

# Think Twice about Roald Dahl

by Michele Landsberg

**T**he mysterious factory stands in the middle of town behind enormous locked iron gates. Night and day, the tall chimneys belch smoke into the air. No one knows who works there, and "NO-ONE...EVER...COMES ...OUT!"

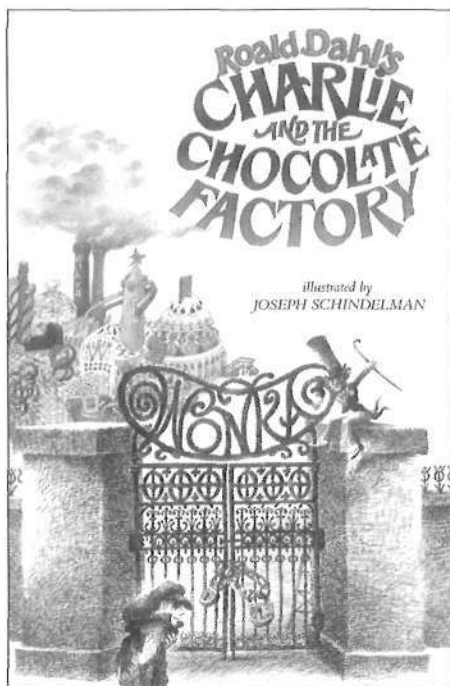
Auschwitz? You'd be forgiven for thinking so, especially when you hear that the factory's chief competitor is another factory-owner called Ficklegruber, a sly play on Hitler's birth-name of Schickelgruber.

But no, this is Willy Wonka's beloved fictional chocolate factory, the centerpiece of Roald Dahl's permanently best-selling children's novel, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, first published in 1964. The ominous emphasis on the fact that no one ever leaves the factory is right there in the original text, capitals, ellipses and all. Dahl may as well have been shouting his analogy to the death camps.

The odd thing about Roald Dahl is that he never made the slightest effort to disguise his unsavory opinions. He openly boasted to an adoring British public that he loathed children.

He never backed away from his overt and scathing anti-Semitism, either, telling the British periodical *The New Statesman* that "There is a trait in the Jewish character that does provoke animosity...even a stinker like Hitler didn't just pick on them for no reason." Dahl also explained his feeling that Jews "had no guts...were submissive" was based on his World War II observation that they "weren't in the [British] armed forces" and went meekly to the gas chambers.

In *The Literary Review*, writing about the Lebanon war, Dahl declared himself "violently anti-Israeli" and wondered, "Is the American President and the Senate and the Congress so utterly dominated by the great Jewish financial institutions over there that they dare not defy them?" He calmly asserted that "Mr. Begin and Mr. Sharon are almost the exact carbon copies in miniature of Mr. Hitler and Mr. Goering...equally bloodthirsty."



## Roald Dahl's own private Final Solution

Echoes of this world-view, alas, reverberate throughout *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Not only is the factory run by black African pygmies called Oompa-Loompas (slave-like creatures who were hastily whitened by the time of the second edition), but there are disturbing scenes in which naughty children touring the factory are knocked off, one by one. A gruesome fate is reserved for Veruca Salt, the shrill, greedy, spoiled daughter of a swaggering, cigar-smoking American industrialist and his fat wife who has a "huge red mouth." (The family fits several categories of anti-Semitic stereotype). Veruca Salt is pushed down the garbage chute to the incinerator, while the Oompa-Loompas spitefully chant a rhyme about how right it is that she should be forced to associate with garbage like herself, instead of with her former fancy friends. But they don't leave it at that. "And as we very rightly thought/ That in a case like this we ought/ To see the thing completely through/ We've polished off her parents too."

**I**n my critical guide to children's literature, *Reading For the Love of It* (Prentice-Hall, 1986), I laid out this evidence for Roald Dahl's anti-Semitism, and gave examples of his equally virulent misogyny. Throughout his work, evil, domineering, smelly, fat, ugly women are his favorite villains, though, by the '70s, he was clever enough to begin featuring aggressive little girls as protagonists.

A favorite Dahl theme is that of the oppressed child, usually a boy, who turns against and physically destroys his female oppressor. The entire plot of *George's Marvellous Medicine*, for example, consists of George (with his father's connivance) trying to kill his "miserable old pig" of a grandmother with one vile potion after another. His homemade poisons put her through torments that sometimes parody sexual violation: "There's squiggles in my belly! There's

bangers in my bottom!" she shrieks at one point. The story concludes after George finally succeeds in killing her. "He felt quite trembly. He knew something tremendous had taken place that morning. For a few brief moments he had touched with the very tips of his fingers the edge of a magic world." Finis.

