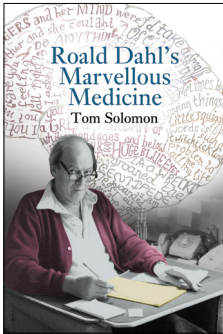


## Book

### Taking a dose of Roald Dahl's marvellous medicine



**Roald Dahl's Marvellous Medicine**

Tom Solomon. Liverpool University Press, 2016. Pp 192. £9.99. ISBN 9781781383391

For Roald Dahl's Marvellous Medicine show at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe see <https://www.tomsolomon.co.uk/copy-of-events>

With more than 50 000 shows being staged by over 3000 artists in 300 venues, there are performances to suit all tastes at next month's 70th Edinburgh Festival Fringe—but one show at the arts festival has a special sprinkling of literary magic. Tom Solomon, Professor of Neurology and Director of the Institute of Infection and Global Health at the University of Liverpool, UK, will entertain families with his *Roald Dahl's Marvellous Medicine* show, which will introduce a new generation to Dahl's tales, while allowing older readers to revisit their favourite books. Wearing my novelist's hat, Dahl was a huge influence when I was growing up. His books showed me that no idea is too fantastical or no character is too colourful. As a journalist, Dahl taught me that just because you're dealing with facts doesn't mean you have any excuse to make your writing boring—his two autobiographies, *Boy* and *Going Solo*, are testament to that.

While many readers will have felt a connection with Dahl through the pages of his books—either through children's stories such as *Esio Trot*, *James and the Giant Peach*, and *Matilda*,

or narratives for adults, like *Lamb to the Slaughter*, *Tales of the Unexpected*, or the script for the James Bond film *You Only Live Twice*—Solomon had a personal link to the author. In the autumn of 1990, Solomon was a junior doctor at the John Radcliffe Hospital in Oxford, UK, and cared for Dahl during the final months of his life, before he died from acute leukaemia, which had developed from myelodysplastic syndrome.

**“Throughout his life, Dahl had a fascination with medicine and he spent long evenings talking with Solomon about cases the young doctor had encountered during his rounds and Dahl's own medical tragedies and triumphs.”**

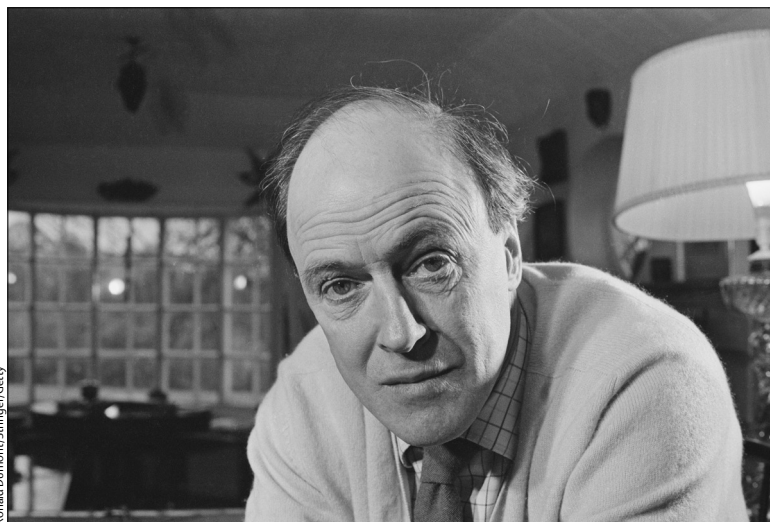
Throughout his life, Dahl had a fascination with medicine and he spent long evenings talking with Solomon about cases the young doctor had encountered during his rounds and Dahl's own medical tragedies and triumphs. With the blessing of the Dahl family, Solomon turned those conversations into *Roald Dahl's*

*Marvellous Medicine*, an entertaining and at times moving piece of narrative non-fiction. The book grew from Solomon's appearances on BBC Radio 4's *Archive on Four* show with the author's granddaughter, Sophie Dahl, and *Great Lives* programme with Matthew Parris. He developed the idea further during his 2015 Edinburgh International Science Festival performance, *Roald Dahl and the Big Friendly Neuroscientist*.

Solomon's stories of his encounters with Dahl are delightful and give an interesting insight into the character behind the weird and wonderful children's tales. While Dahl could be boastful and immodest about his literary achievements, Solomon points out that he was much more modest about his substantial involvement in three medical cases. The first came in 1960 after a taxi hit the pram carrying his 4-month-old son Theo. Theo developed hydrocephalus and a stent was inserted into his head to drain the fluid, but the valve kept blocking. Dahl worked with paediatric neurosurgeon Kenneth Till of Great Ormond Street Hospital, London, UK, and engineer and toymaker Stanley Wade to create the Wade-Dahl-Till valve, which went on to help thousands of children and was described by Till in *The Lancet* in 1964.

Dahl contributed to saving Theo's life, but his eldest daughter, Olivia, died aged 7 years from measles in 1962. Her death spurred Dahl on to become an advocate for vaccinations, writing an open letter to children and parents on behalf of the Sandwell Health Authority, UK, in 1986 to encourage inoculation against measles. Dahl rarely spoke about Olivia, but opened up to Solomon during their nights together.

