I called Roald Dahl from my hotel room in London in order to work out the final arrangements for my interview with him. He patiently explained how to catch the train to Great Missenden, a small town about thirty miles west of London, and agreed to meet me at the station. As I sat in the train, I reviewed my notes on Dahl’s writing career.

I especially wanted to ask him about his early stories. I knew that he began writing during World War II while he was in the Royal Air Force but was no longer flying. I also knew that when he published his first stories, he was living in Washington, D.C., where he worked at the British Embassy. But I wanted to know more details.

Another subject I wanted to discuss with him was his ability to write for both adults and children. Many prominent adult authors try writing for children, but only a few manage to write even a single children’s book that is actually read by children. Dahl, though, has achieved tremendous success in both areas. He first became famous for his macabre short stories for adults, but he is now even more famous for his bestselling children’s books, including James and the Giant Peach, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, The BFG, The Witches, and, most recently, Matilda.

Dahl met me at the train station and drove me to his home, which is called Gipsy House. He showed me into the living room, where we took seats on two of the beautiful antique chairs that Dahl avidly collects. What follows is a somewhat condensed version of our conversation.
Q: What was your very first published story?

A: "A Piece of Cake" was my first publication, but it was a nonfictional piece about the time my fighter plane crashed in Libya. My first fictional story was a little fantasy called "The Gremlins." I wrote it while I was in the RAF. My flying days had just ended, and I was feeling a bit nostalgic about fighting in the war, and these feelings carried over into the story. It's a story about these little creatures who make trouble for the RAF, drilling holes in the planes and so on.

Q: Did you come up with the word "gremlins"?

A: I didn't invent the word. It was being knocked about in my squadron and maybe other squadrons, too. But I think I was the first to use it in print. I invented a name for female gremlins—fifinellas, I think it was. And I called the gremlin children widgets.

Q: Was it a children's story?

A: I didn't think it was when I wrote it. The main character is not a child. But Disney bought it and started making it into a film, and everybody began thinking of it as a children's story. It was even published as a picture book. I still don't see it as a children's story; it was just a little exercise. From there I went on to write a whole series of flying stories, and none of these were for children.

Q: Why were all of your early stories published in America first?

A: I happened to be in America when I started writing, so it seemed natural to send my stories to the American magazines. And then I got an American agent in New York. From then on, Americans were always my initial publishers, that is, until quite recently. There is also a better market for short stories in America than in England. If I were a novelist I might have gone more with British publishers.

Q: Didn't you publish a novel early in your career?

A: I know what you're thinking of. It was called Some Time Never, and I am not proud of it. I never wanted to write it in the first place. I was pushed into it by the great Max Perkins. My short stories had come to Perkins's attention, and he sent me a note that said, "Dear Mr. Dahl, would you come and see me?" Well, I jumped high in the air, as any writer would in those days. He was, after all, editing Wolfe and Hemingway and Fitzgerald. He was the greatest editor America ever had. So I thought, oh wonderful, and I rushed to see him. He told me this delightful story about editing Wolfe's Look