

Dahl's chickens: How do they roost in the 21st century?

A B S T R A C T Close on two decades after the death of Roald Dahl on 23 November 1990, his legacy as a writer of children's books is apparent in the continuing popularity of his work and in the establishment, in 2001, of the Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre in Great Missenden. The Story Centre itself promotes a love of creative writing through a range of activities for children, which allows them to explore and develop their writing skills. Dahl has left his young and not-so young readers with some memorable characters and situations in tales such as *The BFG*, *Danny the Champion of the World* and *Fantastic Mr Fox*. These three works are fine examples of the timeless quality and appeal that can have a formative influence on the developing young reader. One aspect of this influence is the challenging of established ideas that may perhaps be accepted too easily or uncritically. Another aspect relates to the response of young readers to Dahl's use of language, something that can provide a ready basis for language study in the classroom. The content and style of many of Dahl's stories also make them potentially suitable for young readers whose home language is not English. One may conclude therefore that 'Dahl's Chickens', to quote a spoonerism by the Big Friendly Giant, continue to find a roosting place in the minds and hearts of countless children around the world.

Keywords: Dahl, fiction, popularity, contentious, quality, challenging, legacy, story, themes, characters, creative writing, EAL (English additional language)

1. Introduction

This article explores selected examples of Roald Dahl's writing for children in terms of their achievement as works of fiction, and also considers a few examples of what they can offer by way of language activities in the classroom.

Dahl's work appears no less popular today than during his lifetime. According to information gleaned informally from the sales department of Penguin Books in South Africa early in 2009, this trend is also apparent in South Africa, with a consistently strong demand year after year. Dahl is regarded as 'one of the most successful writers for children ever (Watson, 2001:192). It may seem strange that, particularly during the author's lifetime, many adults questioned the

suitability of some of Dahl's work for children because of its 'subversive' nature, or its 'astonishing insensitivity' (Townsend, 1975:255). Dahl is, however, not known for 'pulling his punches' when exposing folly or evil, a good reason why his stories have so much appeal for children.

Dahl's books do, in varying degrees, offer food for the imagination by way of exciting plots, memorable characters, challenging themes and vigorous, at times highly innovative, language. Consequently, they continue to provide the potential for growth in literacy and imaginative response in young readers. Three works of children's fiction from Dahl's output are discussed in this article in terms of the above attributes.

Decisions about the literary quality of particular books can often be fraught with difficulty, especially when allowing for a subjective element during appraisal. If, however, one were to generalise about 'good quality' books, one might agree with Margery Fisher that 'a good book for children is not, and never has been, the sole property of children'. She quotes C.S. Lewis's virtual 'canon' that '...a children's story which is enjoyed only by children is a bad children's book' (Fisher, 1964:11). Watson, however, points to 'a moment in the history of children's books' when critics began to give more weight to popular, accessible fiction, setting children's writers the challenge of writing narratives 'that were richly evocative and multilayered in language and form, but which were at the same time straightforwardly accessible to inexperienced young learner readers' (Watson, 2000: 3). The past few decades have also seen a shift in emphasis towards the individual *response* of the young reader, making it of no lesser importance than exposure to a 'canon' of literature. The following section explores some key issues in the appraisal of fiction for children in relation to Dahl's own writing, followed by a closer look at three of his books and their value from both a literary and a pedagogical perspective.

2. Fiction and reader engagement – some pointers

2.1 Black and white and shades of grey

The question of what makes for an engaging children's book has much to do with how it allows the reader imaginatively to enter a specially created secondary world. As in good adult fiction, the young reader can be brought, through closeness to the thoughts and feelings of the central character(s), to a broader awareness of his or her own world. Dahl frequently raises issues such as injustice in his stories for children, but does it in a way that young readers can relate to, for example through a pompous or hypocritical character being made to look absurd. It has been pointed out that Dahl's stories owe much to farce, and are 'full of violence, vulgarity, revenge and strongly held opinions. They often feature downtrodden but resilient children pitted against adult grotesques' (Watson, 2001:192). A criticism sometimes levelled against Dahl is that the worth of many of his characters is 'associated with their physical attributes' (Gamble & Yeats, 2008:85). This applies most often to adult characters, but sometimes also to children. It is probably not surprising, therefore, that 'Dahl's stories seem objectionable to many adult readers, who find them a mixture of the glutinous and the cruel', but on the other hand, 'they have an enormous and enthusiastic following among children themselves' (Carpenter & Prichard, 1984:139).

