

IMMORTAL LITERARY CHARACTERS

In the timeline of the human race, there repeatedly appear certain people and situations enacting the great drama of existence. They come to life as characters in literature. There have always been Shylocks who are discriminated against for their race, King Lear who are monarchs of misjudgement, Rapunzels waiting to be rescued from distress and Bahubalis who swear vengeance. Eternal characters created by great writers help us live the lives of others. We learn about how someone stood up for what they believed in, or died for love, or worked hard to make their dreams come true. The characters may be from a different era, an unfamiliar culture, but we relate to them.

Characters and their backdrops are living records of nations, leaders and wars. Getting acquainted with them makes us understand second hand the consequences of choices without having to live them ourselves. Putting ourselves in the shoes of others helps us become better citizens, stop us from repeating mistakes and take better decisions for the future.

We bring you a selection of well-known characters: Santiago, Ralph Bickersly, King Lear, Hester Prynne, Sleeping Beauty, Lady Macbeth, Siddhartha, Penelope, Oliver Twist, Eliza Doolittle, Alice Liddell and Willie Wonka. They may be fictional but they carry a core of reality in them. They tell us the story of us.

Santiago

“Now is no time to think of what you do not have.
Think of what you can do with what there is.”
The Old Man and the Sea, Ernest Hemingway



Oliver Twist

“Please, sir, I want some more.”
Oliver Twist, Charles Dickens

PENELOPE



Penelope

“Happy endings are best achieved by
keeping the right doors locked.”
The Penelopiad, Margaret Atwood

Sleeping Beauty

“After all, the world doesn’t stop
just because one person is asleep.”
Sleeping Beauty, Giambattista Basile



Eliza Doolittle

“I sold flowers. I didn’t sell myself.
Now you’ve made a lady of me
I’m not fit to sell anything else.”
Pygmalion, George Bernard Shaw

