

Some reviews of *Matilda*

‘Mischievous though she may be, there could hardly be a better heroine for today’s children. Matilda is super-intelligent and, above all, a voracious reader!’

– *The Times*

‘*Matilda* is the nation’s favourite children’s book, according to a poll of more than ten thousand people conducted by Waterstone’s and BBC1’s *Bookworm* programme’ – *Sunday Times*

‘One of the most popular children’s books ever’ – *Ottaker’s Top Ten Favourite Children’s Books* survey

‘Roald Dahl and Quentin Blake have made an important and lasting contribution to children’s literature’

– *Guardian*

THE BFG

BOY: TALES OF CHILDHOOD

BOY *and* GOING SOLO

CHARLIE AND THE CHOCOLATE FACTORY

CHARLIE AND THE GREAT GLASS ELEVATOR

THE COMPLETE ADVENTURES OF CHARLIE AND MR WILLY WONKA

DANNY THE CHAMPION OF THE WORLD

GEORGE'S MARVELLOUS MEDICINE

GOING SOLO

JAMES AND THE GIANT PEACH

THE WITCHES

For younger readers

THE ENORMOUS CROCODILE

ESIO TROT

FANTASTIC MR FOX

THE GIRAFFE AND THE PELLY AND ME

THE MAGIC FINGER

THE TWITS

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THE ENORMOUS CROCODILE(*with Quentin Blake*)

THE GIRAFFE AND THE PELLY AND ME (*with Quentin Blake*)

THE MINPINS (*with Patrick Benson*)

REVOLTING RHYMES (*with Quentin Blake*)

Plays

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CHARLIE AND THE CHOCOLATE FACTORY: A PLAY (*Adapted by Richard George*)

FANTASTIC MR FOX: A PLAY (*Adapted by Sally Reid*)

JAMES AND THE GIANT PEACH: A PLAY (*Adapted by Richard George*)

THE WITCHES: PLAYS FOR CHILDREN (*Adapted by David Wood*)

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RHYME STEW

SKIN AND OTHER STORIES

THE VICAR OF NIBBLESWICKE

THE WONDERFUL STORY OF HENRY SUGAR AND SIX MORE

ROALD DAHL

Matilda



Illustrated by Quentin Blake



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Introduction

by Julia Eccleshare

Puff in Modern Classics series editor

How strange to be a child who loves books and reading, but who is criticized for it by her parents; how unusual to find a pupil who can do maths perfectly, yet is accused of cheating by her father when she answers a question correctly. Such a child is Matilda.

Roald Dahl's *Matilda* is a story of enormous warmth, celebrating intelligence, good teaching and, above all, a love of reading. And all of it is conveyed with the hallmarks of Dahl's storytelling: larger than life characters, scenes of comic excess that are sometimes tinged with savage overtones and just a little bit of magic to allow for unusual possibilities.

The characters – from Matilda's vile and despicable parents, Mr and Mrs Wormwood, and her villainous headmistress, the terrifying Miss Trunchbull, to the gloriously sweet-natured Miss Honey and Matilda – are as representative of the good and the bad as any of Dahl's creations. Their various faults are as ridiculous as their virtues are too good to be true.

And yet, through them, Dahl does, more than entertain. Juxtaposing these extremes, especially the underhand dealings of the Wormwoods and the terrifying scenes of humiliation played out by Miss Trunchbull (only Dahl could turn a chocolate cake into a weapon of torture!), he makes a barbed commentary on some of the things that he most disliked about contemporary society. The bullying of children by adults stands at the top of the list.

For a generation and more, Roald Dahl has consistently topped the polls of children's favourite authors. His ability to speak directly to his readers, siding with them against adults where necessary while entertaining them with magical possibilities, has given him a unique position as a creator of empowering fantasies.

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It's a funny thing about mothers and fathers. Even when their own child is the most disgusting little blister you could ever imagine, they still think that he or she is wonderful.

Some parents go further. They become so blinded by adoration they manage to convince themselves their child has qualities of genius.

Well, there is nothing very wrong with all this. It's the way of the world. It is only when the parents begin telling *us* about the brilliance of their own revolting offspring, that we start shouting, 'Bring us a basin! We're going to be sick!'



School teachers suffer a good deal from having to listen to this sort of twaddle from proud parents, but they usually get their own back when the time comes to write the end-of-term reports. If I were a teacher I would cook up some real scorches for the children of doting parents. 'Your son Maximilian,' I would write, 'is a total wash-out. I hope you have a family business you can push him into when he leaves school because he sure as heck won't get a job anywhere else.' Or if I were feeling lyrical that day, I might write, 'It is a curious truth that grasshoppers have their hearing-organs in the sides of the abdomen. Your daughter Vanessa, judging by what she's learnt this term, has no hearing-organs at all.'