Many of Dahl's adult characters do indeed come across as irredeemably wicked, especially in tales where issues are clear-cut, while other stories such as *Danny the Champion of the World*

and *The BFG* introduce moral ambiguities where some of the characters are not so simply drawn. Dahl succeeds in portraying such characters and events in a way that is accessible to his readers. Tucker states that the characters in such stories ‘may not always fit easily into “good” or “bad” categories, just as people do not in real life’ (Tucker, 2002:223). McDowell points out that a writer for children need not oversimplify experience, but that ‘a good children’s book makes complex experience available to its readers’ (McDowell, 1973:52), the kind of fiction ‘whose complexities and subtleties do not act as a deterrent’ (Watson, 2000:4). One way in which this can happen is through empathy – ‘feeling into the situation and emotions of another person or character ... empathy is also the basis of our moral feelings ... in the sense of fairness that develops in children’ (Bielby, 1999:60-61).

2.2 An orderly universe

Younger children are also capable of believing that ‘every story should ultimately make some kind of moral sense; not necessarily because they are always moral beings themselves but because they continue to expect events in the world to follow along roughly moral lines’ (Tucker, 2002:108). Linked to this is a ‘strong case’, says Tucker, for reading aloud, especially in the age group of 7 to 9. Far from being a mere deciphering activity, adult narrators can answer questions and provide explanations as they go along. Even when children can readily understand what is happening, they seek reassurance about ‘exactly why things are turning out as they are, why some characters act as they do’ (Tucker, 2002:107). Reading aloud can also be particularly important for children when the texts concerned are not in their home language. ‘Extracting meaning from text can be particularly problematic for children with EAL’ (Flynn & Stainthorp, 2006:75). The word ‘meaning’ encompasses making sense of the whole context of the story, including the morals and behaviour of the characters. Some children may be a little confused by the fact that *Danny’s* father is a poacher, or appalled by the behaviour of the farmers in *Mr Fox*, or somewhat awestruck by the carnivorous giants in *The BFG*, while the perspective of an adult reading aloud may be just what is needed to place events into a comprehensible framework. Worthwhile fiction for children therefore creates opportunities to construct meaningful views of people and the world they inhabit and to ‘make evaluative judgements...increasing the reader’s understanding of the world, widening his sympathies and stimulating his imagination’ (Bawden, 1974:10). These ideas are echoed by Ray, who says the reader ‘should be given the opportunity to make evaluative judgements and be given worthy ideals for conduct and achievement’ (Ray, 1982:128). *Danny* and *The BFG* are particularly good examples of how Dahl achieves this through plot, characterisation and dialogue.

2.3 Vision and quality of language

Van Kleeck *et al.* (2003) quote folklorist and author Julius Lester on what makes a book ‘literature’: ‘Literature... cares about enabling the reader to experience the possibilities in language, that how something is expressed enables one to experience anew that which he or she thought they knew’. Secondly, ‘implicit in literature is a vision of what it is to be human’ (Van Kleeck, 2003:126).

Both of the above points may be seen at work in *The BFG*, in which some moral ambiguities are to be negotiated. The morality of intelligence versus brute strength is complicated by the

heroine's discoveries about the darker side of human nature, conveyed through the BFG's idiosyncratic speech ('...human beans is disappearing everywhere ... even *without* the giants is guzzling them up'). Ray points out that ideally the themes and events in a story should arise from the nature of the characters, and 'must be appropriate to the child reader ... but should also open his mind to the possibility of change ... increasing the reader's understanding of the world' (Ray, 1982:128).