Sleeping Beauty



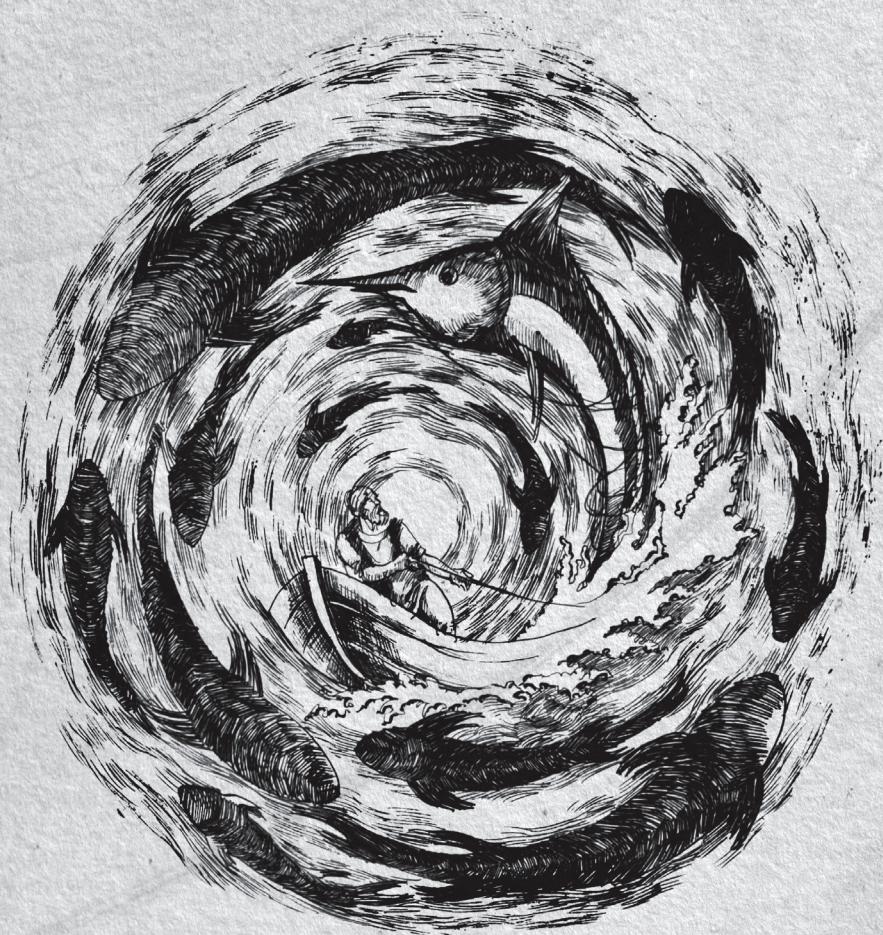


The Old Man and the Sea, Ernest Hemingway

The Old Man and the Sea tackles the theme of perseverance played out in different ways and on different levels. Santiago, the protagonist takes his skiff out to the open sea to catch fish, something he has not done for a long 84 days. He snares a marlin. But it proves to be a mean adversary and does not surrender easily. Santiago defeats the powerful fish after enduring much exhaustion, hunger, thirst, and pain, and finally reels it in and ties it to his boat. On his victorious journey back to the shore, sharks attack and feed on Santiago's hard-won catch until nothing is left. Back on land he only has the marlin's skeleton to speak for the greatest achievement of his life, apart from his badly damaged skiff, that is.

Yet, Santiago is not defeated, nor is his spirit broken. "*Now is no time to think of what you do not have. Think of what you can do with what there is,*" he says. The old man and the open sea are metaphors for the combat of life. Santiago's struggle is against himself, against his perceived, conditioned limits. He pushes his limits back further and further into the sea. The old man becomes oceanic. He becomes the ocean.

Education is a combat with our limits and a quest to become oceanic. It also teaches us to let go of what we achieved. For, our achievements are not to be kept for ourselves alone; they are for all humanity.



THE OLD
MAN AND THE SEA
SEA



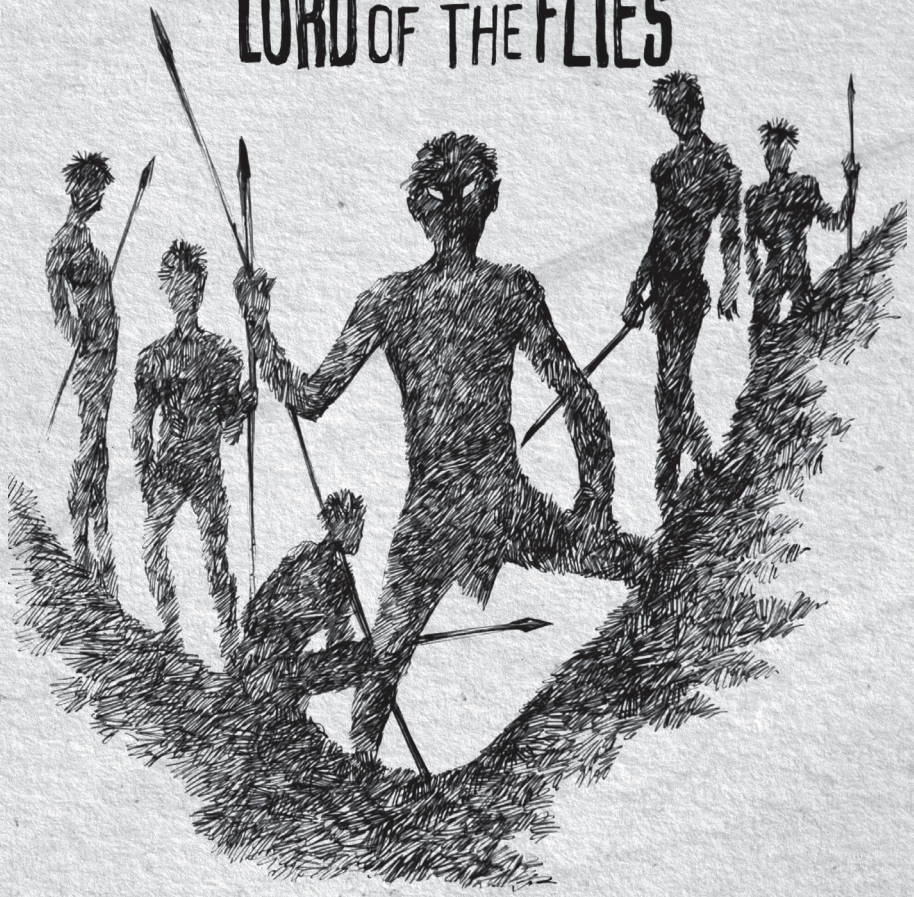
Lord of the Flies, William Golding

Lord of the Flies by Nobel Prize winner William Golding is set on a remote island. A group of schoolboys are stranded when their plane is downed during World War II. The boys led by Ralph Bickersly, Peterkin(Piggy), Simon and Jack Merridew fight to survive in their environment. Trying to be civilized, they elect a leader for themselves as well start the division of tasks (hunters, fire-watchers etc).

