Roald Dahl was born in Wales in 1916. He was a fighter pilot in World War II. In 1940 his plane crashed and this became the subject of one of his first short stories, published in 1942. After this he became a very successful writer of short stories throughout the 1950s. Dahl married the actress Patricia Neal in 1953 and in 1960 he started to write stories for his own children. Titles such as *James and the Giant Peach* and *The Witches* became world-famous and Dahl is recognized as one of the best writers for children in the English language. His stories for adults are also very popular – and characterized by unexpected conclusions. Many of his books were turned into films. Roald Dahl died in 1990 at the age of 74 of a rare blood disease.

**Summary**

This is a collection of seven short stories by Roald Dahl. Although the stories are not connected to one another they are linked in the way that the author invites us to take a wry, fresh look at human nature.

**Man from the South**

The narrator is lounging by a pool at a hotel when he meets a strange little South American man in a white suit. They are joined by an American boy and an English girl, and the boy offers them all a cigarette. When he boasts that his lighter always lights, even in strong winds, the old man asks if he’s willing to bet on it. The boy is surprised but agrees to bet a dollar. The old man laughs and offers to up the stakes: If the boy can light his lighter ten times in a row, he will give him a brand new Cadillac. If the boy loses, the man will cut off the little finger of his left hand. After some deliberation, the boy agrees to the bet. They all go up to the old man’s room where he prepares for the bet. The boy’s hand is tied to the desk with his little finger sticking out and the man holds a chopping knife at the ready. The boy makes his lighter light successfully eight times when the door suddenly opens and a woman rushes in yelling in Spanish. She says that she should not have left him alone and that he has already cut off forty-seven fingers in the place where they come from. She had managed to win everything from him, but it had taken her a long time. The last thing the narrator sees as he leaves the room is the woman’s hand … with only one finger and one thumb left on it.

**Beware of the Dog**

Pilot Peter Williamson has sustained a massive injury while flying a mission over Vichy France (the name given to the German-controlled areas of the country). He parachutes from the plane and later awakes to find himself in a hospital bed. His nurse tells him he is in Brighton on the English seashore. Strange things keep happening, though, like the time he recognizes the sound of German planes through the window when there shouldn’t have been any nearby. The nurse also mentions that the hospital water is very hard, when Williamson knows that the water in Brighton is famous for being soft. Suspicious and frightened, he later drags himself to the window and sees a wooden sign, ‘GARDE AU CHIEN’ (French for ‘Beware of the dog’). He now knows that he is in Vichy France, and that the nice English caregivers are actually Germans in disguise. When they send in a fake RAF commander to convince him to divulge his squadron’s location, he stares him straight in the eye and says nothing more than his name, rank and number, thus showing them that he has understood that he is in enemy territory.

**The Landlady**

A young man named Billy Weaver arrives in Bath for a business trip, and looks for a place to stay. He goes to a deserted guesthouse and a middle-aged landlady appears. She treats him generously, giving him a floor of his own to stay on, and charging him much less than he expected. In the logbook Billy sees that only two other guests have stayed there. Billy’s suspicions grow when the landlady makes a comment about one of the two guests using the past tense, to which Billy comments that he must have only left recently. The landlady replies that he never left, and nor had the other. Billy then notices that the dog by the fireplace and the parrot he had noticed earlier weren’t alive but were stuffed. The landlady says that she did it herself. She then tells Billy that she stuffs all her little pets
Man from the South and Other Stories

herself when they pass away, and offers Billy more tea. The landlady seems kind at first, but it turns out she takes in young men, drugs them, then kills and stuffs them for her collection.

**The Vicar’s Pleasure**

An antiques dealer named Cyril Boggis dresses up as a vicar and visits country houses where he tricks people into parting with their valuable antiques for only a little money. One day he finds a very valuable chest and pretends he only wants the legs and will use the rest for firewood. The owners obligingly saw off the legs and chop up the chest.