2.4 Point of view

Closely linked to plausibility of themes is narrative perspective. Nina Bawden writes that 'the important difference between writing for adults and writing for children is not style or subject matter, though those come into it, but the point of view you're looking from' (Bawden, 1974:4). She says a children's writer should 'never pretend things are other than they are', but should also, 'leave out things that are beyond their comprehension'. Bawden adds that 'a good book for children, like a good book for adults, should hold an honest mirror up to life; reflect the emotional landscape they move in...' (Bawden, 1974:10).

While some (adult) readers may feel that Dahl's own opinion comes through strongly at times or that he sometimes presents skewed portraits of adult behaviour, it is shown in the following section that he is not guilty of pretending that 'things are other than they are' or of being hesitant about holding 'an honest mirror up to life'. The mirror may sometimes present a somewhat exaggerated picture, but hardly a false one.

3. A closer look at three of Dahl's texts

3.1 *Fantastic Mr Fox*

Written for the younger reader, *Fantastic Mr Fox* is an animal fantasy whose main characters are clearly defined in terms of being either sympathetic or grotesque. In keeping with a young child's simplistic view of good and evil, the three farmers, Boggis, Bunce and Bean, all very rich, are introduced as being 'as nasty and mean as any men you could meet' (Dahl, 1974:9). In the course of the story the three farmers attempt to capture Mr Fox, who shows consummate skill in pilfering their farm produce in order for his family to survive. Nonetheless, Mr Fox may be seen as the underdog as the farmers resort to using machines to hunt him down. Championing the underdog is a familiar Dahl theme, becoming contentious when the underdog habitually steals in order to survive.

The young child's concept of justice demands a victory of the hero over the villains. The latter could hardly be more unsympathetically sketched, whereas the hero is appealing because he is too smart for the farmers. The well-groomed and confident Mr Fox becomes a shade *too* complacent, however, and this triggers the main action of the story. The reality of the threat to the fox family is conveyed by both dialogue and action: "They'll kill my children!" cried Mrs Fox'. "How will they kill us, Mummy?" asked one of the small foxes. His round black eyes were huge with fright. Suddenly there was an especially loud crunch above their heads and the sharp end of a shovel came right through the ceiling' (Dahl, 1974:27-8). This kind of language is vivid and direct, which, along with the outrageous descriptions of the farmers and the compelling action, also makes it accessible to children for whom English is an additional language.

The book endorses the victory of natural instinct, intelligence and the will to survive against brute force. There is also a victory against the misuse of modern technology and its consequences for the landscape and for those depending on it for survival.

Fantastic Mr Fox is entertaining for the younger reader, but a moral issue is raised when Badger questions the act of stealing from the farmers. He is finally won over, however, when Fox declares that they will not stoop to the level of the humans who want to kill them. 'If they want to be horrible, let them ... We down here are decent peace-loving people' (Dahl, 1974: 66-7). An issue is raised, nevertheless: what attitude should society adopt towards those who break the law when they are desperate?

3.2 *Danny the Champion of the World*

This story connects thematically with *Fantastic Mr Fox* in its agrarian setting and issues about theft from landowners portrayed as 'baddies'. Danny and his widowed father William live in an old gipsy caravan on a plot of ground where William makes a modest living with his filling station and workshop. The ground falls within a large piece of countryside owned by the wealthy and arrogant Victor Hazell, whose attempts to buy out Danny's father in order to consolidate his ground prove fruitless. It is revealed only later that Hazell wishes to do this in order to build a housing estate, something that surrounding landowners and villagers would have vigorously opposed.