However, their struggle with each other for power reveals the wickedness which lives inside all of us. Sadly, it does not occur to them that they are merely trying to be lords of subjects as pathetically puny as flies. The boys, chief among them being Ralph, go from civilisation to savagery in a very short while. Before the boys are finally rescued from the island there is savagery, destruction and terror. When Piggy gets killed, “Ralph wept for the end of innocence, the darkness of man’s heart.”

The novel portrays the conflict between two competing impulses that exist within all human beings: the instinct to live by rules which works against the instinct to gratify one’s immediate desires, to resort to brutality to be top dog. Ultimately, it tells us that human barbarism lies just beneath the flimsy veneer of decency.

LORD OF THE FLIES





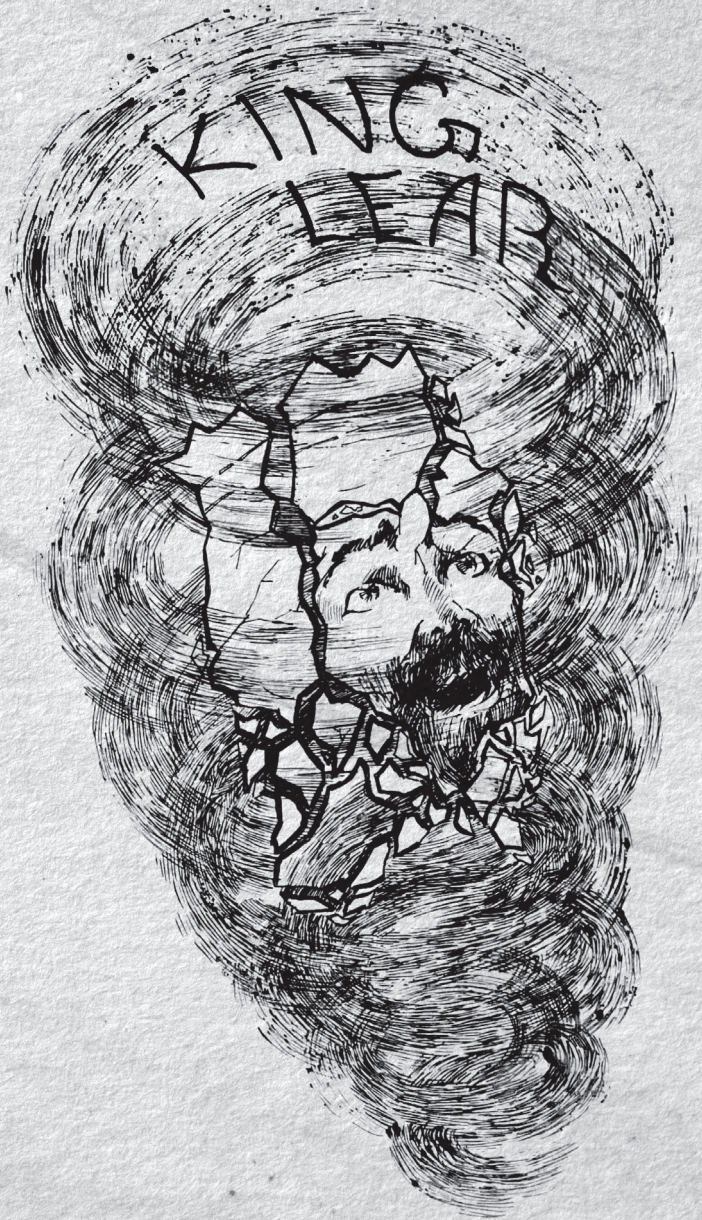
KING LEAR

King Lear, William Shakespeare

The tragedy of King Lear has as its theme disintegrating and destroyed family relationships. King Lear foolishly believes his deceitful children, allowing him to be easily influenced. Lear's daughters, Regan and Goneril, manipulate him with flattering words as their eyes are only on his kingdom. To Lear's demand that she declare her love for him, Cordelia, his honest, yet plain speaking third daughter responds, *"I love your majesty/According to my bond, no more nor less."*