When Dahl's first wife, Oscar-winning actress Patricia Neal, had a stroke in 1965, the author was instrumental in her recovery, badgering her to answer



Ronald Dumont/Stringer/Getty

Roald Dahl (1916–90)

questions and exercise her mind. He recruited Valerie Eaton Griffith to help with Neal's rehabilitation and the pair were instrumental in developing the techniques used by the then Chest, Heart and Stroke Association.

As well as relaying stories from Dahl's bedside, Solomon uses some of his own patient notes to compare other cases with the author's medical encounters: Solomon's first operation,

an appendectomy; "Darren", a patient with herpes simplex encephalitis; and "Keith", who had subacute sclerosing panencephalitis. Solomon's description of the diseases and the workings of the human body are especially clear, as would be expected from an experienced science communicator. What's more surprising is the creativity and style shown in Solomon's writing, especially in the emotionally charged

final chapter. As the medic says himself at one stage in the book: "It seems absurd to admit to this world-famous author that just as he, a writer, has always wanted to be a doctor, so have I, a doctor, always wanted to be a writer". And now he is.

*Peter Ranscombe*

Peter Ranscombe is a freelance journalist and the author of *Hare: A Novel* (2014).

## Magic and loss

Margaret returns to 1960s London to find John, her fiancé, inexplicably hospitalised. He claims merely to be tired, but rather Margaret finds him much diminished and arranges to meet his doctor. This affords some clarity; it seems a depression John calls "the beast" has returned, having stalked John since he was a young man.

Margaret and John marry and *Imagine Me Gone* follows the events that unfold for them and their three children over the course of the next five decades. This is the second novel from New York based novelist Adam Haslett. His first, the well received *Union Atlantic*, fielded ambitious themes from big finance to conflict in the Middle East. This is a more intimate affair, its subject a family's struggle with mental illness.

The narrative is told in the first person through family members in turn. As they navigate their lives, their perspectives intersect and don't always agree. We know from the beginning that events will somehow eventually be marred by misfortune. The book's epilogue is a cryptic—but clearly tragic—adumbration of its ending.

Margaret and John provide alternate vantage points on their fracturing relationship. At times John is incapacitated and distant, while Margaret ruminates about their children and mounting debts. Their daughter Celia makes a career as a therapist, dispensing advice she herself struggles to follow. Alec, who is gay, is a

political journalist. He makes a journey from impersonal hook-ups towards unexpected intimacy.

Michael, the eldest sibling, overshadows all their trajectories. Unlike this father, who is melancholic, Michael is overwhelmed by anxiety and his needs always place him at the centre of his family's concerns. He struggles to make sense of himself, or establish a fulfilling life. A satisfying personal relationship is elusive.

**"This is a remarkable book, about darkness, but full of love and feeling."**

Occasionally very sad, *Imagine Me Gone* is also often amusing, and sometimes both. Michael is intense and brilliant, and too complex to merely be an object of pity. In an evocative passage both tragic and comic, he uses a medical pre-assessment questionnaire to elaborate his life story. Later, a request for loan deferment is subverted to a treatise on the "transgenerational haunting of the trauma of slavery"—one of Michael's esoteric obsessions.

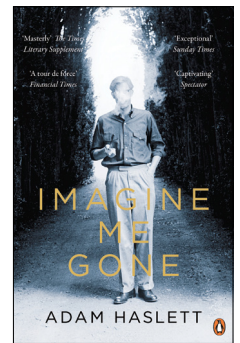
Michael sees a series of psychiatrists, who are sketchy characters at the margins of the story. He finds initial relief with medication, but as time progresses takes ever higher doses, with diminishing returns. Ultimately, to his family's bitterness and disillusionment, doctors have little to offer him. Haslett doesn't shy away

from the possibility that Michael bears some responsibility for his problems. The burden he places on others is a recurring theme, alongside an exploration of where the limits to his family's obligations lie.

There are ways in which this novel of East Coast WASP-y Americans feels rather familiar. Dysfunctional families are a staple of American literature, with Jonathan Franzen the current presiding master of this subgenre. This tale is lifted far above the quotidian in many ways, chief among them Haslett's insightful and enchanting prose. The book is rich with arresting, and sometimes startlingly perceptive, tiny details. Every character is gifted with an exacting eloquence and in each chapter events and emotions are so finely rendered and involving that it's hard to believe what passes didn't actually happen.

In fact, in ways it did. Although not straightforwardly autobiographical, *Imagine Me Gone* draws inspiration from Haslett's own experience. His father died by suicide when he was 14 years old, maybe accounting for the ambivalence towards professional care found in this novel. The characters have attributes both fictional and borrowed from family members. But if this leads to a few pulled punches, it doesn't matter. This is a remarkable book, about darkness, but full of love and feeling.

*Stephen Ginn*



*Imagine Me Gone*  
Adam Haslett. Penguin, 2017.  
Pp 368. £8.99.  
ISBN 0241972884