One night Danny's father reluctantly confesses that he has been poaching pheasants in Hazell's wood several miles away. Danny is at first shocked. 'You mean stealing them?' I said, aghast. 'We don't look at it that way,' my father said. 'Poaching is an art. A great poacher is a great artist' (Dahl, 1977:30). He explains that he had been taken poaching from the age of ten, and caught the poaching fever from his own father. Furthermore, when he was a boy, most men in their village were out poaching pheasants at night, 'not only because they loved the sport but because they needed food for their families'. William explains to Danny that jobs were very scarce, 'and some families were literally starving. Yet a few miles away in the rich man's wood, thousands of pheasants were being fed like kings twice a day' (Dahl, 1977:30-31).

Danny is told how Hazell reared hundreds of pheasants each year, overfed them and then, in order to curry favour with the local gentry, handed them over to the mercies of annual shooting parties. Such mass slaughter of half-tame birds was not sport. Poaching without the use of firearms, and with the stealthy keepers never far away, certainly was. The theme of the 'haves' versus the 'have-nots' forms a strong parallel with *Fantastic Mr Fox*, but *Danny* only has human characters, which makes the story potentially more contentious than *Mr Fox*.

After breaking his leg falling into a man-trap in the wood, Danny's father wishes to teach Hazell a lesson by removing so many pheasants from the wood on the night before the annual shooting party that there are practically none left to shoot. It remains no more than a dream until Danny's brainwave of putting small quantities of sleeping powder, prescribed for his father, into raisins and feeding them to the pheasants prior to roosting. The plan works and Hazell is humiliated the following day, when his secret plans for the housing estate are also exposed.

Danny and his father triumph in the end, but there is a difficulty. Can poaching, a form of stealing, be justified in any circumstances? Gamble and Yeats bring this question into clear focus:

The values and beliefs the child brings to the text can be challenged, reinforced, refined or rejected through discussion and exploration ... The reader has to wrestle, together with Danny, with the thorny question of whether poaching is stealing, and whether in this case it was justifiable, although Dahl rather ducks the issue by making Hazell so grotesque that young readers feel any action against him is acceptable. How the young reader grapples with such issues will depend on the attitudes and experience brought to bear on the text (Gamble & Yeats, 2008:26).

Dahl does not so much duck the issue as throw up a question for individual readers to explore and come to terms with. He challenges what could be a stereotyped notion of right and wrong within a believable set of circumstances. For Danny's father and many others, poaching is essentially a sport demanding shrewdness and skill, underpinned by a long agrarian tradition and unwritten rules of acceptable conduct such as the non-use of firearms. In this light, it may not seem too preposterous that Sergeant Samways, upholder of the law, enjoys roasted pheasant 'as much as the next man' and that he 'knows a thing or two about catching 'em as well' (Dahl, 1977:138).

One has a glimpse in this book of human life still close to its roots and not yet eroded by the disruptive elements of urbanisation. Through exciting events and individual characters, Dahl reveals to his readers that people who lack justice and compassion can subvert the spirit of the law even when they do not break the law. Equally, those with a humanitarian inclination can promote what is good and just even while technically transgressing the letter of the law.

3.3 *The BFG*

One of the finest of Dahl's fantasy stories, *The BFG* is about the unlikely friendship between a little girl called Sophie and the Big Friendly Giant (BFG), who abducted her from an orphanage, and their quest to defeat a group of enormous giants who prey on young children. The plot is essentially 'like a folk-tale: a giant and a small girl together bring about the defeat of a cannibalistic tribe of monsters ... the Big Friendly Giant is a resonant fictional character, with his funny and in a way beautiful confusions of speech' (Treglown, 1994:217).

The BFG indeed has an eccentric style of speech abounding in grammatical irregularities and malapropisms, spoonerisms and puns, as well as an intensely expressive range of coined words and phrases. Sophie soon learns that her captor has a kind nature, but his neighbours are nine flesh-eating giants more than twice his size. They visit different countries each night in search of their staple diet: children. By contrast, the BFG dispenses pleasant dreams to children, taking each night's supply in a suitcase, and subsists on a repulsive vegetable called a snozzcumber.