I might even delve deeper into natural history and say, 'The periodical cicada spends six years as a grub underground, and no more than six *days* as a free creature of sunlight and air. Your son Wilfred has spent six years as a grub in this school and we are still waiting for him to emerge from the chrysalis.' A particularly poisonous little girl might sting me into saying, 'Fiona has the same glacial beauty as an iceberg, but unlike the iceberg she has absolutely nothing below the surface,' I think I might enjoy writing end-of-term reports for the stinkers in my class. But enough of that. We have to get on.



Occasionally one comes across parents who take the opposite line, who show no interest at all in their children, and these of course are far worse than the doting ones. Mr and Mrs Wormwood were two such parents. They had a son called Michael and a daughter called Matilda, and the parents looked upon Matilda in particular as nothing more than a scab. A scab is something you have to put up with until the time comes when you can pick it off and flick it away. Mr and Mrs Wormwood looked forward enormously to the time when they could pick their little daughter off and flick her away, preferably into the next county or even further than that.



It is bad enough when parents treat *ordinary* children as though they were scabs and bunions, but it becomes somehow a lot worse when the child in question is *extra-* ordinary, and by that I mean sensitive and brilliant. Matilda was both of these things, but above all she was brilliant. Her mind was so nimble and she was so quick to learn that her ability should

have been obvious even to the most half-witted of parents. But Mr and Mrs Wormwood were both so gormless and so wrapped up in their own silly little lives that they failed to notice anything unusual about their daughter. To tell the truth, I doubt they would have noticed had she crawled into the house with a broken leg.



Matilda's brother Michael was a perfectly normal boy, but the sister, as I said, was something to make your eyes pop. By the age of *one and a half* her speech was perfect and she knew as many words as most grown-ups. The parents, instead of applauding her, called her a noisy chatterbox and told her sharply that small girls should be seen and not heard.

By the time she was *three*, Matilda had taught herself to read by studying newspapers and magazines that lay around the house. At the age of *four*, she could read fast and well and she naturally began hankering after books. The only book in the whole of this enlightened household was something called *Easy Cooking* belonging to her mother, and when she had read this from cover to cover and had learnt all the recipes by heart, she decided she wanted something more interesting.



'Daddy,' she said, 'do you think you could buy me a book?'

'A book?' he said. 'What d'you want a flaming book for?'

'To read, Daddy'

'What's wrong with the telly, for heaven's sake? We've got a lovely telly with a twelve-inch screen and now you come asking for a book! You're getting spoiled, my girl!'



Nearly every weekday afternoon Matilda was left alone in the house. Her brother (five years older than her) went to school. Her father went to work and her mother went out playing bingo in a town eight miles away. Mrs Wormwood was hooked on bingo and played it five afternoons a week. On the afternoon of the day when her father had refused to buy her a book, Matilda set out all by herself to walk to the public library in the village. When she arrived, she introduced herself to the librarian, Mrs Phelps. She asked if she might sit awhile and read a book. Mrs Phelps, slightly taken aback at the arrival of such a tiny girl unaccompanied by a parent, nevertheless told her she was very welcome.

‘Where are the children’s books please?’ Matilda asked.

‘They’re over there on those lower shelves,’ Mrs Phelps told her. ‘Would you like me to help you find a nice one with lots of pictures in it?’

‘No, thank you,’ Matilda said. ‘I’m sure I can manage.’

From then on, every afternoon, as soon as her mother had left for bingo, Matilda would toddle down to the library. The walk took only ten minutes and this allowed her two glorious hours sitting quietly by herself in a cosy corner devouring one book after another. When she had read every single children’s book in the place, she started wandering round in search of something else.

Mrs Phelps, who had been watching her with fascination for the past few weeks, now got up from her desk and went over to her. ‘Can I help you, Matilda?’ she asked.

‘I’m wondering what to read next,’ Matilda said. ‘I’ve finished all the children’s books.’

‘You mean you’ve looked at the pictures?’

‘Yes, but I’ve read the books as well.’

Mrs Phelps looked down at Matilda from her great height and Matilda looked right back up at her.

‘I thought some were very poor,’ Matilda said, ‘but others were lovely. I liked *The Secret Garden* best of all. It was full of mystery. The mystery of the room behind the closed door and the mystery of the garden behind the big wall.’

Mrs Phelps was stunned. 'Exactly how old are you, Matilda?' she asked.