**Pig**

A boy named Lexington is born in New York City. Unfortunately he is soon orphaned when his parents are accidentally shot by the police, who mistake them for robbers. Lexington is sent to live with his Aunt Glosspan out in her cottage high in the Blue Ridge Mountains. She is an eccentric old woman who schools him herself and raises him to be a strict vegetarian. As he grows older, Lexington starts to exhibit a talent for cooking and Aunt Glosspan encourages him to write a cookbook. By the time he is 17, he has invented over 9,000 different dishes. He is shocked when Aunt Glosspan suddenly dies. The next day he finds a letter she has left him instructing him to go to New York and meet with her lawyer. Apparently the lawyer will read her will and then give Lexington money to pursue his cooking ambitions. Unfortunately for the boy, the lawyer is an unscrupulous man who takes advantage of Lexington’s trusting nature. In New York, Lexington is served pork for the first time in his life and he finds it delicious. Eager to learn about this new food for his book, he bribes the waiter to take him back into the kitchen to meet the chef. The chef tells him though, that he can’t be sure it was pig’s meat. ‘There’s just a chance,’ he says, ‘that it might have been a piece of human stuff.’ He tells Lexington that they’ve been getting an awful lot of it recently, but the cook says, ‘that it might have been a piece of human stuff.’ He says, ‘that it might have been a piece of human stuff.’ He can’t be sure it was pig’s meat. ‘There’s just a chance,’ he says, ‘that it might have been a piece of human stuff.’ He tells Judson that a small boy is stealing the milk and that Judson should hide beside the cow and catch him in the act. Judson does this and is of course bitten by the snake. He dies there in the meadow, and as the old man watches the snake again begin to suckle the cow, he says quietly, ‘You can have his share … Yes, we don’t mind you having his share.’

**The Champion of the World**

Claud, who is a poacher, and his cohort, Gordon, work in a petrol station. One day they prepare 196 raisins to take with them when they go to Hazel’s Wood to poach pheasants. Gordon’s idea is to fill the raisins with seconal from sleeping pills and knock the birds unconscious so that they can easily steal them. They manage to get in and out of the wood unscathed, bagging 120 birds and dropping the sacks off in a hired taxi. The next day they wait by their filling station for Bessie Organ, the vicar’s wife, to deliver the birds in a specially constructed baby carriage. Before she gets there, though, the drug begins to wear off and the birds all wake up and fly out and settle down on the filling station. Horrified, Claud and Gordon realize that Victor Hazel will be appearing soon.

**Background and themes**

There is one central theme in all these stories. One person or group of people plays some kind of trick on another and entices them into a trap. The victim only survives if he or she is clever – or lucky. In Dahl’s world only the quick-witted will survive. It is a narrow vision, but within it Dahl’s range is wide. *Pig* is nightmarish in its view of human nature. However, *The Vicar’s Pleasure* is a pleasing comedy of errors that wryly reflects the muddle of our everyday lives. *An African Story* and *Beware of the Dog* are
Man from the South and Other Stories

suggested by Dahl’s own war-time experiences as a pilot. Anxiety about death is mixed in with the excitement of flying, which provides a sense of exhilaration rare in Dahl’s writing. Further direct connections can be made in two other stories.

*Pig* is a bitter satire on *Candide* by Voltaire. Dahl has no trust in Voltaire’s 18th-century rationalism and optimism. Aunt Glosspan (an inversion of Voltaire’s Dr Pangloss) leaves her nephew unprepared for life. Like the young man in *The Landlady*, innocent youth is slaughtered by corrupt experience.

As usual, it isn’t all bad. *The Champion of the World* is a delightful tale of two poachers whose essentially harmless prank goes wrong. This story became one of Dahl’s most warm-hearted novels for children, *Danny and the Champion of the World*, in which the poachers actually win. The novel also contains a portrayal of a loving relationship between father and son. It would be interesting for students to compare the two.

Discussion activities

Before reading

1. **Discuss**: Ask your students if they have heard of Roald Dahl. Have you read any of his books or short stories? What kind of different stories did Dahl write? Have you seen any of the films made from his books?

2. **Write**: Have students look at the titles in the Contents list and imagine they are chapters in a novel. Then they write three or four sentences for each chapter until they have a complete plot for the novel.

3. **Group work and discuss**: Students work as small groups. Tell each group to think about short stories and how they are different to novels. Tell them to look at the notes about Dahl’s short stories in the Background and themes section. Would it be possible to write Dahl’s type of short story as a long novel, or would he have to introduce other ideas? If so, what?

Man from the South

Before reading

4. **Guess**: Ask the students to guess the following from the title of the story: What does ‘the south’ refer to? Where is it? What is it like?

While reading

5. **Check**: Ask students to check whether their predictions in Activity 4 were correct.

6. **Pair work and discuss**: Put students into pairs. Have them talk about the following. If you were the American boy would you take the bet? Why/why not?

After reading

7. **Group work and write**: Put students into groups. They need to write a different ending for *Man from the South*. The woman does not come into the room and stop the bet. Students have to think about which man will win the bet and what will happen then.