After a narrow escape from a prowling giant, Sophie resolves to try and prevent the deaths of scores of innocent children every night. She and the BFG devise a plan to capture the nine flesh-eaters, based on the BFG's skill in concocting dreams and securing the cooperation of none other than the reigning British monarch. The unlikely friendship between little girl and giant is quaint enough; improbability is taken further when both actually meet the Queen. Her Majesty is naturally astounded, but just as naturally maintains her regal dignity and composure throughout the extraordinary events in which she agrees to become involved. Despite the absurdities of some of the top men in Her Majesty's Defences the giants are captured and permanently incarcerated in an enormous pit.

The BFG is, first and foremost, an entertaining and exciting story of lovable (and unlovable) characters and heroic deeds. It also celebrates the triumph of justice, resourcefulness and courage over the anarchy of brute strength. But there is more than this. While the flesh-eating giants are uncompromisingly hideous and frightening, the BFG opens Sophie's eyes to some disquieting truths about human beings. They are discussing the nightly disappearance of children, when he points out that this does not attract undue attention, as

'...human beans is disappearing everywhere all the time even *without* the giants is guzzling them up. Human beans is killing each other much quicker than the giants is doing it.'

'But they don't *eat* each other,' Sophie said.

'Giants isn't eating each other either,' the BFG said. 'Nor is giants *killing* each other. Giants is not very lovely, but they is not killing each other. Nor is crockadowndillies killing other crockadowndillies (Dahl, 1982:84).

Sophie desperately tries to think of another creature that behaves as badly as the human. Even so, the giants must be stopped, she implores; after all, humans have never done them any harm.

'That is what the little piggy-wig is saying every day,' the BFG answered. 'He is saying, 'I has never done any harm to the human bean so why should he be eating me?''

'Oh dear,' Sophie said (Dahl, 1982:85).

It is quite likely young readers will share Sophie's experience in having her eyes opened in this way. Tucker suggests that 'books can sometimes have an almost electrifying effect on readers still on the threshold of forming impressions and making up their own minds' (Tucker, 1981:186). Nina Bawden's observation about holding an honest mirror up to life is fully applicable here. The negative connotations are not dwelt on for long: they are tempered by the BFG's quaint speech; the point is made and the story moves on.

The relationship between Sophie and the BFG lies at the very heart of the story. Before long Sophie realises that she is happier in the company of the giant in his potentially dangerous world than she has been at the orphanage. In the BFG she encounters kindness, sympathy and a degree of spontaneity quite foreign to her.

Sophie herself is mature beyond her years, self-assured, articulate and understanding; by contrast her strange companion lacks the graces and refinements which education has given the little girl. Despite his unattractive exterior, the BFG is a creature of deeply felt sentiments, and Sophie discovers much about herself, human beings and the nature of friendship from him. She finds a beauty and wisdom in this eccentric and lonely creature. His gracious mien complements his little friend's own nobility of nature. So, when meeting the Queen for the first time, 'he stopped and made a slow graceful bow'. It is integral to the BFG's portrayal that such a moment of courtesy should be accompanied by an amusing unintended error of speech: 'Your Majester,' he said. 'I is your humbug servant' (Dahl, 1982:169). An eleven-year-old child once wrote that *The BFG* was his favourite book because 'It was *very* funny, the names were terribly gruesome. Roald Dahl's use of adjectives was excellent and the BFG's love for human beings was very tender'.

4. Educational spin-offs: the Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre

One of the legacies of Dahl's output as a writer was the establishment of the Roald Dahl Museum and Story centre, in Great Missenden in 2001 (**Figure 1**).