This is not pleasing to the ears of a man used to flattery. If you get taken in by flowery language, your life will be stormy. Towards the end of his life, abandoned by his two elder daughters, and with the younger banished, Lear is caught up in a storm, both real and metaphorical.

Children may behave sweetly to parents with mundane or dark motives. Yet parents remain undiscerning. Parents also discriminate between children, based on appearances. The child that is favoured may abandon them in the last days of their lives. It may also pan out the other way round. To realise who truly loves you sometimes takes a tragedy or two. And that is the tragedy of life. Tragedies are lessons that life gives us. Despite the darkness they bring, they also throw light on what ought not be.





HESTER PRYNNE

The Scarlet Letter, Nathaniel Hawthorne

The Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne highlights beliefs regarding sin, individual and society, puritanism, social norms and guilt. The society of the time considers the passionate act of Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale as a vice. Hester is sentenced to wear the red coloured letter 'A' around her neck which marks her out as a degraded person. *"The scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread. Shame, Despair, Solitude! These had been her teachers—stern and wild ones—and they had made her strong, but taught her much amiss."*

Hester proves to be stronger than the society that punishes her. She is more sinned against than sinning. An act does not define or make a person's life. The act is just a scar and a scar is just a lesson. The school and the home should be cradles of gender justice. We need to redefine our perceptions of outrage on men and women which can take the form of gestures or words. We should accommodate our own people instead of casting them away as stigmatised. They are our own. Christ rehabilitates people who are outcasts. Such a person, who brings back the outcast, the shamed, the outlawed, back to the community is the true saviour.

THE SCARLET LETTER





SLEEPING BEAUTY

The Pentamerone, Giambattista Basile

Sleeping Beauty or Little Briar Rose is a classic fairy tale about a princess who is cursed to sleep for a hundred years by an evil fairy. She is to be awakened by a handsome prince when the spell ends.

Making his way to her castle, by now covered with brambles, the handsome prince reverses the spell on the princess and frees her from her state of sleep. His is, in fact, a Midas touch or a master-touch that creates miracles out of a state of seemingly nothing.

Paraphrased to an educational scenario, it is a guru or mentor who can see an apparently mediocre child's ability or potential. It takes a Prince Charming, a special teacher, to slash away the undergrowth of ignorance, fear and prejudice and awaken a person slumbering in the castle of his mind, to his or her true state of energy. An organic teacher is one who can make sacrifices to realise the potential of a child. This happens in spirituality, education and culture. One needs to be touched, one needs to touch. This is the give and take of life. *"After all, the world doesn't stop just because one person is asleep."*

Sleeping Beauty





LADY MACBETH

Macbeth, William Shakespeare

Lady Macbeth is one of Shakespeare's most famous and frightening female characters. She plots Duncan's murder. Her guilt pushes her down a gradual spiral of insanity that starts a little after Duncan's murder. It manifests in strange behaviour like sleep walking and constantly trying to wash away apparent bloodstains on her hands.

"Out, damned, spot! Out, I say!" she says, and *"Here's the smell of blood still. All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand."* The 'spot' she talks about is the imaginary blood she sees on her hands from the murders and other crimes she and her husband have been involved in. An all-consuming ambition for power can be harmful if one overreaches. It leads to psychological distress, and finally destruction. Practice gratitude and mindfulness as both lead to enhanced psychological well-being. Balance ambition with other priorities. Ambition addiction can be damaging for both oneself and those around one.

LADY
MACBETH





SIDDHARTHA

Siddhartha, Herman Hesse

Herman Hesse's classic novel based on the early life of Buddha, published initially in German, was inspired by the author's visit to India before World War I. Hesse blends various philosophies as expressed through one man's search for the true meaning of life.

