 'If you're going to get anywhere in life, you have to read a lot of books.' Books take you to a fantasy land of magic in childhood and adolescence which almost certainly disappears when you become an adult. And do remember, 'If you don't believe in magic, you'll never find it.'

Source: Based on 'Roald Dahl: In His Own Words', BBC, Radio 4, 2016; and 'Boy: Tales of Childhood' by Roald Dahl, 1984.

Asrar Chowdhury teaches economic theory and game theory in the classroom. Outside he listens to music and BBC Radio; follows Test Cricket; and plays the flute. He can be reached at: asrar.chowdhury@facebook.com.