'Four years and three months,' Matilda said.

Mrs Phelps was more stunned than ever, but she had the sense not to show it. 'What sort of a book would you like to read next?' she asked.

Matilda said, 'I would like a really good one that grown-ups read. A famous one. I don't know any names.'

Mrs Phelps looked along the shelves, taking her time. She didn't quite know what to bring out. How, she asked herself, does one choose a famous grown-up book for a four-year-old girl? Her first thought was to pick a young teenager's romance of the kind that is written for fifteen-year-old school-girls, but for some reason she found herself instinctively walking past that particular shelf.

'Try this,' she said at last. 'It's very famous and very good. If it's too long for you, just let me know and I'll find something shorter and a bit easier.'

'*Great Expectations*,' Matilda read, 'by Charles Dickens. I'd love to try it.'

I must be mad, Mrs Phelps told herself, but to Matilda she said, 'Of course you may try it.'

Over the next few afternoons Mrs Phelps could hardly take her eyes from the small girl sitting for hour after hour in the big armchair at the far end of the room with the book on her lap. It was necessary to rest it on the lap because it was too heavy for her to hold up, which meant she had to sit leaning forward in order to read. And a strange sight it was, this tiny dark-haired person sitting there with her feet nowhere near touching the floor, totally absorbed in the wonderful adventures of Pip and old Miss Havisham and her cobwebbed house and by the spell of magic that Dickens the great story-teller had woven with his words. The only movement from the reader was the lifting of the hand every now and then to turn over a page, and Mrs Phelps always felt sad when the time came for her to cross the floor and say, 'It's ten to five, Matilda.'

During the first week of Matilda's visits Mrs Phelps had said to her, 'Does your mother walk you down here every day and then take you home?'

'My mother goes to Aylesbury every afternoon to play bingo,' Matilda had said. 'She doesn't know I come here.'

'But that's surely not right,' Mrs Phelps said. 'I think you'd better ask her.'

'I'd rather not,' Matilda said. 'She doesn't encourage reading books. Nor does my father.'

'But what do they expect you to do every afternoon in an empty house?'

‘Just mooch around and watch the telly.’

‘I see.’

‘She doesn’t really care what I do,’ Matilda said a little sadly.

Mrs Phelps was concerned about the child’s safety on the walk through the fairly busy village High Street and the crossing of the road, but she decided not to interfere.

Within a week, Matilda had finished *Great Expectations* which in that edition contained four hundred and eleven pages. ‘I loved it,’ she said to Mrs Phelps. ‘Has Mr Dickens written any others?’

‘A great number,’ said the astounded Mrs Phelps. ‘Shall I choose you another?’



Over the next six months, under Mrs Phelps’s watchful and compassionate eye, Matilda read the following books:

Nicholas Nickleby by Charles Dickens

Oliver Twist by Charles Dickens

Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë

Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen

Tess of the D’Urbervilles by Thomas Hardy

Gone to Earth by Mary Webb

Kim by Rudyard Kipling

The Invisible Man by H. G. Wells

The Old Man and the Sea by Ernest Hemingway

The Sound and the Fury by William Faulkner

The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck

The Good Companions by J. B. Priestley

Brighton Rock by Graham Greene

Animal Farm by George Orwell

It was a formidable list and by now Mrs Phelps was filled with wonder and excitement, but it was probably a good thing that she did not allow herself to be completely carried away by it all. Almost anyone else witnessing the achievements of this small child would have been tempted to make a great fuss and shout the news all over the village and beyond, but not so Mrs Phelps. She was someone who minded her own business and had long since discovered it was seldom worth while to interfere with other people's children.

'Mr Hemingway says a lot of things I don't understand,' Matilda said to her. 'Especially about men and women. But I loved it all the same. The way he tells it I feel I am right there on the spot watching it all happen.'

'A fine writer will always make you feel that,' Mrs Phelps said. 'And don't worry about the bits you can't understand. Sit back and allow the words to wash around you, like music.'

'I will, I will.'

'Did you know,' Mrs Phelps said, 'that public libraries like this allow you to borrow books and take them home?'

'I didn't know that,' Matilda said. 'Could I do it?'

'Of course,' Mrs Phelps said. 'When you have chosen the book you want, bring it to me so I can make a note of it and it's yours for two weeks. You can take more than one if you wish.'



