

**What's So Good About...?** is a series of 15-minute programmes focusing on the popular children's writers: Roald Dahl, Malorie Blackman, Jacqueline Wilson, JK Rowling, Jamila Gavin and Dick-King Smith. Three of the programmes explore Dahl's success as a children's author.

Set in and around Roald Dahl's home Gypsy House, the programmes explore the way in which strands of Dahl's own life were woven into his wildly imaginative stories. Like Danny's father in *Danny Champion of the World*, Dahl made hot air balloons for his children, and like Mr Willy Wonka in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, he was obsessed by sweets!

A laptop screen appears throughout the programme with archive footage of Dahl telling us where the ideas for his characters came from, and giving advice to would-be writers. Storyteller Jo James reads extracts from Dahl's books and reminds us of the importance of reading aloud.

### Programme 1: Heroes and Monsters

The first programme introduces us to Dahl's home, Gypsy House and his writing hut. This small, simple garden hut is the place where he wrote for two hours each morning and afternoon. Making himself comfortable in an easy chair, the only equipment Dahl needed was a makeshift writing desk on his lap, a pot of sharpened pencils and a pile of yellow paper. In this way – with a quiet place to work and a disciplined routine to stick to – Dahl wrote eighteen books for children.

We meet Wally Saunders, an elderly man with very large ears who built Dahl's writing hut. Apparently he inspired the gentle, large-eared character of the BFG – an excellent example of how Dahl took people's tiny peculiarities and exaggerated them.

Dahl's books are published in numerous languages, which demonstrates the extent of his worldwide appeal. The programme explores what this appeal was, focusing particularly on his characters and the wonderful way in which he described them.

### How to create a character

- Make them interesting and larger than life
- Make them very attractive or very ugly, very good or very bad
- Provide an opposite character so that readers can make comparisons
- Exaggerate every little detail about them
- Use metaphors and similes to describe them
- Give them names to suit their character

Dahl was a master of exaggeration, particularly in his portrayal of characters, which are either extremely nice or extremely nasty. In his wonderfully evocative descriptions, he uses inventive similes and metaphors to keep the writing lively. Roald Dahl said, 'if a person is nasty or bad or cruel you make them very nasty, very bad and very cruel and, if they are ugly, you make them extremely ugly'. Despite the extreme nastiness of Dahl's baddies, his heroes and heroines – who are nearly always children – never allow evil to triumph.

### Activities

- Ask the children to brainstorm what they think is so good about Roald Dahl. Record their comments in speech bubbles to inform a display of Dahl's books.
- Working in groups, children devise quiz questions for each other around who said what to whom in Dahl's books.
- Children draw their favourite character from one of Dahl's books and annotate it, using both Dahl's descriptions and their own.
- Children create their own character in the style of Dahl considering: what they look like, what they do, how they speak and sound, how others view them, how they treat others.

### Programme 2: The Greatest Secrets

In the second programme, we learn more about Dahl the man. His imagination wasn't limited to his stories – he used it to solve problems and invent things such as the shoe stretcher shown in the programme. Dahl's plots with all their twists and turns spring from his fascination with the world around him. He saw all plots as problem-solving opportunities.

Most of Dahl's books originated as bedtime stories for his own children. Dahl regarded childhood as precious and magical, and through his stories he indulged himself and his children in fantastical journeys drawn from reality. He surrounded himself with artefacts that reminded him of important things in his life, or in some way amused or fascinated him. Dahl said, 'For a writer, where you live and the things that you find around you are an excellent source of ideas'.

Dahl not only drew on his memories of childhood for his autobiographies, *Boy* and *Going Solo*, but also used them to empathise with his characters. Dahl himself was beaten by schoolmasters, for example, Captain Hardcastle, who is personified as the baddy, Captain Lancaster, in *Danny, Champion of the World*.

Like most writers, Dahl considered a good plot to be the most important element of a story. He found it difficult to remember all of the ideas that came to him, so kept lots of exercise books in which he wrote them down. These were supplemented with lists of interesting facts, and with cut out pictures of people he found interesting.

### Ideas

- Keep your eyes and ears open for new ideas
- Ideas are like seeds – they need time to grow and may require pruning
- Ideas can 'disappear like a dream' so they need to be written down
- Include twists and turns to make the plot interesting
- Jot down interesting facts

Dahl was a fastidious writer who was constantly thinking of his audience. He wanted his plots to be lively and fast moving with plenty of twists and turns. He would re-draft and edit stories numerous times until, when he read them aloud to himself, he was happy with the result and they made him laugh!

