

To Olivia – a Sky Original Film.

Released on 19th February 2021 in advance of World Encephalitis Day on 22nd February.

A blog by [Dr Ava Easton](#)

In 1962, Olivia 'Twenty' Dahl, eldest daughter of Roald Dahl and Patricia Neal, dies.

Roald Dahl (Hugh Bonneville), an eccentric, burgeoning children's author and his wife, Patricia Neal (Keeley Hawes), a glamorous Hollywood movie star, have retreated to the English countryside to bring up their expanding young family. Tragically, their lives are turned upside down by the devastating death of their daughter Olivia from measles encephalitis, and, as the couple struggle through the unimaginable loss, their shared grief becomes a source of redemption and strength which changes their lives forever.

I know about measles. I had it as a child and was pretty unwell with it, confined to a darkened room for over a week with concerns raised for my eyesight among other things. Decades later I still know about measles because I work with patients who have encephalitis because of it, and also families like that of Roald and Patricia, who are left bereaved by it. Measles is not an innocuous childhood illness. It is serious and deadly. Measles kills. It's that simple.

Measles is a highly infectious airborne viral illness contracted by touching or breathing it in after people cough or sneeze.

Measles can however be prevented by having the MMR (measles, mumps and rubella) vaccination.

In 1986 Roald Dahl wrote:

Olivia, my eldest daughter, caught measles when she was seven years old. As the illness took its usual course I can remember reading to her often in bed and not feeling particularly alarmed about it. Then one morning, when she was well on the road to recovery, I was sitting on her bed showing her how to fashion little animals out of coloured pipe-cleaners, and when it came to her turn to make one herself, I noticed that her fingers and her mind were not working together and she couldn't do anything.

"Are you feeling all right?" I asked her.

"I feel all sleepy," she said.

In an hour, she was unconscious. In twelve hours she was dead.

Naturally when offered the opportunity by Sky to preview the film and write about it I jumped at the chance.

To Olivia is a beautifully made film that focuses in on this one life-defining period in the lives of Roald Dahl, Patricia Neal and their then other children Tessa and Theo. The subject matter may sound bleak but the film is filled with light and shade as well as some humorous moments. Roald Dahl was a complex character, and it captures some of that beautifully as well as acting as a tableaux for domestic life in the 1960s. As such and perhaps in contrast to what people might expect Patricia Neal is in many ways an equal character to the larger than life and often imposing shadow that is Roald. She is a strong woman and thankfully so as the death of Olivia is only one of many challenges they will face during their time together. But this film is not a biopic, it is a beautifully shot, extremely well-acted moment in time where worlds collide. The divergent way they each cope with their grief and the impact on the other children are a rare insight, rarely covered by the media or openly spoken about, which many who have experienced the bereavement of a child or brother or sister will understand. It is hard to watch at times, but it also offers hope. Whilst our grief for those we have loved and lost endures, it is also the price we pay for that love. The film also illustrates that life does continue, that we will eventually once again live, love and laugh even when in the depths of our grief we do not think that possible.

The acting of the young Tessa in the film is excellent and I suspect she may be a face to watch out for in the future.

The film is a story about family, about death, about relationships, about the future and as young Roald reminds adult Roald in the film "...we all become stories in the end..." and if that is the case, which I believe it is, then best make yours a good one!

The film returns to the campaigning activities of Roald and Patricia at the end and in that same vein I will leave you with a few key points:

- 90% of unvaccinated people exposed to measles will become infected.
- A single person with measles will be able to infect 90 other people who are not immune.
- Between one and three people in every 1,000 who catch measles will die.
- Measles, like many other causes of encephalitis such as COVID-19, is vaccine preventable.
- Sadly we have seen uptake of vaccination against measles decline in the last couple of decades and measles, a once near-eradicated disease, is again a public health crisis.