

Biffsquiggled by the BFG

The near-death experience of Roald Dahl's wife inspired his magical way with words

TOM SOLOMON WAS a 24-year-old junior houseman on the haematology ward of the John Radcliffe hospital in Oxford in the late autumn of 1990. He had read *The BFG* and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* but had never expected to meet the man who wrote them.

Then, one evening on the ward, Solomon became aware of a presence. "I was working at the computer and this enormously tall man with big sticking-out ears, wrapped in a big dressing gown and with very twinkly, curious eyes, was watching me. It was almost like looking up at the BFG. Of course, it wasn't the BFG, it was the BFG's author."

'The BFG's language is like that of many stroke victims'

Roald Dahl had been admitted to John Radcliffe with the blood disease myelodysplastic syndrome. It would be his final illness, and Solomon stayed by Dahl's side until his death aged 74 on 23 November 1990. In that time the two men became close friends, and the author

gave the young doctor a unique insight into the writing of *The BFG* and, in particular, the eponymous giant's distinctive use of language when conversing with "human beans".

"We talked about his life, music, literature, love, marriage, the medical tragedies that happened to him and his family, and how he managed to turn those around into something positive with lasting impact," says Solomon, now a professor of neurology, who has written a book about Dahl's many intriguing interactions with medical science. "And we talked about *The BFG*. He would sit back, move his head around as he was thinking, and say, 'Well, you know, I've always enjoyed coming up with new words in my writing. It keeps the nippers entertained. But I suppose there must have been a bit of Pat in there.'"

Pat was Dahl's wife, American actress Patricia Neal. In 1965 the 39-year-old Neal was pregnant with the couple's fifth child Lucy when she suffered a potentially devastating bleed from an aneurysm in the brain. Neal regained full health. But along the way she said some very odd things that, Dahl told Solomon, probably inspired *The BFG*.

Dahl had used invented words from his first children's book, *The Gremlins*, in 1943. But the BFG spoke a whole new language, nonsensical yet almost recognisable: just like the language of many stroke victims, Solomon points out.

"She couldn't get the right words out. If they were having a drink and she wanted another, she'd ask for a 'sooty swatch, no, I mean a soap driver'. When she wanted a cigarette she called it an 'oblogon'. And it was not just abnormal words; Neal spoke in abnormal sentences. "She'd say, 'I'll jake my diddles.' Weird little phrases like that. And Roald wrote them down."

The BFG wouldn't appear until 1982, but through the intervening years Solomon believes Neal's difficulty with words percolated through Dahl's mind. According to him, Dahl had never spoken about the connection before. "I think he was probably a bit uncertain how to handle the fact that this had come from Patricia's stroke," he says. "It was obviously a terribly unfortunate thing. But what Dahl loved was the language. That's the thing about *The BFG*,

isn't it? The sheer joy of playing with words." **MICHAEL HODGES**

Roald Dahl's *Marvellous Medicine* by Tom Solomon can be pre-ordered online at Amazon or via www.liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk

BFG FOR BEGINNERS

Biffsquiggled (adjective)

Confused or puzzled. "You must be giving up so easy," the BFG said calmly. "The first titchy bobstacle you meet and you begin shouting you is biffsquiggled."

Bogthumper (noun)

A truly horrible and nasty nightmare. "A dream where you is seeing little chiddlers being eaten is about the most frightsome trogglehumping dream you can get. It's a kicky bogthumper."

Flushbunk (verb)

To go on a quick trip (usually to eat human beans). "We is all of us flushbunking off to England tonight," answered the Fleshlumpeater as they went galloping past.



Foulpester (noun)

A revolting and annoying creature. The Fleshlumpeater opened his tiny piggy black eyes. "Which of you foulpesters is wiggling my arm?" he bellowed.

Gloriumptious (adjective)

Something wonderful and exciting. "I must say it's quite an experience," Sophie said. "It's a razztwizzler," the BFG said. "It's gloriumptious."

Gobblefunk (verb)

To play around with words and invent new meanings for them. "You mean whales," Sophie said. "Wales is something quite



different." "Wales is whales," the Giant said. "Don't gobblefunk around with words."

Golden phizzwizard (noun)

The very best dream you could ever have: the opposite of a trogglehumper. "It's a golden phizzwizard! It is not often I is getting one of these!"

Grinksludger (noun)

Someone who is unpleasant or unkind. "Grown-up human beans is not famous for their kindnesses. They is all squifflerotters and grinksludgers."

Grobsquiffler (noun)

Someone silly and not important. "Now then, you little grobsquiffler!" boomed the Fleshlumpeater.

Taken from the Oxford Roald Dahl Dictionary (Oxford, £14.99)