From then on, Matilda would visit the library only once a week in order to take out new books and return the old ones. Her own small bedroom now became her reading-room and there she would sit and read most afternoons, often with a mug of hot chocolate beside her. She was not quite tall enough to reach things around the kitchen, but she kept a small box in

the outhouse which she brought in and stood on in order to get whatever she wanted. Mostly it was hot chocolate she made, warming the milk in a saucepan on the stove before mixing it. Occasionally she made Bovril or Ovaltine. It was pleasant to take a hot drink up to her room and have it beside her as she sat in her silent room reading in the empty house in the afternoons. The books transported her into new worlds and introduced her to amazing people who lived exciting lives. She went on olden-day sailing ships with Joseph Conrad. She went to Africa with Ernest Hemingway and to India with Rudyard Kipling. She travelled all over the world while sitting in her little room in an English village.



Mr Wormwood, the Great Car Dealer

Matilda's parents owned quite a nice house with three bedrooms upstairs, while on the ground floor there was a dining-room and a living-room and a kitchen. Her father was a dealer in second-hand cars and it seemed he did pretty well at it.

'Sawdust,' he would say proudly, 'is one of the great secrets of my success. And it costs me nothing. I get it free from the sawmill.'

'What do you use it for?' Matilda asked him.

'Ha!' the father said. 'Wouldn't you like to know.'

'I don't see how sawdust can help you to sell second-hand cars, Daddy.'

'That's because you're an ignorant little twit,' the father said. His speech was never very delicate but Matilda was used to it. She also knew that he liked to boast and she would egg him on shamelessly.

'You must be very clever to find a use for something that costs nothing,' she said. 'I wish I could do it.'

'You couldn't,' the father said. 'You're too stupid. But I don't mind telling young Mike here about it seeing he'll be joining me in the business one day.' Ignoring Matilda, he turned to his son and said, 'I'm always glad to buy a car when some fool has been crashing the gear so badly they're all worn out and rattle like mad. I get it cheap. Then all I do is mix a lot of sawdust with the oil in the gear-box and it runs as sweet as a nut.'

'How long will it run like that before it starts rattling again?' Matilda asked him.

'Long enough for the buyer to get a good distance away,' the father said, grinning. 'About a hundred miles.'

'But that's dishonest, Daddy,' Matilda said. 'It's cheating.'

'No one ever got rich being honest,' the father said. 'Customers are there to be diddled.'

Mr Wormwood was a small ratty-looking man whose front teeth stuck out underneath a thin ratty moustache. He liked to wear jackets with large brightly coloured checks and he sported ties that were usually yellow or pale green. 'Now take mileage for instance,' he went on. 'Anyone who's buying a second-hand car, the first thing he wants to know is how many miles it's done. Right?'

‘Right,’ the son said.

‘So I buy an old dump that’s got about a hundred and fifty thousand miles on the clock. I get it cheap. But no one’s going to buy it with a mileage like that, are they? And these days you can’t just take the speedometer out and fiddle the numbers back like you used to ten years ago. They’ve fixed it so it’s impossible to tamper with it unless you’re a ruddy watchmaker or something. So what do I do? I use my brains, laddie, that’s what I do.’

‘How?’ young Michael asked, fascinated. He seemed to have inherited his father’s love of crookery.

‘I sit down and say to myself, how can I convert a mileage reading of one hundred and fifty thousand into only ten thousand without taking the speedometer to pieces? Well, if I were to run the car backwards for long enough then obviously that would do it. The numbers would click backwards, wouldn’t they? But who’s going to drive a flaming car in reverse for thousands and thousands of miles? You couldn’t do it!’

‘Of course you couldn’t,’ young Michael said.

‘So I scratch my head,’ the father said. ‘I use my brains. When you’ve been given a fine brain like I have, you’ve got to use it. And all of a sudden, the answer hits me. I tell you, I felt exactly like that other brilliant fellow must have felt when he discovered penicillin. “Eureka!” I cried. “I’ve got it!”’

‘What did you do, Dad?’ the son asked him.

‘The speedometer,’ Mr Wormwood said, ‘is run off a cable that is coupled up to one of the front wheels. So first I disconnect the cable where it joins the front wheel. Next, I get one of those high-speed electric drills and I couple that up to the end of the cable in such a way that when the drill turns, it turns the cable *backwards*. You got me so far? You following me?’

‘Yes, Daddy,’ young Michael said.

‘These drills run at a tremendous speed,’ the father said, ‘so when I switch on the drill the mileage numbers on the speedo spin backwards at a fantastic rate. I can knock fifty thousand miles off the clock in a few minutes with my high-speed electric drill. And by the time I’ve finished, the car’s only done ten thousand and it’s ready for sale. “She’s almost new,” I say to the customer. “She’s hardly done ten thou. Belonged to an old lady who only used it once a week for shopping.”’