8. **Pair work and write**: Put students into pairs. Give Student A four of the extra words from the story, ‘chop, maid, parachute, sill’. Student A gives definitions of these words to Student B who has to say what they are. Together students must write a new sentence using each of the four words.

Beware of the Dog

Before reading

9. **Guess**: Ask the students to guess the following from the title of the story: What does ‘the dog’ refer to?

While reading

10. **Check**: Ask students to check whether their predictions in Activity 9 were correct.

11. **Write and discuss**: Dahl writes about different colours in the story, white, black, grey and green. Ask students to make a list of the different things in these colours. Why do you think Dahl did this? Talk to another student.

12. **Read carefully**: The story takes place during the Second World War. Ask students to answer the following questions:

   How do you know the story is set in a war-time context?

   State some of the clues from the story.

   What is the profession of the main character? Can you tell which countries were at war? Which country is the enemy of the main character? Can you tell the name of the character?

   The pronoun ‘he’ is always used to refer to the main character. The readers only come to know his name at the very end of the story. What do you think the author’s purpose is? Can you tell why?

13. **Discuss**: Ask students to discuss the following questions:

   Do you think things like this really happened in the Second World War? Why or Why not? If the pilot is imagining it, what do you think is really happening to him?

14. **Read carefully and discuss**: Ask the students to read page 19 again and discuss these questions:

   What does the pilot see when he looks out from the windows of the hospital? What does the sign mean in English? What do you think is the significance of its meaning in terms of the theme of the story?

After reading

15. **Research**: Put students into groups. Ask each group to do research on the following questions from books or the Internet: Why Germany and England were enemies during the Second World War? Was France on the side of England or Germany?
**Man from the South and Other Stories**

### The Landlady

**Before reading**

16 **Research:** On page 23, Billy Weaver can see the words 'BED AND BREAKFAST'. What do these words suggest? 'BED AND BREAKFAST' or simply 'B&B' is a popular tourism term in English. Can you tell some of the characteristics of 'B&B' establishments in England? (Suggestions: Who runs the B&B business? B&Bs can be homes, guesthouses or inns.)

**While reading**

17 **Read carefully:** Put students into groups. Ask them to read the first paragraph on page 22 and discuss the following questions: Billy Weaver travelled down from London to Bath. Why is the preposition 'down' used? (Hint: Look at the map of England and find the location of London and Bath.)

What does the author compare the wind to? What kind of rhetoric has been used?

18 **Pair work and discuss:** Put students into pairs and discuss this: You are Billy. You are worried about the landlady and the house and want to get away. At which point in the story do you leave and why? Compare your answer with another student.

19 **Group work and discuss:** Students work in small groups and discuss the following. Dahl describes the landlady as ‘like the mother of one of his best friends’ and says that ‘she had probably lost a son of her own.’ What does this tell you about the landlady and Billy?

20 **Read carefully and discuss:** On page 30, the landlady offers Billy more tea, but Billy refuses because the tea ‘tasted faintly of bitter almonds’. In many suspense and mystery stories, potassium cyanide, a toxic substance, is said to have a ‘bitter almond’ taste, such as the one Billy described. Have the students work in small groups and discuss why they think the tea tasted faintly of bitter almonds and what they infer from this?

**After reading**

21 **Role play:** Billy begins to notice something strange about the landlady. Put students into pairs and ask them to imagine and act out this conversation.

*Student A:* You are Billy. You want to escape from the inn. Give your excuse to the landlady.

*Student B:* You are the landlady. You try to make Billy stay.

22 **Discuss:** Put students into pairs or small groups. They have to think of alternative titles for the story. They can use four words at the most.

23 **Group work and write:** This story is frightening. Divide students into small groups and tell them to write five things for the story that makes it funny instead of frightening.

24 **Research and discuss:** Some critics suggest that the landlady suffers from necrophilia, a kind of disease which makes the patient develop a sexual interest in dead bodies. Ask students to find information from the Internet about the symptoms of the disease and discuss the following questions.

- Do you think the landlady has necrophilia? Does the landlady develop any of the symptoms?

### The Vicar’s Pleasure

**Before reading**

25 **Guess:** Ask students to think about the title of this story. What do you think is the vicar’s ‘pleasure’? Compare your answer with another student.

**While reading**

26 **Check:** Ask students to check whether their predictions in Activity 25 were correct.

27 **Read carefully:** A simile is the use of an expression which describes one thing by directly comparing it with another (as in as white as snow), using the words as or like. Ask students to find examples of the use of similes in the story. (Hint: on pages 31 and 33)

28 **Role play:** Put students into pairs and ask them to imagine and act out this conversation.

