

Brain damage released Dahl's creativity

Jack Malvern Arts Correspondent

The macabre workings of Roald Dahl's mind that manifested themselves in the grotesque villains of his children's stories may owe as much to chance as his genius.

The author's doctor believes that the cruel aunts of *James and the Giant Peach*, and the misanthropic title characters in *The Twits*, might never have entered Dahl's work had he not suffered a serious head injury during the Second World War.

The author liked to tell friends that his creativity began after a "big bang on the head" when he crashed his Gloster Gladiator fighter in the desert in Libya in 1940, but most people assumed he was being fanciful.

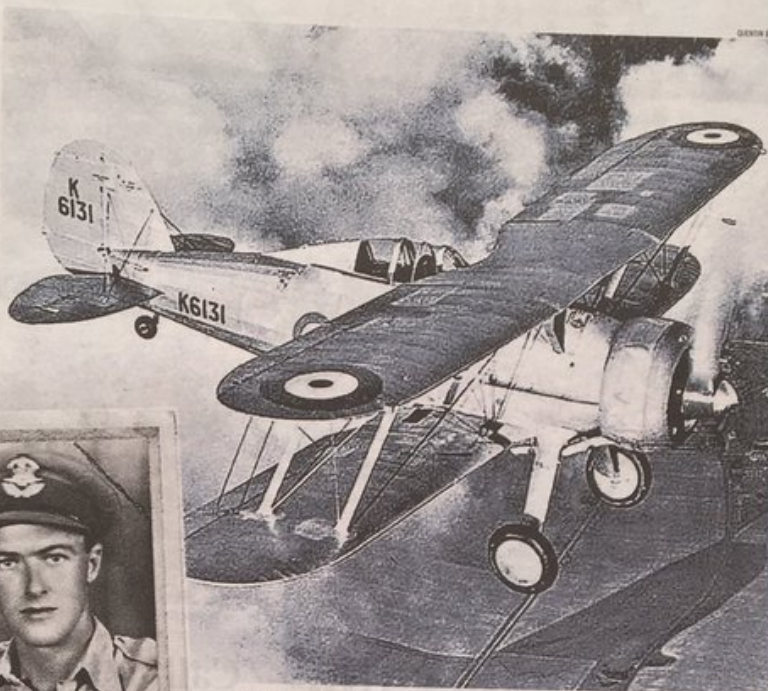
Tom Solomon, who became friends with Dahl when he treated the writer in the last three weeks of life in 1990, believes that Dahl's story was correct, albeit for the wrong reasons.

The professor, who is now a specialist in neurology at the University of Liverpool, said that Dahl liked the idea of sudden artistic output syndrome, a condition in which someone with no interest in art suddenly becomes prolific after sustaining brain damage.

Evidence of Dahl's creativity in childhood letters and stories suggests that he did not have the condition, but Dr Solomon believes that the writer did damage a part of his brain that controlled inhibition.

"I think the bash on the head may have just tipped things," he said at *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* Cheltenham Literature Festival. "I don't think he had sudden artistic output syndrome. I think he damaged the frontal lobe — that's the bit that inhibits you, so if you have damage to the front of the head you get disinhibited. So he could write things that other people wouldn't write."

Professor Solomon said that while other people might have entertained thoughts about horrible aunts being squashed to death by a giant peach or a sadistic husband who tricks his wife in-



Roald Dahl suffered a serious head injury when he crashed his Gloster

Gladiator in the Libyan desert in 1940. His doctor believes the injury made him become

disinhibited, enabling him to invent sadistic husbands and child-eating crocodiles



Plain speaking

Roald Dahl's capacity for caustic remarks was undiminished in the last weeks of his life, his doctor said.

Tom Solomon, who treated Dahl at the John Radcliffe hospital in Oxford in 1990, recalled him saying that he had met many other writers, who were "mostly a dull bunch".

Dahl spoke of his disappointment when he met CS Forester, author of the *Hornblower* novels. "He was nothing like I imagined," Dahl said, according to Professor Solomon in *Roald Dahl's Marvellous Medicine*. "I loved his work... but he was such an ordinary looking man."

Dahl said Norman Mailer was "a fine writer but a terrible bore to meet" and Thomas Mann had "no spark at all". "John Steinbeck was usually drunk," he said. "Evelyn Waugh... insufferable."

