

Book Review: Roald Dahl's Marvellous Medicine

Linda Nichols¹

¹ Adjunct Researcher University of Tasmania



Most of us know Roald Dahl's Childrens works but few of us are familiar with his fascination with medicine and in particular neuroscience. During Dahl's adult life his family suffered some terrible medical tragedies, and it was the medical interactions during these times that influenced some of his most famous writing from explosive potions in George's Marvellous Medicine to Gobblefunk, the language created by Dahl for the BFG.

Roald Dahl's Marvellous Medicine is an extraordinary account of Roald Dahl's fascination with medicine. It was in 1990, as a junior doctor, that Solomon was tasked with looking after a terminally ill Roald Dahl who had leukaemia and in 2016, he published his memoirs. Tom describes his long and fascinating conversations with Dahl, where they would chat into the small hours of the night about everything medical. Tom wrote of his time with Dahl during his last few weeks as humbling and the chance to tell Dahl's story as a privilege.

I was first drawn to Tom's work because of my love of Roland Dahl's works and medical achievements. It was Dahl's fascination with science and his medical intrigue that enabled him to not only process the tragic events in his life, but to also become an active researcher and inventor.

Dahl's life was peppered with a number of tragedies, from the death of his sister as a child and soon after his father passed of what the family believed to be a broken heart. Dahl himself experienced significant head, facial and spinal injuries when his plane crashed during the second world war. Perhaps these significant life events influenced his views on medical research and innovation when he

had a family of his own.

It was in 1960 that Dahl's 4-month-old son, Theo, suffered a traumatic brain injury when his pram was hit by a cab. Theo required a shunt for his subsequent hydrocephalus, however the shunt kept blocking. Dahl teamed up with Paediatric neurosurgeon Kenneth Till and engineering friend Stanley Wade to invent a more reliable shunt, the Wade-Dahl-Till valve, which was subsequently used by thousands of patients, and they published their work in the Lancet. At the time he was describing the shunt to Solomon, the ever-modest Dahl depicted his contribution as minimal, but this was an understatement as he was intimately involved in the project and subsequent Lancet publication.

When Dahl's wife, Patricia Neal, suffered a haemorrhagic stroke following a ruptured cerebral aneurysm, she was left unable to walk or talk. They had young children to care for and Patricia was pregnant at the time. It was Patricia's aphasia that inspired the BFG's language and perhaps more the sadness at

Questions or comments about this article should be directed to Linda Nichols

Email address: linda.nichols@utas.edu.au

DOI: 10.21307/ajon-2024-007

Copyright © 2024 ANNA

being unable to dream anymore. At the time of Patricia's stroke, rehabilitation care and interventions were limited. Dahl set up an intensive rehabilitation program for his wife and with time she began to recover. In fact she achieved what many referred to as an unexpected quality of life. Dahl published their rehabilitative approach and his methods were widely adopted, ultimately leading to the formation of the Stroke Association.

However, Dahl could not solve every problem that befell the family and harboured significant guilt over the death of his seven-year-old daughter, Olivia, from measles induced encephalitis in 1962. This occurred just before the introduction of the first measles vaccination. Dahl was devastated following Olivia's death and became a lifelong advocate and campaigner for vaccination. In 1990 fate would deal another blow with Dahl's 27-year-old stepdaughter, Lorina, dying of a brain tumour. While her death occurred just months prior to Dahl's own passing, it still gave him time to again wonder whether he could he have done more. Dahl lived through an incredible time of medical advancement, yet there was a lack of progress in many areas and here he tried to fill the gaps.

This is a fantastic book; it is personal, touching, witty and gripping, yet written with reverence. It includes a balance of biography, memoir, and popular science. It shows a side of Roald Dahl that many of us are not aware of. The book also touches on Solomon's experiences and stories from his career. These are intertwined in a wandering style with Dahl's story, resulting in what some have described as an oddity of a book. Yet it is an incredible story that began when a conversation was sparked, and a special rapport began. Dahl's passion to solve things and create

a better world is clear in every page that is written, in an inclusive and capturing nature that leads you to read beyond your last page. You almost feel like you are on a journey where the story is as rich as one of Dahl's own books and almost stranger than Dahl's own inventive fictional works.

Solomon makes sure that Dahl's legacy is an inspiration. He provides an insight into Dahl's mind and what it is to be human during no ordinary lifetime. Solomon tells how Dahl coped through tragedy by determination to change things and by taking action. Dahl was the master and creator of shy and awkward characters, and he spent his lifetime publicising and promoting these characters. If not for Solomon the real story, Dahl's story, might have been lost. There have been other biographers who have told of Dahl's life, yet no one has done it like Solomon. This is more than a book about Dahl, it is also about what Solomon learned from a dying Dahl, and the connection he made with Dahl. The story is particularly moving and emotional as it draws to a conclusion, presenting an entwined narrative of medicine, emotion and empathy. This is an informative and inspiring read and well recommended.

Tom Solomon, *Roald Dahl's Marvellous Medicine* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 2016) 256 pp.

£10.00 Pb. ISBN: 9781781383391