The novel tells the story of a wealthy Indian Brahmin who turns his back on a life of privilege to seek spiritual fulfilment. But asceticism does not satisfy him, nor do wealth or the attentions of the lovely courtesan Kamala with whom he fathers a child. Despairing of finding fulfilment, he goes to the river and there, learns simply to listen. He becomes a boatman ferrying people from one side of the river to the other.

Education is a search and an introspection of life. It teaches us to gauge how responsive we are to the life we are blessed with. When we think only of ourselves, we reach a dead-end. When we travel with others we find paths opening up for us. The brevity of life, so apparent to Siddhartha, is in ours too. Our quest should be to reach the other shore, that of eternity. *"When someone seeks,"* said Siddhartha, *"his eyes see only the thing that he seeks... Seeking means: having a goal. But finding means: being free, being open, having no goal."*



SIDDHARTHA

A decorative banner with a textured, light gray background and dark gray borders. The word "PENELOPE" is written in a bold, black, sans-serif font across the center of the banner. The banner has a slight curve and a shadow effect, giving it a three-dimensional appearance.

The Penelopiad, Margaret Atwood

Penelope is a mythical heroine from Homer’s *Odyssey*, whose beauty was more of character and conduct than of person. She is known for her fidelity to her husband Odysseus, who is away fighting in the Trojan War. Not having a father to discipline, to guide, to give courage and confidence, Telemachus, their son turns unmanageable. Penelope herself becomes the target of 108 suitors. In order to delay marrying any of them, she pledges to make her choice among the suitors when the funeral shroud she weaves for Laertes, her husband’s father, is finished. She weaves her web in the day and unravels it at night. In her words, “*Happy endings are best achieved by keeping the right doors locked.*” Needless to say, her suitors wait in vain.

In *The Penelopiad* by Margaret Atwood, the story is told from the point of view of the single mother. The pressures on a single woman to earn a livelihood, families or couples living apart — often continents apart— due to the demands of their job, and family break up are all too familiar motifs of our times. Handling adolescents, keeping healthy family relations, the changing roles of mother, father and children are matters that seek our attention and intervention. Strategies that may help are: show your love, create a routine, find quality child care, set limits, don’t feel guilty, take care of yourself, lean on others and finally, stay positive.

PENELOPE





OLIVER TWIST

Oliver Twist, Charles Dickens

The tale of Oliver Twist is legendary to British culture. The novel centres around Oliver and focuses on the social injustice meted out to orphans in the Victorian period. One mealtime, Oliver is served a tiny bowl of gruel. Hunger and the urging of his companions make Oliver say, “*Please, sir, I want some more.*” He is punished by being put into solitary confinement and is only allowed cold water to wash with whilst being caned by Mr Bumble, the beadle of the orphanage.

We find Mr Bumbles everywhere around us. They can be inconsiderate parents, teachers or other figures of authority. All children desperately need the food of love, attention, time, sympathy and understanding. Asking for more takes incredible daring on the part of a child. The lack of warmth and the refusal to give more, send children to other quarters. Many a time they end up leading a life of crime and lawlessness. The adult world should shed its numbness and stop turning a deaf ear to the requests of children. Only when we heed their cry for “more” can we make true treasures out of our young people.



