

# Matilda

Roald Dahl



## About the author

Roald Dahl was born in 1916 in South Wales, Britain. His parents were Norwegian immigrants. He trained as a fighter pilot, and during the Second World War, he flew bomber planes in Libya, Greece and Spain. In 1940, Dahl's plane crashed in a Libyan desert, and Dahl suffered serious injuries.

In 1942, Dahl began working at the British Embassy in Washington, DC. While working at the embassy, he met the writer C.S. Forester, who advised him to write about being shot down in a Libyan desert. Dahl immediately wrote his first short story, and ten days later, it was accepted for publication. It was the beginning of what was to become an extraordinary literary career. Dahl soon became a highly successful short story writer. His most famous short story collection is entitled *Kiss Kiss*, which was published in 1959.

In 1953, Dahl married the actress Patricia Neal, and the couple moved to England the following year. They had four children, the oldest of whom died at the age of seven, sending Dahl into a deep depression. Failing to overcome their problems, the couple divorced in 1983, and Dahl remarried several years later.

In 1960, Dahl started writing stories to amuse his children. Many of his children's books went on to become international bestsellers, and children from all over the world began writing to him. In addition, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *The Witches*, *James and the Giant Peach*, *Danny the Champion of the World* and *The BFG* all became successful films, making Dahl one of the most accomplished children's writers in the history of the genre.

Dahl died in 1990 at the age of seventy-four.

## Summary

*Matilda* is a gloriously funny children's book written by Roald Dahl, arguably the most successful children's writer in the English language. In 1996, the book was made into a highly successful film starring Danny DeVito (also the director), Mara Wilson and Rhea Perlman.

*Matilda* is about a very clever little girl named Matilda. She can speak perfectly at the age of one and a half, and by the age of four, she can read complicated adult books. However, Matilda has one problem – her parents are nasty! Her father is a dishonest car dealer, and neither he nor his wife takes an interest in their daughter. In fact, all they want to do is watch TV. Matilda decides to teach her nasty parents a lesson. She glues her father's hat to his head, and then tricks her parents into believing that there is a ghost in the sitting room.

When Matilda is five years old, her parents send her to the local village school, where she finds a friend in her kind – but extremely poor – class teacher, Miss Honey. Miss Honey immediately realises that Matilda is a genius and tries to help her. However, it is difficult for her because the headmistress, Miss Trunchbull, is a terrible bully and doesn't like Matilda. Everyone is terrified of Miss Trunchbull – that is, everyone except Matilda! One day, Matilda realises that she has some very special powers, and she uses these powers to defeat Miss Trunchbull and help Miss Honey.

## Background and themes

Roald Dahl often said that the key to his success as a children's writer was simple – to conspire with children against adults. 'It's the path to their affections,' he said in an interview with a British newspaper in 1990. 'It may be simplistic, but it is the way. Parents and schoolteachers are the enemy. The adult is the enemy of the child because of the awful process of civilising this thing that when it is born is an animal with no manners – no moral sense at all.'

*Matilda* is an excellent example of Dahl's philosophy. In the story, Matilda's parents and her headmistress are conveyed as monsters holding positions of power. They want to hurt the children in their care. Like Dahl's other children's books, *Matilda* depicts the battle between good and evil – between bad adults and innocent, clever children, who always win in the end.

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Dahl's stories are very funny, which makes children love them even more. The evil adults are outrageously bad, and Dahl satirises real life in a way that children recognise and find highly amusing. Normal behaviour is turned upside down. For instance, in the real world, parents often complain that their children spend too much time watching TV. However, Matilda's father insists that she spend *more* time watching TV. In addition, elements of Dahl's stories are exaggerated. For example, Miss Honey is so poor that her tiny sitting room contains no real furniture – only three wooden boxes. Miss Trunchbull has stolen Miss Honey's house and forced her to work for one pound a week. Children recognise the humour, absurdity and injustice of the situation, and because they live constantly under the authority of other people, they tend to respond deeply to any kind of injustice. It is this injustice that Dahl plays on in his stories.

Dahl's stories also echo children's deepest fantasies. Impossible things happen in ordinary situations. For example, Miss Trunchbull picks a child up by her hair in the playground, whirls her above her head and throws her into a field. Then the five-year-old Matilda suddenly acquires magical powers that enable her to defeat the terrifying headmistress and rescue Miss Honey from her poverty. The child has become a powerful hero.

A child's world is a magical place – it has yet to be limited by reality. In Dahl's stories, children overcome the limits of their world, defeat wicked monsters and rescue innocent victims. Dahl originally wrote his stories for his own children, and they certainly made an impression on them. 'The most important quality about my father was his ability to make everything seem like an adventure,' writes his daughter Ophelia.

