

Roald Dahl's 1988 children's novel *Matilda* was written two years before he died, making it one of the last books he ever wrote. It was written in the small writing shed that he wrote all of his works in, from other classics such as *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, to the screenplays he wrote. Dahl's work is extremely popular with children around the world, consistently being listed as a "good children's author" (Bingle 42). This means that most people have engaged in Dahl's work in some way, they are familiar with the rich world that he creates and the magic he endows to the situations the children in his stories face. Matilda, the titular character, is forced to face the monstrous Miss Trunchbull to stand up for herself, her classmates, and her beloved teacher, Miss Honey. Matilda's journey teaches her how to stand up for herself and others and unlocks magic powers she didn't realize she had.

Matilda was born to clueless parents who didn't want another child, especially not a girl who reads. As soon as they're able to, they send her to Crunchem Hall, a primary school with a fierce headmistress. There she meets a band of friends and her teacher, Miss Honey. She learns that Miss Honey is Miss Trunchbull's niece and that she lost her parents as a child, forcing her to move in with Miss Trunchbull. When Matilda learns that Miss Honey is still in Miss Trunchbull's grasp, as she's stuck paying her aunt back for every penny that she ever spent. Matilda discovers she has telepathy and uses her powers to send the Trunchbull for the hills.

Both the 1996 movie featuring and directed by Danny DeVito, and the musical change aspects of the book's plot. A major difference between the movie and the book is the location. While the book takes place in the United Kingdom, the movie is set entirely in America. There is no specific reason for this and seemingly was a choice by DeVito. The musical changes the character arcs for some of Matilda's school friends, most notably Hortensia. In the book, she is

an older kid who teaches Matilda the ways of Crunchem Hall. She explains the pranks she pulls on the Trunchbull and how she subverts the power structure of the school. This influences Matilda and leads to some of the schemes she pulls on both her parents and Miss Trunchbull. The final major difference between the book and both the movie and the musical is Michael. He's crueler to Matilda in the movie and the musical than he is in the book. While he is their parents favorite, he also understands their neglect. Recently, Netflix adapted the stage musical into a movie version for at home viewers. This version cuts multiple numbers, reducing the Wormwoods and removing Michael entirely.

The Netflix adaptation adds another musical to the trend of creating staged productions of popular musicals for streaming services. While many people are confused by this trend, we've seen multiple iterations of this before. Movie musicals, such as the *Sound of Music* and *Singing in the Rain*, and the live musicals that were streamed on Fox and NBC. There has been an audience for streamed musicals for as long as we've had televisions, and the pandemic heightened those needs for many people. The COVID-19 pandemic was a time when at-home viewing was not only wanted but needed and as we've left the height of the pandemic, many people don't want to give up that access.

Regardless of which adaptation of Dahl's novel one is consuming, they all deal with some difficult themes and topics. Child abuse, gender and misogyny, and the heroism of imperfect children, are all covered in this book written for children. Dahl doesn't sugar coat these topics, which many say is dangerous to the children reading his books. The musical also doesn't shy away from some of the violence that's seen in the books, keeping most of the Trunchbull's violent acts the same. Most notably, the song "Chokey Chant," which outlines the Chokey, a

brutal device the Trunchbull uses to keep children in line. In “Chokey Chant,” the children explain,

They say it’s a cupboard in her office that she throws children into

They say she’s lined it with nails, and spikes, and bits of broke glass...

And when you scream, you don’t know if the sound came out

Or the scream in your head even reached your mouth (Minchin).

While children are known to dramatize scary situations, it’s obvious that these children are telling the truth. The Chokey is just one of the ways the Trunchbull punishes children for their behavior, but it shows the lengths she’s willing to go.

Dahl plays with themes of otherness in childhood and the Trunchbull is a prime example of this. She hates children for the simple act of being children. Children are other than adults and Trunchbull uses this as both their crime and their punishment (Spivey 100). They must acknowledge that there’s nothing they can do to stop themselves from the “crimes” they’re committing. However, when Matilda enters the school, she’s also othered by her powers. She’s able to navigate her otherness from both her peers and her adults, which can be an inspiration to children who feel othered at school or home.

Throughout the book, all the women in Matilda’s life provide different examples for how she should grow up. From the beastly Miss Trunchbull to her mother, Mrs. Wormwood. She is a soap-opera obsessed woman who thinks “a girl should think about making herself look attractive so she can get a good husband later on” (Dahl 91). All the women that Matilda interacts impact her in some way, either by terrifying or nurturing her. Even the librarian, Mrs. Phelps, becomes determined to help this five-year-old girl find a book to read after she’s finished reading the

entire children's section. However, no woman that Matilda engages with is a role model that demonstrates independence and strength. Even Miss Honey, who is epitomized as a "Madonna" (Dahl 60) is not able to stand up for herself. She has to let a five-and-a-half-year-old girl fight her battles.

Even then, that five-year-old girl must pretend to be her father. Instead of any woman in her life using their own power, they have to rely on the concept of a man to save them. Gender in Matilda is often accepted as the gospel, and many characters refuse to leave their gendered stereotypes behind, even when faced with struggle. The only character who subverts the gender binary, Miss Trunchbull, is made a mockery for her looks and her hatred of children. Through his books, he "makes use of gender stereotypes in order to dictate what a good woman should" (Hunt 20). Much of his work carries these themes of 'good' and 'bad' women and shows a disturbing trend in how he viewed them. His longtime editor, Stephen Roxburgh, is credited with "cutting racist and misogynistic content from some of his most famous stories" (McCluskey). This is a disturbing truth, especially since he was creating work specifically for children.

As new editions of his work are being printed, some publishers are making the decision to change the language in these works. While some people are opposed to these edits, the publisher has followed through with them. Doing this allows children to continue to read these works without internalizing some of the negativities that Dahl imposes on them. This will hopefully help with some of the gender inequity in *Matilda*. When transferring the story of Matilda from the page to the stage, Minchin and Kelly took some creative liberties. One of these, is the Acrobat Story sequences.

In the book, Matilda has no narrative power whatsoever, her whole story is told for her by the narrator. This is unlike many of Roald Dahl's other works, where characters tell their stories in the first person. However, in the stage adaptation, the addition of the acrobat and escapologist give her autonomy over her own story. "From the outset of the musical, reading is identified with telling, and Matilda is defined not just as a reader, but also as a storyteller" (Pope 217). The musical gives autonomy back to some of the characters that Dahl took it from by giving them the chance to tell stories. Notably, Matilda "becomes both the creator and the product of her own story" (Pope 218).

The musical adaptation of *Matilda* takes some of the most important parts of the book and melds them with a new version of the story. Matilda's story takes her through a perilous journey of bullies and parents who don't know how to love her. While Dahl's work has some elements that can negatively impact children, notably sexism and other negative ideas, there are also parts of the story that ring true to children around the world. Throughout the musical, Matilda repeats the refrain, "even if you're little you can do a lot" (Minchin). She learns how to stand up for herself and figures out what she can do with what little power she has. By adapting these works to new mediums, we give children these messages and show them stories that can inspire them.

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