OLIVER
TWIST

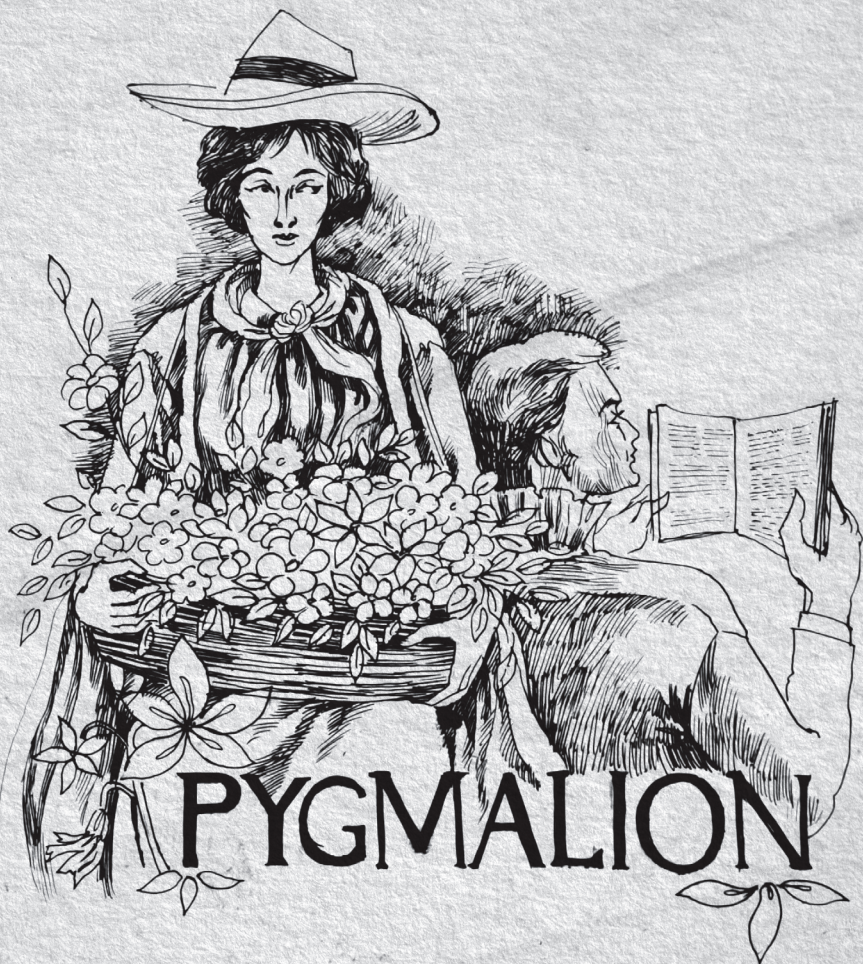


ELIZA DOOLITTLE

***Pygmalion*, George Bernard Shaw**

Pygmalion, the play penned by Shaw, has a plot which goes thus: Henry Higgins, a professor of phonetics, has the ability to deduce the hometown or region of anyone based on their accent. He overhears a flower girl named Eliza Doolittle and mocks the common way she talks. Higgins trains her till she develops a typical British upper-class accent. She is a great success, socially. However, Higgins loses interest in her after his project of schooling her into a fine young woman concludes. But Eliza, having fallen in love with him, turns restless and asks him, “*I sold flowers. I didn’t sell myself. Now you’ve made a lady of me, I’m not fit to sell anything else.*”

The trainer’s or teacher’s role ends with educating his protégé to a level of perfection which also instils a restless yearning in the student to go forth and make use of his education. Perfection is never the end of the road. It does not mean the end of one’s problems. It merely equips one to deal with them.





Alice in Wonderland, Lewis Carroll

In this 1865 novel and one of the best known works of Victorian literature, a young girl, Alice Liddell, falls down a rabbit hole and enters a strange and wondrous place. She meets new people, makes tough decisions, shrinks and grows a couple of times and understands some important things about herself.

The novel belongs to the literary nonsense genre. Yet, it represents the child's struggle to survive in the confusing world of adults. To understand the adult world or to get adapted to the world of the school, away from home, is often a struggle for children. Classrooms require children to fit in, to control themselves. It is a passage which they need to manoeuvre before they go out into the wider world. To prune their natural, yet undesirable traits and thus become refined is education.

"Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?" "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," goes a dialogue in the novel. One needs to become smaller, humbler, and simpler. Only then can one cross the threshold to the greater world. In a world of deception and corruption, the road to heaven is narrow. The constraining tunnel of life experiences is a crucible in which we are all recast for our own good and that of others.

A GARDEN-RACE

ALICE IN WONDERLAND

and after a few minutes it seemed quite
to Alice to find herself talking to
them, as if she had known them
Indeed, she had known the
the Lory
only so
better
out know
positively refused
more to be said.