The Centre is dedicated to promoting the love of reading and writing, particularly in young children, and encouraging young readers to discover what it is like to create their own stories. Groups of up to thirty-five children experience hour-and-a-half workshops in a multimedia environment. Apart from the static displays in the museum itself there are audio-visual presentations on Dahl's juvenile fiction. The author's voice is heard at intervals narrating parts of particular stories. The Story Centre offers a variety of stimuli including phrases or sentences that are incomplete or out of sequence and story 'starters'. These include items on an 'Ideas Table' (**Figure 3**), opportunities to create one's own verse with 'Refrigerated Rhymes' (**Figure 4**), and fragments from stories placed at random on a bulletin board.



Figure 1

Figure 2 shows the reconstructed interior of Dahl's writing hut. (Quite striking is the absence of surveillance cameras, cordoned-off display areas, or signs saying 'Do not touch' near the loose items on display.)



Figure 2

What children attempt to write can be captured on a screen, to which others may add suitable words. The children are *actively* involved in their individual or group activities: in no sense are they merely curious onlookers. This is shown in **Figure 5**, where various suggestions are given in writing for practical tasks aimed at making the creative process more colourful and more fun. According to archivist Jane Branfield, children are encouraged to make up unusual sentences 'on a small workstation, from strips of phrases and words that are provided, and the sentences are projected by a ... hidden periscope mechanism onto the floor behind them' (Branfield, 2009). This all adds to the fun, as other children can see the sentences on the floor as they appear.

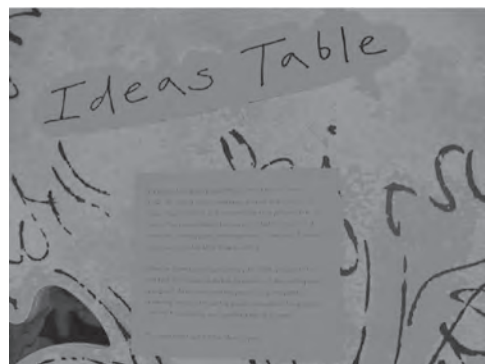


Figure 3

One of the benefits for the educator is that most of the ideas for exploring the creative side of writing can be practically applied. A perhaps

unintended example of this was the ‘menu’ (Figure 6) on a wall inside the adjoining Café Twit. As some of the words were obscured, or are indistinct in the accompanying photograph, the full text is given below the picture.

Education students at NMMU tried out their own versions of the above. Ideally they were to use the same number of syllables (a practical approach to understanding and working with metre) and the same classes of word, such as nouns and adjectives, in roughly the same places as in the original. Getting the ‘rhythm’ just right by finding suitable words containing the appropriate number of syllables is seldom easy, but the very challenge it presents makes it enjoyable and rewarding. A typical collaborative effort (not sparing the squeamish or faint-hearted, in good Dahl fashion) went like this:

I love the crackly crunchy taste of crisp fish scales for lunch
 I like mouse tails and stir-fried snails, all heaped up in a bunch
 A bowl of moss with dental floss
 Is all I want to munch.
 (In truth I must admit that this is really just a hunch.)

More ‘mundane’ language activities based on Dahl’s writing have been done by NMMU students preparing to teach in the Intermediate Phase of schooling. Some examples follow of how the eccentric language of the BFG provided the basis for grammar and vocabulary work, while allowing for the possibility of non-home language users of English needing to be ‘alerted’ to the idiosyncrasies of the BFG’s speech. Following this are a few abbreviated examples of activities based on *Danny the Champion of the World*.

5. Language activities on *The BFG* and *Danny the Champion of the World*

5.1 Linguistic Adventures with the Big Friendly Giant: language activities on concord, vocabulary and tenses

In the first (EFAL) task the frequent occurrence of the same error (*is* instead of *are*) is likely to have a more lasting impact:

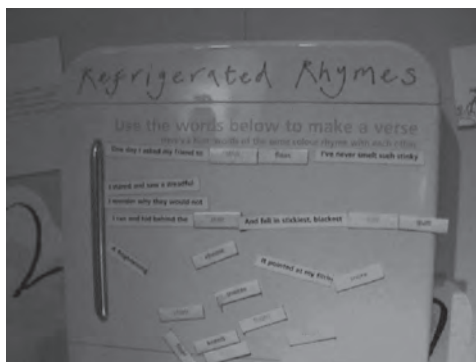


Figure 4



Figure 5

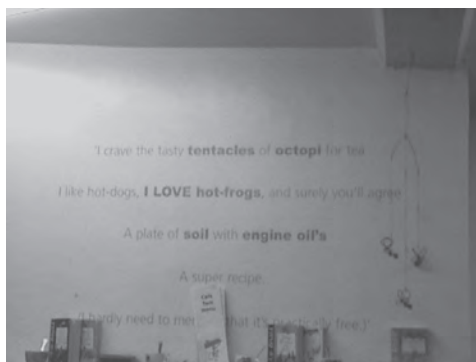


Figure 6

'I crave the tasty **tentacles** of **octopi** for tea
 I like hot-dogs, **I love hot-frogs**, and surely you'll agree
 A plate of **soil** with **engine oil's**
 A super recipe.
 (I hardly need to mention that it's practically free.)'

5.1.1 Task 1

Sophie and the BFG are discussing how children around the world are caught and eaten by giants every night. The BFG never learnt to use normal English. Find and correct the errors in the BFG's speech:

'...human beans is disappearing everywhere all the time even *without* the giants is guzzling them up. Human beans is killing each other much quicker than the giants is doing it.'

'But they don't *eat* each other,' Sophie said.

'Giants isn't eating each other either,' the BFG said. 'Nor is giants *killing* each other.'

5.1.2 Task 2 (EHL and FAL)

Some unusual words are spoken by the BFG in the following passage. Write a number above each one, write the same number below the extract, and next to it write a 'normal' word that you would use. In brackets next to each word write the class (e.g. noun, adjective) of the word.

Sophie is in danger of being discovered by the child-eating giant called Bloodbottler, who bursts into the BFG's cave, and hides behind the remainder of a 'snozzcumber' – an unappetising vegetable eaten by the BFG.

Suddenly, the Bloodbottler grabbed the half-eaten snozzcumber. The BFG stared at the bare table. Sophie, where is you? He thought desperately. You cannot possibly be jumpelling off that high table, so where is you hiding, Sophie?

'So this is the filthing rotsome glubbage you is eating!' boomed the Bloodbottler, holding up the partly-eaten snozzcumber. 'You must be cockles to be guzzling such rubbsquash!'

For a moment, the Bloodbottler seemed to have forgotten about his search for Sophie. The BFG decided to lead him further off the track. 'That is the scrumdiddlyumptious snozzcumber,' he said. 'I is guzzling it gleefully every night and day. Is you never trying a snozzcumber, Bloodbottler?'

'Human Beans is juicier,' the Bloodbottler said.

'You is talking rommytot,' the BFG said...

5.1.3 Task 3 (for both EFAL and EHL; tenses used in answers should correspond with those in the questions)

1. Write down in three sentences what YOU WOULD DO if you were the BFG.
2. Write down in three sentences what you think WILL HAPPEN NOW.
3. Write down in three sentences what HAPPENED NEXT.
4. Write down in three sentences what YOU WOULD HAVE DONE if you had been the BFG.

5.1.4 Role-play, prediction and other language activities based on *Danny the Champion of the World*

Activity 1

An early episode in the story is read up to a point where the young Danny reverses a car straight for the approaching Rolls Royce of the nasty Mr Victor Hazell. Some students

- a) prepare a short scene in play form (later performed in class) on what they predict will happen next, while others
- b) do their own prediction in prose format, following the style of the original, while others
- c) delete certain classes of words, for example nouns, adjectives and verbs from an existing piece of text – an exercise that focuses on grammatical ‘fit’ in the context of the unfolding story.

EFAL needs are catered for by the provision of word options

- i) In brackets for each deletion, or
- ii) From a ‘word bag’ at the end of the reading passage, or
- iii) In the form of a word search.