### Discussion activities

#### Chapters 1–3

##### Before reading

- Discuss:** Ask students if they have ever seen the film version of *Matilda*. *Did you like the film? Why or why not? Do you remember any of the characters in the story?* List the characters the students mention on the board, and then ask them to find pictures of the characters in the book.
- Pair work:** Photocopy the pictures throughout the book – make enough copies so that each pair of students has a copy of every picture in the book. Cut off the captions at the bottom of the pages and then give the pictures and the captions to the pairs. Get them to match the pictures with the captions.

- Discuss:** Divide the class into two groups – one made up of students who have seen the film *Matilda* and one made up of students who haven't seen the film. Then get them to look at the picture on the cover of the book and discuss the following questions:  
*Which person do you think is Matilda? Why do you think this?*  
*Who do you think the other people are? Why do you think this?*  
*What does each person look like?*  
*What kind of clothes is each person wearing?*  
*Which people do you think are good? Why do you think this?*  
*Which people do you think are bad? Why do you think this?*

##### After reading

- Pair work:** Put students into pairs and get them to rename Chapters 1 to 3. They should choose a suitable word, phrase or sentence from each chapter. When they have finished, they should stand up in front of the class and explain why they chose each of the words, phrases or sentences.
- Write:** *Would you like to have the Wormwoods for parents? Why or why not?* Get students to write a sentence to answer these questions.
- Pair work:** Put students into pairs and get them to describe Matilda from the point of view of a) Mr Wormwood and b) Mrs Phelps. Then get them to describe Mr Wormwood from the point of view of a) Matilda and b) Mrs Wormwood. When they have finished, some of the pairs should describe the characters in front of the class.

### Chapters 4–6

##### Before reading

- Pair work:** *Would you like to have Matilda for a sister? Why or why not?* Get students to work in pairs and discuss these questions.
- Guess:** Ask students to predict what will happen to Matilda in Chapters 4, 5 and 6. *Will her parents be nice or nasty to her? Will she play more tricks on them? Will she be happy or sad?*

##### After reading

- Check:** Review students' predictions about what would happen to Matilda in Chapters 4, 5 and 6. Check if their predictions were right or wrong.
- Pair work:** *Who do you think is worse – Mr Wormwood or Miss Trunchbull? Why do you think this?* Get students to work in pairs and discuss these questions.
- Discuss:** *Have you ever had a teacher like Miss Honey? What was she like? Do you think there really are teachers like Miss Trunchbull in the world? Do you think there really are parents like the Wormwoods in the world?* Get students to work in small groups and discuss these questions.

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- 12 Role play:** Put students into pairs and get them to role play the scene in which Miss Honey goes to Miss Trunchbull's office to talk to her about Matilda (from the middle of page 15 to the middle of page 16). When they have finished, some of the pairs should role play the scene in front of the class.
- 13 Role play:** Put students into groups of three. Student A is Matilda, Student B is Lavender and Student C is Hortensia. Lavender and Hortensia should describe Miss Trunchbull to Matilda and tell her stories to support their descriptions of the head teacher.
- 14 Write:** Write the following heading on the board: 'The Best Teacher in the World'. Then put students into pairs and get them to write a paragraph to describe the qualities of 'the best teacher in the world'. When they have finished, some of the pairs should read their paragraphs to the rest of the class.

### Chapters 7–9

#### Before reading

- 15 Pair work:** Put students into pairs. Get them to look at the picture on page 29 and discuss the following questions:  
*What is the house like? Is it big or small? Is it new or old?  
 Is it nice or not nice?  
 Where is the house located?  
 Who do you think lives in the house? Why do you think this?  
 Would you like to live in the house? Why or why not?*
- 16 Discuss:** Ask students to think about why Chapter 7 is called 'Matilda's Eyes'. *What do you think happens to Matilda's eyes in this chapter?*
- 17 Discuss:** Ask students to think about why Chapter 9 is called 'An Unpleasant Surprise for Miss Trunchbull'. *What do you think the unpleasant surprise is? Why do you think it is unpleasant?*
- 18 Discuss:** Get students to look at the picture on page 34. *What do you think has happened to Miss Trunchbull? Why do you think she is lying on the floor with her eyes shut? Why do you think this?*

#### After reading

- 19 Check:** Review students' predictions about why Chapter 7 is called 'Matilda's Eyes', why Chapter 9 is called 'An Unpleasant Surprise for Miss Trunchbull' and why Miss Trunchbull is lying on the floor with her eyes shut in the picture on page 34. Check if their predictions were right or wrong.
- 20 Write:** Put students into pairs and get them to write down a different adjective to describe a) Matilda; b) Mr Wormwood; c) Mrs Wormwood; d) Mrs Phelps; e) Miss Honey and f) Miss Trunchbull. When they have finished, some of the pairs should read their list of adjectives to the rest of the class.