***The Witches***

***Chapter 4***

***Summer Holidays***

***Summary:***

* The narrator and Grandmamma decide to spend the summer in Norway. To whet their appetites, Grandmamma tells some stories about her childhood summers there: fishing, eating shrimp heads (yummm), and spending time with her brother.
* Then Grandmamma falls ill – she has a doctor on call and their housekeeper, Mrs Spring, stays with them, but the narrator has to wait ten whole days before he can see his grandma again.
* Even once she is back on her feet, the doctor orders that she not travel to Norway – major bummer.
* Instead, they decide to go to the Hotel Magnificent on the south coast of England (which, by the way, is kind of like the Florida of England).
* To cheer him up, Grandmamma gives our narrator two white mice, which he names William and Mary, and he takes them along for the ride.
* Once they're at the hotel, our narrator tries to teach his pet mice a few tricks. Apparently this is not okay according to fancy hotel rules. The maid sees one and screams, and needless to say, our narrator finds himself in some trouble.
* The manager of the hotel, Mr Stringer, is a little peeved. Don't worry, though – clever ol' Grandmamma gets them out of this pickle. She claims to have seen rats in the hotel and threatens to call the health inspectors. So Mr Stringer agrees to let the narrator keep his mice, as long as they stay in their cage. Done and done.
* Actually, not so much. This arrangement clearly won't do for our ambitious narrator. He needs to find a secret spot where he can take his mice out for more circus training.
* After wandering through a maze of rooms – viola! – he finds The Ballroom. It's full of chairs and a platform, but completely empty of people. There's a sign on the door for a meeting of The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (which, by the way, is a [**real charity**](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/)), but he figures the meeting is over. If not, who better to run into than a society of child-helpers?
* Just in case, our narrator hides behind a screen toward the back of the room. This is where he begins his mice's tight-rope training. Naturally. (There's a how-to in here if you're interested in training your own circus mice.)
* In the middle of all this, happy as a clam, he starts to hear voices. Uh-oh. Mr Stringer begins to usher in a huge group of women, all with pretty clothes and hats.

***Brief Synopsis:***

The boy attends school in England through the spring and into the summer. He and his grandmother plan to return to Norway in the summer and stay in a cabin on the coast, like she and her family used to when she was young. She and her brother used to go out all day in a boat fishing and visiting small islands. However, just three weeks before summer break, the grandmother gets very sick with pneumonia. She must stay in bed and the boy is not allowed to see her because she is too sick. Finally, after about ten days, the boy is allowed in to see his grandmother. His grandmother gets better over the next week but the doctor still stays that she is not strong enough to travel back to Norway for the summer.

The doctor suggests that instead of going to Norway, the boy and his grandmother go to the south coast of England. They book two rooms at the Hotel Magnificent in Bournemouth. Before they leave, the boy's grandma buys him two white mice, which he names William and Mary. He starts to teach them some tricks, such as crawling through his sleeve and up onto his head.

At the hotel, the chambermaid finds one of the mice on their first day. She screams and makes a fuss and the manager tells the boy's grandmother that they can't have mice in the building. She replies that she has seen rats in the building, and gets him to permit the mice to stay, although they must be kept in their cage at all times.

The boy still wants to train his mice, which will require having them out of the cage, so he goes looking for a private, abandoned room in the hotel to practice with them. He wanders around the large building and finally finds a ballroom. The door has a sign on it that reads

"RSPCC MEETING

STRICTLY PRIVATE

THIS ROOM IS RESERVED

FOR THE

ANNUAL MEETING

OF

THE ROYAL SOCIETY

FOR THE PREVENTION

OF CRUELTY TO CHILDREN" (49)

He decides to train his mice in this room, since there are no people around and since, if they did come in, he thinks that the people from such a society would not be too upset with him. There is a large folding screen in the back of the room which he hides behind in case the Manager came in. The boy gets to work training the mice to walk a tightrope by holding a piece of string at longer and longer distances, luring the mice across it with bits of rock cake.

Suddenly, the boy hears someone enter the ballroom. It is the manager. However, the manager does not stay, but instead welcomes the group of women from the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, who stream in through the double doors.

**Critical Study (A Note About Witches – Summer Holidays):**

A Note About Witches – The seven-year-old, never-named English narrator explains at the outset of the story he is about to relate that witches are real, that they are evil, that they hate children and spend their lives plotting to get rid of them, that they blend in easily, and that they could be any woman anywhere. This, the narrator explains, is part of what makes them so dangerous to children, as well as the fact that witches don’t ordinarily look dangerous. The narrator asks the reader to observe a drawing of two women, and asks which is the witch. The narrator says there is no way to know.

My Grandmother – The narrator explains to the reader that he has had two close encounters with witches in his life, and that only because of his Norwegian grandmother was he able to escape. The narrator explains to the reader that Norway is where witches first came from. The narrator also reveals his parents were killed in a tragic car accident while visiting Norway. The narrator then went to Oslo to live with his grandmother, Grandmamma, who taught him all he now knows about witches. At the time, Grandmamma explained she knew five children who disappeared or changed because of witches, and that in every case, a strange lady was seen outside the child’s home before the child disappeared. One little girl, Solveg Christiansen, was found to be trapped in an oil painting, while another, Birgit Svenson, was turned into a chicken.