Activity 2

Following this is the playing of the *film version* covering the same episode. At the point where the reading was stopped earlier, the sound is turned down and the film is run to the end of the episode. Students observe the actions and body language of the characters until the end of the episode. Students compare what they see happening with their predictions done earlier. The next step is to provide their own dialogue to fit the body language and events they have observed. Once this is done, the film is replayed with normal sound.

Activity 3

Sentence building or completion is an activity linked to the creation of meaning out of something seemingly meaningless. Learners who are familiar with the book respond to instructions such as: ‘Read the six sentences below. They are proper sentences, aren’t they, but what do they mean? You can help to make sense of them by choosing a suitable word from the word bag below the sentences. When you have done this, have you made each sentence mean something sensible? And what kind of words have you used?’

1. Danny is () his father.
2. Danny is () () his father.
3. Danny is () (his father ().
4. Danny is () the Baby Austin.
5. Victor Hazell is () a cigar.
6. Victor Hazell is a cigar ().

Bag of words: {his; not; manoeuvring; with alongside; working; his; watching; lighting; father; to; smoker; listening}

The story is a resource for many other activities, such as rewriting passages in reported speech, for example when the incident in which Captain Lancaster accuses Danny of dishonesty and punishes him, is reported (reluctantly) by Danny to his father, or alternatively in an imaginary scene when his father reports this to the headmaster.

6. Some closing thoughts

Dahl’s fiction for children often carries bold, sometimes exaggerated depictions of people and situations. At times the author is not reticent about expressing strongly held opinions, but this does not overshadow the overall tenor of his work. His characters have far too much life and

inventiveness. His stories engage the reader; they are written in language that challenges, that possesses vitality, innovation and a range of different effects and registers.

He relates to his young readers as beings who are capable or will become capable of responding as individuals and forming their own opinions on particular issues. If some adults think that their children need to be shielded from the harsher elements of Dahl's stories, they would be misunderstanding the very essence of the appeal they have for children, who dislike coyness or any other artifice to soften the edges of a character or event. And so, Dahl's 'Chickens' continue to find ready roosting places in the minds and hearts of countless children and adults.

Dahl's fiction just asks to be read with relish and exploited in the classroom. The writer's introduction to the three titles discussed here coincided with some voluntary English teaching in the 'Senior Primary' in the early 1980s. This afforded a 'live' window into reader engagement and response to imaginative texts in the school context. Clearly, 9- and 10-year olds responded with glee to descriptions of the physical repulsiveness of the farmers in *Fantastic Mr Fox*, or to the slaving, bloodthirsty, belligerent giants in *The BFG*. The accessibility and vitality of the language in these three books certainly helped to foster discussion of characters, events and, no less importantly, contentious themes, which were given concrete expression in the stories.

There is also abundant scope for exploring and experimenting with language in the three books. Passages of dialogue offer models for readers to work on, for example, creating their own dialogue where it does not exist in the original. EAL readers can also attempt to render the BFG's eccentric speech in different registers, for example using 'correct' idiomatic English (to the Queen), and then more conversational English (to Sophie). The BFG's quaint utterances, moreover, provide more effective contexts for exploring grammatical peculiarities across word classes and sentence structures.

The Story Centre in Great Missenden provides an excellent model of what can be done to stimulate an interest in both reading and creative writing. It offers a multi-media environment with an emphasis on practical activities, and is innovative in many ways. It offers a model that any school can learn from and seek to emulate.

The Centre also reflects something about what can ultimately be achieved by children; something like the achievement of the amiable and eccentric BFG himself. After the capture of the giants, BFG became an avid reader of, inter alia, all the books by Charles Dickens (whose name he eventually managed to say the right way round). Thanks to Sophie's efforts in coaching him, he learnt to spell and to write properly, and eventually completed a book about himself and his young friend. But where, Dahl asks the reader on the very last page of *The BFG*, is the book that the BFG wrote?

'It's right here. You've just finished reading it.'

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