Asked about authors who were not disappointing in the flesh, Dahl talked about Ernest Hemingway. "He was not much fun to be with, but I had such respect and love of his work that I did not mind."

Dahl observed that his friend Ian Fleming, with whom he collaborated on *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, was the opposite of Hemingway. "Very witty, extroverted, a sybarite... People forget how well he wrote."

Professor Solomon was surprised by Dahl's frankness, he said, but did not believe his comments were meant with any venom.

to thinking that she has a shrinking disease, they would keep them private. "There was a fearlessness to his writing. He wrote things that others would not have done."

Frontal lobe damage might also explain the writer's cantankerous reputation and occasional outbursts, Dr Solomon said.

Although Dahl's dark style was now celebrated, it was "hugely controversial" when his stories first appeared, he said. "Publishers wouldn't publish it and school librarians wouldn't have them."

Professor Solomon obtained permission from the author's estate to publish his recollections in his book *Roald Dahl's Marvellous Medicine*, the royalties from which will go to the author's favourite charities. The book observes that Dahl was irreverent to the last and wrote filthy limericks to try to shock some of the doctors.

Ladybird books get lost in translation

X David Sanderson

The name Hector is racist, everyone called Simon must be a lord, and "poorly" must always be followed by another word, the creators of the rebooted Ladybird books have discovered.

Joel Morris and Jason Hazeley, who have written the phenomenally successful *Ladybird Books for Grown-Ups* have said that their books are getting lost in translation in America.

Proving the adage that we are two nations separated by a common language, the writers said that the American editors didn't understand the jokes and wanted to change everything. "It started to get ridiculous," Mr Hazeley said at *The Times* and *Sunday Times* Cheltenham Literature Festival.

Mr Morris said that they had helped on the "Finnish version, the Chinese version" but that they had had to "give

up" on the American one. "The hardest translation job was the Americans, who just came back, marked the books with what wouldn't work and it was literally everything," he said.

It had started with the expected changes, such as Frazzle bacon crisps becoming Cheetos. Then it came down to names. "They said, 'You can't call him Hector,'" Mr Hazeley said. "Why can't we call him Hector? 'It's racist', they said."

"And then Simon got a ring around it," Mr Morris added. "They said it sounds too much like a la-de-da lord."

Mr Hazeley added that there was a sentence in the *Mindfulness* book that said: "Sophie had been on a raw food diet

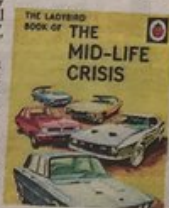
but the raw chicken had made her very poorly." He said: "The note back from the American editor was 'poorly what. Word missing. Poorly made up'."

"We said there's not a word missing but they just did not get it."

Other more understandable changes included "Cockney mindfulness" becoming "white rapper mindfulness" while "KFC Zinger Tower Burgers" became "fully loaded Quizzo's meatball subs".

Since the pastiches were launched last year they have sold 23 million copies.

A new tranche are soon to be launched with titles, including *The Ladybird Book of the Zombie Apocalypse*, and *The Ladybird Book of the Sick*.



Actors chasing TV work are 'losing their language skills'

David Sanderson

Modern actors are losing crucial skills possessed by their predecessors because they are chasing the money and concentrating on television work, it has been claimed.

Benet Brandreth, the rhetoric coach at the Royal Shakespeare Company, has said that drama schools are focusing on teaching acting skills suited to television.

He argues that the "study of understanding language" is being lost. "Actors' training of late has been focused on the money, which is television," he told *The Times* and *Sunday Times* Cheltenham Literature Festival. "So there is less encountering of [rhetoric]. I think our understanding of rhetoric is

much more limited than it was in Shakespeare's time," he said, adding that this was a "loss to the world as a whole".

Mr Brandreth, who is also a barrister, described rhetoric as the "art of persuasion, the examination of language and how it works on the minds of other people".

He said the key question was that of why was one person making a particular argument in a debate with another person. "You start to delve into questions about how that person sees himself in relation to the other, what kinds of arguments they think will work on the minds of other people. And in that way you find a lot of light and shade in a scene, the nuances of a scene."