Why should all this be drawn to the attention of Lilith readers? Recently, I offered a brief version of this analysis on an Israeli feminist e-mail list where an Israeli educator had expressed interest in finding Hebrew versions of Dahl's "feminist" works. The educator thanked me for the information. But others attacked me as advocating censorship or book-banning—something I hadn't even thought of or mentioned.

One woman vigorously defended Dahl's work as "subversive and provocative...but this is part of their charm." She thought it was "stretching things" to compare Wonka's factory to Auschwitz: "A secluded place where some secret activity is taking place...seems to me innocent and familiar enough." She thought it would be a shame if Dahl's works were "banned" in Israel because of "political correctness."

Her approach is worth mentioning only because it is so familiar. When my book first appeared, some teachers and librarians were particularly defensive, partly because Dahl's books were the only ones guaranteed to hold boys enthralled at story-time, and partly, I think, out of embarrassment that they hadn't themselves picked up on the woman-hating themes.

But it is too easy—even intellectually lazy—to close one's mind to textual analysis of children's books, or attempt to dismiss and silence critics, on the grounds that any critique is merely "politically correct" or a summons to a book-burning.

The opposite is true: responsible adults have an obligation, surely, to know what they are encouraging their children to read. Awareness doesn't automatically imply censorship.

I find Dahl's chocolate-coated, sickly sweet fascism a nauseating experience; you may not. But before you invite your children to share the treat, you may want to go farther than reading the book jacket "label." You may want to check out the ingredients for yourself, and be ready with antidotes to any toxic elements.

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*Michele Landsberg is a feminist columnist for The Toronto Star and a best-selling Canadian author of three books.*

This book reconstructs the difficult life of a courageous woman with a great mind and a generous spirit. It fills in some important blanks in a period that gave birth to rabbinic Judaism, an era of great creativity in the face of tragedy. —ND

## **No Pretty Pictures: A Child of War**

by Anita Lobel

Greenwillow, \$16. Ages 10 and up.

This riveting childhood autobiography by an award-winning author and illustrator (*On Market Street*) tells of her survival in Poland from the age of five, when she was sent off by her Jewish parents in the protection of their Catholic nanny with her two-year-old brother, whom they dressed as a girl to disguise his Jewishness. It is laced with fresh sensory impressions, first of the orderly life before the war, the smell of her father's clean-shaven hug before he would leave for work in the morning, the taste of crispy fried bacon served surreptitiously in the kitchen by the nanny. Later, in the zig-zag of life on the run, we read of the ubiquitousness of lice; stifling the urge to speak while hiding in cramped quarters; a risky ride on a carousel. Her childlike prayer that the Virgin Mother would save her, the awkwardness of reuniting with her parents as an adolescent when the war was over; and her aversion to identifying herself as a Jew illuminate some of the collateral damage suffered by those who survived, especially as children. With a bright palette and great respect for her materials she has taken her unspeakably awful experience and crafted a beautiful story. —ND

## **The Primrose Path**

by Carol Matas

Blizzard Publishing (73 Furby St., Winnipeg MB Canada R3C 2A2), \$7.95.

At 13, Debbie thinks life is going well. She has a best friend and she's deep into the youth group at her family's Reform temple. Then her parents move the family across the country, and she is enrolled in a school attached to an Orthodox synagogue. The rabbi, who is her teacher, brings Torah stories to life, tells jokes, and, strangest of all, tickles and teases the girls.

Debbie's new friends fill her in on inside jokes, teach her Orthodox customs (like covering her arms and legs even in hot weather), and decode the unfamiliar rituals. But one thing remains a mystery: the rabbi continually does things like touch the girls' breasts, or put his hands in between their legs. Why, she asks herself, does the rabbi touch the girls in places that no person should?

Finally she tells her father what she's been witnessing.

The synagogue's board asks Debbie to testify in front of the rabbi. Before long, other grown women come forward and tell similar stories of when the rabbi molested them. The rabbi at first convinces the board that the women are lying. As the days go on, more people, including Debbie's own mother, begin to tell stories of the rabbi's misconduct.

This young adolescent, struggling with the difficult issues of whom to tell, how much to tell, and how to confront authority figures, realizes she has done the right thing because she helped prevent the problem from recurring. ■

—Robyn Schmones