‘Can you really turn the mileage back with an electric drill?’ young Michael asked.

‘I’m telling you trade secrets,’ the father said. ‘So don’t you go talking about this to

anyone else. You don't want me put in jug, do you?'

'I won't tell a soul,' the boy said. 'Do you do this to many cars, Dad?'

'Every single car that comes through my hands gets the treatment,' the father said. 'They all have their mileage cut to under ten thou before they're offered for sale. And to think I invented that all by myself,' he added proudly. 'It's made me a mint.'

Matilda, who had been listening closely, said, 'But Daddy, that's even more dishonest than the sawdust. It's disgusting. You're cheating people who trust you.'

'If you don't like it then don't eat the food in this house,' the father said. 'It's bought with the profits.'

'It's dirty money,' Matilda said. 'I hate it.'

Two red spots appeared on the father's cheeks. 'Who the heck do you think you are,' he shouted, 'the Archbishop of Canterbury or something, preaching to me about honesty? You're just an ignorant little squirt who hasn't the foggiest idea what you're talking about!'

'Quite right, Harry,' the mother said. And to Matilda she said, 'You've got a nerve talking to your father like that. Now keep your nasty mouth shut so we can all watch this programme in peace.'

They were in the living-room eating their suppers on their knees in front of the telly. The suppers were TV dinners in floppy aluminium containers with separate compartments for the stewed meat, the boiled potatoes and the peas. Mrs Wormwood sat munching her meal with her eyes glued to the American soap-opera on the screen. She was a large woman whose hair was dyed platinum blonde except where you could see the mousy-brown bits growing out from the roots. She wore heavy make-up and she had one of those unfortunate bulging figures where the flesh appears to be strapped in all around the body to prevent it from falling out.

'Mummy,' Matilda said, 'would you mind if I ate my supper in the dining-room so I could read my book?'

The father glanced up sharply. 'I would mind!' he snapped. 'Supper is a family gathering and no one leaves the table till it's over!'



‘But we’re not at the table,’ Matilda said. ‘We never are. We’re always eating off our knees and watching the telly.’

‘What’s wrong with watching the telly, may I ask?’ the father said. His voice had suddenly become soft and dangerous.



Matilda didn’t trust herself to answer him, so she kept quiet. She could feel the anger boiling up inside her. She knew it was wrong to hate her parents like this, but she was finding it very hard not to do so. All the reading she had done had given her a view of life that they had never seen. If only they would read a little Dickens or Kipling they would soon discover there was more to life than cheating people and watching television.

Another thing. She resented being told constantly that she was ignorant and stupid when

she knew she wasn't. The anger inside her went on boiling and boiling, and as she lay in bed that night she made a decision. She decided that every time her father or her mother was beastly to her, she would get her own back in some way or another. A small victory or two would help her to tolerate their idiocies and would stop her from going crazy. You must remember that she was still hardly five years old and it is not easy for somebody as small as that to score points against an all-powerful grownup. Even so, she was determined to have a go. Her father, after what had happened in front of the telly that evening, was first on her list.



The Hat and the Superglue

The following morning, just before the father left for his beastly second-hand car garage, Matilda slipped into the cloakroom and got hold of the hat he wore each day to work. She had to stand on her toes and reach up as high as she could with a walking-stick in order to hook the hat off the peg, and even then she only just made it. The hat itself was one of those flat-topped pork-pie jobs with a jay's feather stuck in the hatband and Mr Wormwood was very proud of it. He thought it gave him a rakish daring look, especially when he wore it at an angle with his loud checked jacket and green tie.

Matilda, holding the hat in one hand and a thin tube of Superglue in the other, proceeded to squeeze a line of glue very neatly all round the inside rim of the hat. Then she carefully hooked the hat back on to the peg with the walking-stick. She timed this operation very carefully, applying the glue just as her father was getting up from the breakfast table.

Mr Wormwood didn't notice anything when he put the hat on, but when he arrived at the garage he couldn't get it off. Superglue is very powerful stuff, so powerful it will take your skin off if you pull too hard. Mr Wormwood didn't want to be scalped so he had to keep the hat on his head the whole day long, even when putting sawdust in gear-boxes and fiddling the mileages of cars with his electric drill. In an effort to save face, he adopted a casual attitude hoping that his staff would think that he actually *meant* to keep his hat on all day long just for the heck of it, like gangsters do in the films.

When he got home that evening he still couldn't get the hat off. 'Don't be silly,' his wife said. 'Come here. I'll take it off for you.'



She gave the hat a sharp yank. Mr Wormwood let out a yell that rattled the window-

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