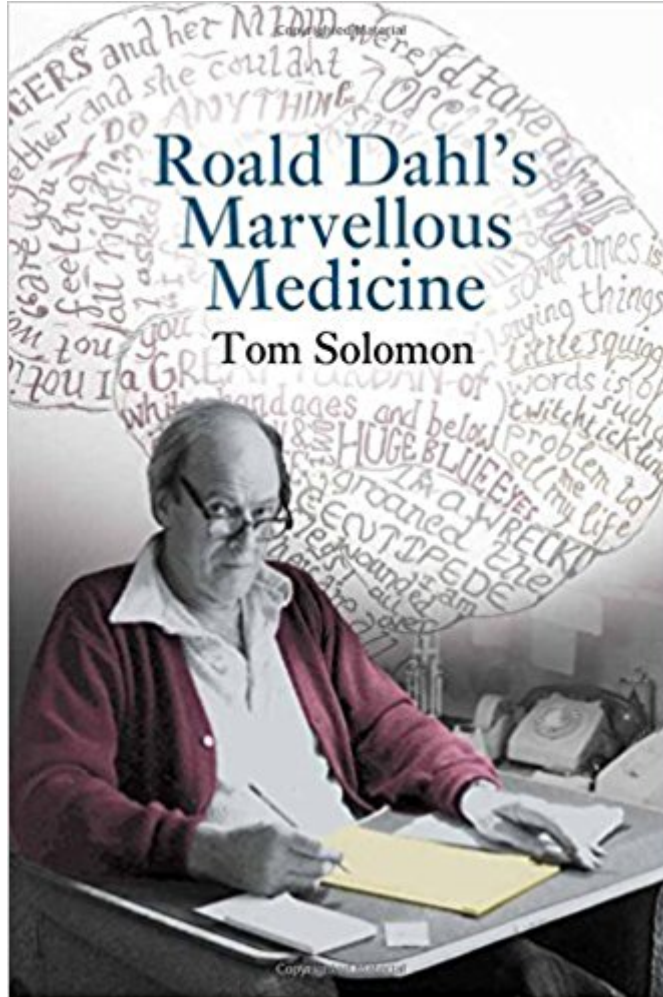


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Roald Dahl's Marvellous Medicine



Synopsis

Most people know Roald Dahl as a famous writer of children's books and adult short stories, but few are aware of his fascination with medicine. Right from his earliest days to the end of his life, Dahl was intrigued by what doctors do, and why they do it. During his lifetime, he and his family suffered some terrible medical tragedies: Dahl nearly died when his fighter plane went down in World War II; his son had severe brain injury in an accident; and his daughter died of measles infection of the brain. But he also had some medical triumphs: he dragged himself back to health after the plane crash, despite a skull fracture, back injuries, and blindness; he was responsible for inventing a medical device (the Wade-Dahl-Till valve) to treat his son's hydrocephalus (water on the brain), and he taught his first wife Patricia to talk again after a devastating stroke. His medical interactions clearly influenced some of his writing - for example the explosive potions in *George's Marvellous Medicine*. And sometimes his writing impacted on events in his life - for example the research on neuroanatomy he did for his short story *William and Mary* later helped him design the valve for treating hydrocephalus. In this unique book, Professor Tom Solomon, who looked after Dahl towards the end of his life, examines Dahl's fascination with medicine. Taking examples from Dahl's life, and illustrated with excerpts from his writing, the book uses Dahl's medical interactions as a starting point to explore some extraordinary areas of medical science. Solomon is an award-winning science communicator, and he effortlessly explains the medical concepts underpinning the stories, in language that everyone can understand. The book is also peppered with anecdotes from Dahl's late night hospital discussions with Solomon, which give new insights into this remarkable man's thinking as his life came to an end.

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Customer Reviews

"Solomon's book shows how deeply medicine and illness permeated Dahl's life, explaining much about his character, his achievements and even (perhaps) his creativity." - Tom Shippey, Times Literary Supplement
"Intriguing and expected" - Donald Sturrock, author of Storyteller: The Life of Roald Dahl
"Unusual and delightful...Solomon brings a personal and highly readable touch, weaving together medical science and biographical detail." - Brian Clegg, author of The Universe Inside You

Tom Solomon is a doctor, world-leading researcher, and an award-winning science communicator. Nowadays, as a Professor of Neurological Science and Director of the Institute of Infection and Global Health at the University of Liverpool, he confronts global health challenges such as Ebola and Zika virus, but in 1990 he was a junior doctor tasked with looking after the nation's favourite children's author, Roald Dahl.