At last the Mouse, a
person of some authority
out, "Sit down, all of you
I'll soon make you dry
down at once, in a big
in the middle. Alice
fixed on it, for she
bad cold if she did not get dry
"Ahem!" said the Mouse with
air, "are you all ready? This is the
I know. Silence all round
William the Conqueror

question, but

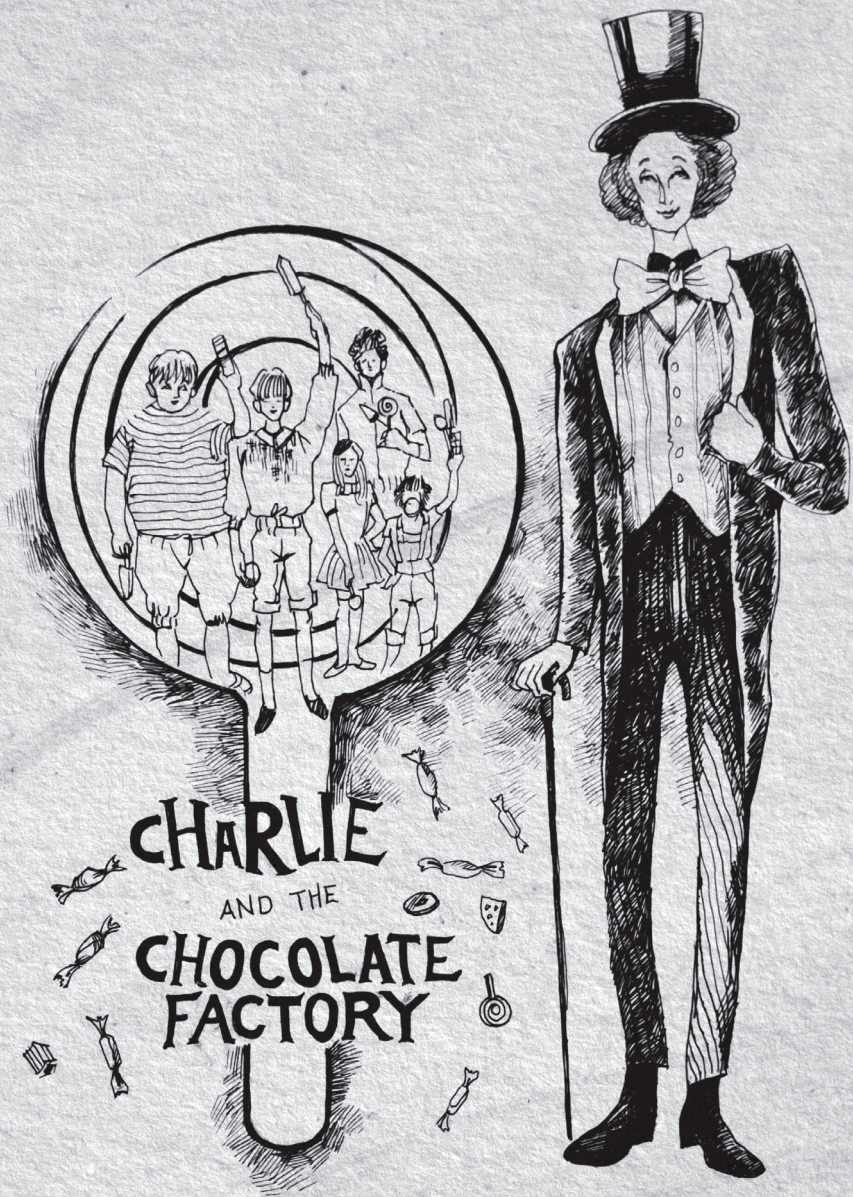




Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, Roald Dahl

The story features the adventures of a poor eleven-year-old boy, Charlie Bucket, inside the chocolate factory of eccentric chocolatier Willy Wonka. He is the last one of five children who wins a Golden Ticket found in a Wonka chocolate bar, bought with a fifty-penny piece which he luckily finds in the snow. During the tour of the factory, the other four children give in to their impulses and are ejected from the tour in darkly comical ways. Wonka congratulates him for “winning” the factory and explains that the whole tour was designed to help him secure a good person to serve as an heir to his business, and Charlie is the only child whose inherent goodness allowed him to pass the test. When asked why he gives the factory to a child, Willy Wonka answers:

“I don’t want a grown-up person at all. A grown up won’t listen to me; he won’t learn. I want a good sensible loving child, one to whom I can tell all my most precious sweet-making secrets – while I am still alive.” A good-hearted child always has a good future. You can bet on it!



CHARLIE
AND THE
CHOCOLATE
FACTORY