### Activities

- Children can list memorable things that have happened to them. How can they weave them into an idea for their own humorous story?
- Encourage the class to keep a notebook and jot down details of the world around them.
- Keep a class scrapbook of pictures of things, people and places, which interest or fascinate the class in some way. The pictures can be annotated with thoughts and ideas.
- With a partner, children plan a story by drawing a story map showing the key incidents and twists and turns of the plot.

### Programme 3: Anything is Possible

Dahl was able to see the world as his readers do. He tapped into their imaginations and sense of humour, he laughed at the same jokes and if his writing didn't make him chuckle, it wasn't good enough. In this third and final programme, a wide range of texts are used to show how Dahl created magic for his audience. It also looks at Dahl's four rules of writing:

#### 1. Make your readers ... laugh

Use weird and wonderful names: Some of the beasts in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* are called Whangdoodles and Snozzwangers, and in *The BFG* we hear of Bloodbottlers, humans beans and Snozzcumpers!

Play with words: Dahl's pleasure in the sounds and rhythms of language is reflected in his humorous use of spoonerisms, malapropisms, puns and nonsense words as we see with the BFG who muddles words and phrases, for example, 'skin and groans', and 'catastrophic disastrophe', and who often punctuates what he says with 'Am I right or left?'

Create absurd situations: Reality is made topsy-turvy with extraordinary events presented as though they were commonplace, such as James being inside the giant peach or the Twits when they think they are on the ceiling.

Break adult rules: Most of Dahl's child characters do things they're not meant to!

#### 2. Make your readers ... squirm

There is no shortage of revolting, gut-churning descriptions in any of Dahl's books, from eyeballs in soup to cheese growing in Mr Twit's beard. Horrible foods, recipes and disgusting behaviour heighten the reader's reaction to the story.

#### 3. Make your readers ... enthralled

Dahl likes to take ordinary settings and do something quite extraordinary in them; the more fantastical and magical the better.

#### 4. Make your readers ... tense and excited

Build up the atmosphere and keep the reader on a knife edge!

Dahl felt it was the writer's job to constantly outguess the reader with the twists and turns of the plot, ending where possible with a complete surprise!

### Activities

- Dahl enjoyed alliteration, which often gave a comic effect to his dialogue. Children can use alliteration to invent insulting phrases similar to Miss Trunchbull's phrase in *Matilda*, 'you clotted carbuncle'.
- Dahl often used onomatopoeia (where words sound like their meaning) such as the bad dreams described by the BFG as bogthumpers and trogglehumpers. As a class, make up onomatopoeic words to describe happy peaceful dreams.
- Children can choose a recipe from a book and subvert it into a revolting recipe good enough for the Twits to eat!

### Support material for Book Box: Popular Writers

Resource Book: 206849 £6.95

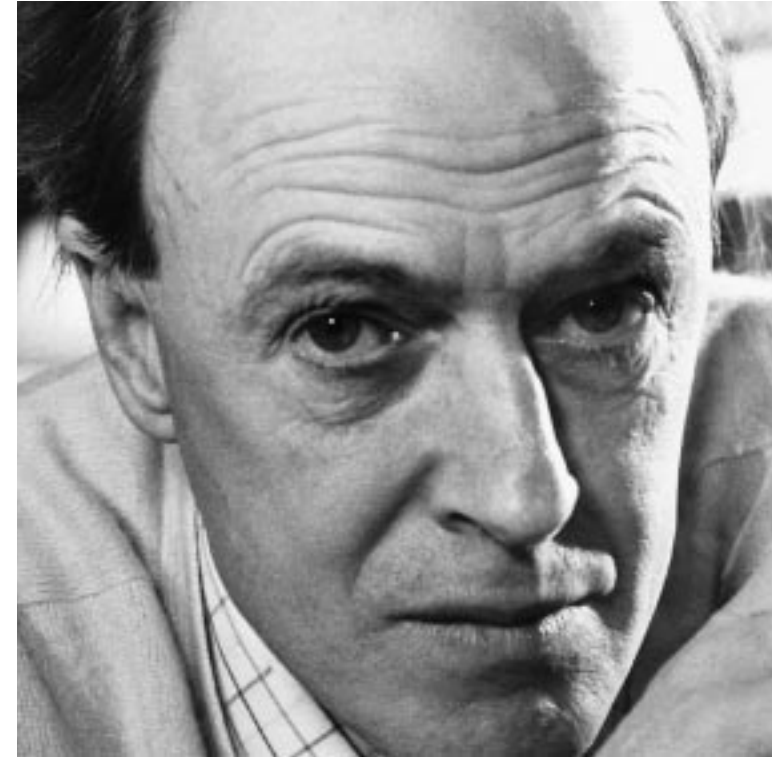
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English for 7–11 year olds



## Book Box: Popular Writers What's So Good About... Roald Dahl?



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