How to Recognize a Witch – This chapter returns the plot of the novel to the past. Grandmamma sits the narrator down to help him recognize a witch when he sees one. She explains that witches are demons in human-shape. Witches always wear gloves, even in the house, and only take them off when they go to sleep. Witches are bald, and always wear wigs to hide their baldness. This makes their heads itchy. Witches also have larger nostrils than normal people, and amazing powers of smell. Clean children always smell worse to witches than dirty children. Witches also have pupils that constantly change color, blue spit, and don’t have any toes. Grandmamma also explains she once had an encounter with a witch, but says it is too scary to relate.

The Grand High Witch – The narrator and Grandmamma move to England to comply with the last will of the narrator’s father. Grandmamma explains that there are not as many witches in England as there are in Norway, but English witches are the nastiest in the world. They enjoy turning children into things like slugs so parents will step on them not knowing the slug is actually a child. Each country has a Secret Society of Witches, and each year, the Society members gather together for a lecture from the Grand High Witch of All the World. No one in the world knows where the Grand High Witch lives, including the witchophiles – people who study witches. Back home in England, the narrator reunites with his best friend, Timmy. They decide to build a treehouse. When Timmy is down with the flu, the narrator continues. He discovers he is being watched by a strange woman wearing gloves who says she has a green snake to give as a present to him. Thankfully, Grandmamma calls the narrator in for dinner, at which time the narrator relates what has happened.

Summer Holidays – For summer vacation, Grandmamma and the narrator plan to head to Arendal, Norway, where Grandmamma had spent her own childhood. Unfortunately, Grandmamma gets pneumonia. The doctors advise only a short trip, so the narrator and Grandmamma go to the south coast of England instead, to the Hotel Magnificent in Bournemouth. Hoping to make things better for the narrator, Grandmamma buys him two pet white mice named William and Mary. Mr. Stringer, the hotel manager, allows the white mice in the hotel only as long as they remain caged. While looking for a secret place to train his mice, the narrator comes across an empty room reserved for a group called the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. There, he begins to teach his mice to walk a tightrope behind a folding screen. A short time later, Mr. Stringer guides the society of ladies into the room.

“The Witches” is a children’s horror novel by Roald Dahl in which an unnamed seven-year-old boy and his grandmother seek to bring down all the witches of the world before the witches kill all the children around the globe. These witches, the narrator explains early in the novel, are actually real. They are not the exaggerated cartoons or silly depictions one sees in pop culture, but are truly evil beings. As the reader learns through Grandmamma, witches are actually not people, but demons in human form. The narrator explains that the most dangerous thing about witches is that they cannot be easily distinguished from real people. Here, the author alludes to one of his primary themes, in which he uses horror as a way to warn about trusting strangers. Just because someone looks harmless, does not mean that person is harmless. This is a strong warning for all children reading the novel.

At the same time that the author uses horror as a way to inform children, he also uses horror as a way to scare readers and put them on the edge of their seats, considering it a normal part of childhood to want a good thrill. Part of the way that the author goes about creating such a sense of horror is to explain to readers that witches are real. While the adult reader may recognize the author’s sly sense of suspense, the young reader will think twice about the reality of witches. This is especially telling when the writer reveals through his narrator that fictionalized witches – with their silly hats and black cloaks – are not what real witches are like, and that real witches are good at being in disguise.

The concerns about children not trusting strangers expressed through the author’s warnings, as well as the idea that witches may be ordinary looking women in disguise, both help to inform a recurring theme in the novel in which the writer argues that appearances do not mean everything. The aged and heavy Grandmamma might be dismissed by most as a mere old woman, but despite her grandmotherly appearances, Grandmamma is fiercely intelligent and courageous. She becomes a wellspring of important knowledge for the narrator, who uses this information in his own struggle against witches later in the novel. What little the narrator knows so far about witches saves him from a witch in the garden.

The appearance of the witch in the garden is not only horrific in and of itself, but supports another important theme the author uses in his work. This is the idea that endings are not always happy. While Grandmamma intervenes at just the right time to call the narrator in for dinner, the horror of, and incomplete ending to the encounter is that what becomes of the witch in the garden is not known. In other words, this particular witch is still lurking about somewhere, which adds to the narrator’s horror because he never knows when this witch may pop up again.

***Quotations:***

***Quotation 1:***

What a splendid place this was! (5.58)

Our narrator is reacting to the ballroom in the hotel: huge, with rows of beautiful chairs and a thick carpet. How does the feeling of the room change once the witches come in for their meeting?

***Quotation 2:***

"Oh yes," the nurse answered, smiling. "She told us she simply had to get better because she had to look after you." (5.22)

Grandmamma is more concerned about her grandson than she is about her own health. Do you think the opposite is true, too?