

## Books

## Minpins and medicine: the life of Roald Dahl

Neurologist Tom Solomon's book, *Roald Dahl's Marvellous Medicine*, is a unique combination of memoir, popular science, and biography. Solomon was driven to write the book after recording a radio show on Roald Dahl's life, in collaboration with his official biographer Donald Sturrock, for the BBC's *Great Lives* programme. Solomon realised that although the public was well versed in Dahl's oompa loompas, gremlins, and minpins, they knew little of his interest in, and contributions to, medicine. With this book, Solomon sought to fill that void.

Solomon met Dahl when working on the haematology ward where Dahl was treated in the last year of his life. As a junior doctor, Solomon was often on the night shift, and was befriended by a sleepless Dahl. They would chat about everything including "people, places, literature, love, music, marriage... and medicine" throughout the course of his stay. These conversations with Dahl are the thread Solomon uses to knit together a loose biography of Dahl's life, highlighting Dahl's contributions to modern medicine, in particular, to neurology.

Dahl was to become overly familiar with neurological illnesses over the course of his life through his experience with several personal tragedies affecting family members. Solomon notes how Dahl responded to these tragedies by researching the disorders and their underlying aetiologies, and by attempting to find solutions. For example, the invention of the Wade-Till-Dahl valve was spurred by Dahl's infant son Theo's hydrocephalus, which he developed after his pram was hit by a taxi. Theo was surgically fitted with a cranial shunt which was prone to blockage. In collaboration with Theo's neurosurgeon Kenneth Till and toymaker Stanley Wade, Dahl improved the design of the valve within the shunt to prevent clogging. After his first wife Patricia Neal's stroke in 1965, Dahl was motivated to devise an intensive rehabilitation program for her. This method was viewed by some as cruel, and was at odds with standard rehabilitation techniques used at the time. However, Neal made a complete recovery, and this intensive approach revolutionised stroke rehabilitation.

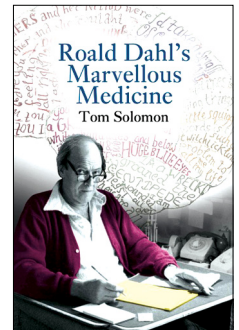
Each of these incidents and the clinical science behind them is covered clearly by Solomon, with occasional detours into related medical history, such as the history of vaccines, or into his own personal history, including his time in Mozambique researching malaria treatments. When describing the clinical background for each of these medical advancements, Solomon's experience as a science communicator is obvious, and in these places the book shines: the science is described clearly, with minimal jargon, but also without the condescension or oversimplification that frequently fetters popular science writing.

It is also quite clear throughout that Solomon is a fan of Dahl's fiction, and he uncovers several connections between these medical experiences and Dahl's writing, such as the exponential increase in new words (or neologisms) Dahl created following his first wife's stroke and subsequent temporary aphasia. Neal often had difficulty finding the right words for what she wanted to say, and would unintentionally invent new ones, which Dahl would record. Solomon notes that these neologisms made their way into *The BFG*, in which the title character, like Neal, had difficulty speaking.

Solomon's writing is also wholly engaging and thoughtful, and the reader feels they are taking part in the conversations he had with Dahl. However, his admiration for Dahl and their friendship undoubtedly also colour his representation of Dahl's life events and character, leading to a rosier portrayal of Dahl than that painted by previous biographers. For example, when mentioning Dahl's divorce from Neal, Solomon mentions Neal's personality may have changed due to the damage from her stroke, implying that this may have contributed to their separation. He is also keen to tell readers that Dahl remained married to her for twenty years following the stroke. However, he neglects to mention that for ten of these years, Dahl had been having an affair with a family friend, Felicity Crosland. Solomon says only that Dahl had become "increasingly close" to Crosland, whom he later married. The affair was well documented in both the official and unofficial Dahl biographies, and the rationale for Solomon's omission here is unclear. However, these oversights may be irrelevant to those most interested in Dahl's contributions to medicine.

Overall, the story of Dahl's life is only a part of the concoction that is *Roald Dahl's Marvellous Medicine*, and the book provides novel insight into the less discussed aspects of the life of this fascinating and well loved author.

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Tom Solomon  
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