*Student A:* You are Mr Boggis. You want to lower your price further. Give your reasons.

*Student B:* You are Rummins. You want to raise your price. Give your reasons.

**After reading**

29 **Discuss:** ‘Mr Boggis is greedier and more stupid than the three men.’ Think about this and then discuss with another student.

30 **Group work and write:** This story is funny. Divide students into small groups and tell them to write five things to add to the story that makes it frightening instead of funny.

### Pig

**While reading**

31 **Write and discuss:** Divide students into pairs and tell them to write the following list about the story.

- Who is the worst person, who is the best? Who do you feel sorry for and why? Who is cleverest and who is stupidest, and why? Which animal suffers most and which animal is the cleverest?

Students compare lists with other pairs and discuss their choices.

**After reading**

32 **Write:** Have students think about why the story is entitled Pig? Ask students to write their own views.

33 **Discuss:** Discuss this with another student, ‘The things that happen in this story are impossible. They could never happen.’
Man from the South and Other Stories

34 **Group work and discuss:** Have students work in small groups and discuss this question.
   *In what ways are these objects important to the plot of *Pig*?
   - Aunt Glosspan’s will
   - the dish of pork Lexington eats in the restaurant

**An African Story**

**Before reading**
35 **Research and write:** *An African Story* is written in a story within a story approach. Ask students to find out what this approach is. What is the purpose of such approach? Students write down their answers and discuss their points.

**While reading**
36 **Write and discuss:** Find the different noises Judson dislikes and make a list. *What other noises could there be that he dislikes?* Ask students to make another list of at least five things. They compare their two lists with other students.

**After reading**
37 **Pair work and discuss:** Have students work in pairs and discuss the following:
   *Why do you think Dahl wrote the first section of this story in which the young pilot meets the old man? What difference does this make the story of the old man and Judson?*

38 **Read carefully and discuss:** Discuss the final paragraphs on page 77. As the old man watches the snake again begin to suckle the cow, he says quietly, ‘You can have his share … Yes, we don’t mind you having his share.’
   *Who do ‘you’ and ‘his’ refer to? How does this sentence reflect the old man’s thinking? What does the writer mean by this sentence?*

**The Champion of the World**

**While reading**
39 **Group work and write:** Have the students work in small groups. Ask each group to make two lists called ‘poachers’ and ‘keepers’ and write the names of all the people on the two sides, i.e. poachers and all the people who help them, and keepers and all the people who like shooting pheasants.

40 **Role play:** Have students read the ending of the story again and ask them to imagine and act out this conversation.
   *Student A: You are Mr Hazel. To your surprise, you come to the garage and see all the pheasants. Then you see Claud and Gordon coming back. What will you say to them?*
   *Student B: You are Claud or Gordon. What will you tell Mr Hazel? How will you persuade Mr Hazel that it was not your fault?*

**After reading**
41 **Write and discuss:** Divide students into groups of five or six. They need to decide which are the most important ten words in the story and list them in order, 1 the most important and 10 the least important. The class should then compare lists. Which three words appear on most lists and in which position?

**Extra activities**
42 **Pair work and discuss:** Put students into pairs. Ask them to think about *Pig* and *The Champion of the World*. What did they like about these two stories and why?

43 **Discuss:** Ask students these questions: *Would you like to read more of Dahl’s short stories? Why or why not?*

44 **Write:** Put students into small groups and ask them to write a short plot for a new Dahl story to add to this book. They need to think of a title, too.

45 **Write:** Ask students to put the seven stories in a list, numbered 1 to 7, showing which they like most (1) and which they like least (7). They say why they made their choice and then compare their list with another student or a group.

46 **Discuss:** In class ask students to think about other short stories they have read in English or their own language. Were they like Dahl’s short stories or not? How were they different? Tell students to think about subject-matter, character and how these other stories ended.

47 **Write:** These stories are for adults, but Dahl is famous for his children’s books. Tell students to choose one of the stories in this book and write a plan to change it into a children’s story. What things do they need to change and what do they need to keep? They have to think carefully about the ending.

48 **Group work and discuss:** Many of Dahl’s stories are characterized by unexpected conclusions. Readers are often left guessing how the story will end until the very last few paragraphs or lines. In *Man from the South*, for example, the last-minute appearance of the gambler’s wife reveals to the readers that the old man hasn’t anything left to bet with, as she has won all his belongings, but it has cost her three fingers of her left hand. The story turns out to end totally differently from what one might have expected. Have the students work in small groups and talk about this with reference to other stories in the book.

**Vocabulary activities**
For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.