For anyone experiencing any form of trauma, this is a quite remarkable book. Tom Solomon, who looked after Roald Dahl for many years during the author's later life, The book recounts Dahl's life from his earliest days in the British Army to his death. There have been previous biographies, but none concentrating on Dahl's medical encounters, from his illnesses, to the death of his children, to his pioneering research into medical science and his abilities to bring influential people together. His wartime experiences involved horrific injuries, from which he recovered; they gave him the impetus to become a professional writer. At this point the book appears fairly conventional in narrative terms, even though Solomon, a practicing doctor, writes in detail about Dahl's clinical symptoms. Where the book takes off is in its account of what happened to Dahl's eldest daughter Olivia, and his first wife Patricia Neal. Olivia died young after an attack of a measles-related disease; and the experience hit Dahl hard. She was only seven years old, and had no previous medical history. The traumatic experience not only inspired him into further medical research into the disease, as he consulted with eminent doctors both in the United Kingdom and elsewhere, and tried to find ways of working towards a cure. The experience galvanized him creatively to some of his greatest work as he moved from short story writing into producing classic children's works such as CHARLIE AND THE CHOCOLATE FACTORY. Solomon is extremely good at relating trauma to a sudden burst of creative activity; it was almost as if he had to write as fast as possible so as not to waste the

experience of the moment. The same phenomenon occurred when Neal had a stroke in the mid-Sixties, from which she was not expected to recover. Through patience as well as consultations, Dahl helped her recover to the extent that she could resume her film career, even though she still experienced difficulty conversing. At this time Dahl was working harder than ever, not only producing further books but looking after his four remaining children. The fact he accomplished the task successfully pays testament to his phenomenal energy. Dahl spent some considerable time in Africa investigating serious viruses such as Ebola and malaria. Although not a doctor himself, he worked with several creative talents and got to know a lot about medical science. Even while bedridden in old age, he was more than willing to discuss diagnoses with Solomon and his colleagues. The narrative moves seamlessly from biographical narrative to medical diagnoses, to the effect of trauma on Dahl's state of mind. Solomon does not pull any punches in his account of the author's frequent misfortunes, but still comes up with a life-enhancing portrait of a remarkable man.

I loved this book! I could hardly put it down. I'm not a medical professional but I love to read in the popular science and medicine genres - non-fiction and fiction - and I'm a big fan of Roald Dahl, so I was very excited to stumble on this book. I wasn't disappointed. It's an extraordinary account of Roald Dahl's fascination with medicine and how the author played a key role in developing a more reliable shunt to treat hydrocephalus. He also helped devise a better treatment regimen for stroke patients. Professor Tom Solomon is a medical doctor who treated Roald Dahl at the end of his life, and the two of them would often sit and talk on the ward late at night. Dr Solomon grew to know Dahl and his family quite well, so he was ideally placed to write a memoir about the author. He peppers it with stories of his own career which has taken him around the world. Dahl had experienced illness and injury, but members of his family were also unlucky: his baby son was hit by a car and needed lifesaving brain surgery, his young daughter died of measles encephalitis, and his first wife, the Hollywood actress Patricia Neal, had a stroke when she was pregnant aged 39. Tom Solomon tells us how Dahl coped by taking action. The author had courage and determination, and thanks to his writing success, he had money and connections. Dahl made the most of them to improve the circumstances of his loved ones - and patients around the world. Dahl's son needed a shunt to treat hydrocephalus, and Dahl was horrified by how unreliable the only shunts available at the time could be. So he co-ordinated between a neurosurgeon in the US, and a friend in the UK who happened to be a toymaker and hydraulic engineer, to develop a better model. It was named the Wade-Dahl-Till valve after the three men involved. Tom Solomon also tells us how Dahl devised

a better treatment regimen for stroke patients. It was tough, some might say brutal, but it was thanks to Dahl that his wife was able to survive, recover, and regain an unexpected degree of quality of life. The regimen became standard practice in the UK and abroad. Last but not least Tom Solomon finds clues of Dahl's fascination with medicine in his works of fiction for children and adults. The result is a satisfying and multi-layered record of Roald Dahl and his legacy in fiction, and in medicine.

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