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Finding Fate's Father: Some Life History Influences on Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Finding Fate's Father: Some Life History Influences on Roald Dahl's Charlie and the Chocolate Factory
William Todd Schultz For Adrienne and Henry Necessity and chance Approach not me, and what I will is Fate. Â
— Milton, Paradise Lost VII: 1.172-73 Roald Dahl thought quite a lot of chocolate. At age nine, Dahl attended school near a sweets shop whose emissions he happily sniffed. An adolescence spent in an otherwise dreary English Public School was at intervals partially redeemed by the nearby Cadbury Company. Dahl and his lucky classmates sometimes got to taste test experimental chocolates, rating them and writing out their

reactions. Dahl liked to imagine himself working there, "and suddenly I would come up with something so absolutely unbearably delicious that I would grab it in my hand and go rushing along the corridor and right into the office of the great Mr. Cadbury himself," who after tasting Dahl's discovery would then leap from his chair crying, "'You got it! We'll sweep the world with this one!'" (Boy 148⁴⁹). Foreshadowings of Willy Wonka's factory appear even in Dahl's first major book for children, *James and the Giant Peach*, when the impossibly massive fruit runs over just such an establishment on its way to thrilling adventures at sea. When, however, Dahl eventually got around to writing *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, there his fascination with everything chocolate found its fullest expression. Dahl himself traces the novel's origin to the Cadbury experience: "I have no Biography 21.4 0? all 1998) Â© Biographical Research Center 464 Biography 21.4 (Fall 1998) doubt at all that, thirty-five years later, when I was looking for a plot for my second book for children, I remembered those little cardboard boxes and the newly-invented chocolates inside them, and I began to write a book called *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*" (Boy 149). But what else might have motivated him? What might account for the charisma—and menace—of Willy Wonka, or for the unhappy, almost grisly accidents that befall so many of the children, with the exception of Charlie? Before suggesting answers to these questions, a brief summary of the book might be helpful, especially since the film *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*, so familiar to so many parents, departs in important respects from the highly successful text that inspired it.¹ Two such differences seem particularly significant: the book contains no bewilderingly lurking Slugworth figure, but it does give Charlie a father, albeit a rather feckless and irrelevant one. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is a meditation on what Artaud called the "marginality of fate," and on the almost providential intervention of chance. Charlie Bucket is the only child of a desperately poor family. His father works long hours screwing caps on tubes of toothpaste, until he loses his job and resorts to shoveling snow. The father's miserable wages must support not only Charlie and his mother, but also both sets of invalid grandparents. As a result, their house isn't large enough and there isn't enough money to buy proper food, forcing them to eat "bread and margarine for breakfast, boiled potatoes and cabbage for lunch, and cabbage soup for supper," with Sundays a special day because everyone gets a second helping. The family therefore goes "from morning till night with a horrible empty feeling in their tummies," and Charlie's bones bristle beneath the skin of his face (7). Standing within sight of Charlie's home is an enormous chocolate factory—the biggest in the world, and run by the cleverest chocolate maker in the world. For half a mile in every direction, the factory scents the air with the "heavy rich smell of melting chocolate" (9). The family is bewitched. The factory seems both nemesis and temptation, a symbol of everything dreaded and desired. Grandpa Joe spends many an evening telling Charlie about the factory: How its founder Willy Wonka—always described in superlatives— invented ice cream that doesn't run in the sun, and gum that never loses its taste. How the building—bricks, cement, and all—was constructed Schultz, *Finding Fate's Father* 465 of light...

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William Todd Schultz

For Adrienne and Henry

Necessity and chance

Approach not me, and what I will is Fate.

— Milton, *Paradise Lost*: VII: 1.172-73

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