

Matilda at 25 | Roald Dahl's bookish heroine is still an inspiration to the quiet girls.

by Chelsey Philpot APRIL 05, 2013

“Hopeless.” That was how Roald Dahl’s longtime editor at Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Stephen Roxburgh, described an early draft of the cantankerous author’s last long chapter book for children. And, once Dahl, who was in poor health and his early 70s, was honest with himself, he, too, realized the novel was all wrong. He started it over again—the first time in his long and celebrated career he ever had to do so. However, the fact that Roxburgh was right did not stop Dahl from pulling the book and taking it to Penguin.

This month, the novel Dahl eventually published, about a 5-year-old genius with telekinetic powers who outsmarts her nincompoop parents and repugnant headmistress, celebrates its 25th anniversary. *Matilda* has undergone numerous cover revamps, spawned a 1996 movie, and inspired an acclaimed musical that makes its Broadway debut this month. Even in its final form, in which (unlike in Dahl’s early draft) the heroine does not die after gambling on horses, the humor of *Matilda* has an edge to it. *Matilda*’s neglectful parents don’t want her; her headmistress, Miss Trunchbull, is a bully; and until she forms a friendship with her teacher, Ms. Honey, she is very much by herself in the world—except for her books. The first time I read *Matilda*, I had a perm and huge pink glasses sliding down my nose. Since then, I have found *Matilda* Wormwood in Hermione Granger, Violet Baudelaire, and every other hero whose first impulse is to solve problems with the power of her brain.

As children we read to escape—to enter fantasy worlds where a bespectacled boy can discover he’s a wizard or a brave girl can find a magical passage through a wardrobe. But we also read to find reflections of ourselves. *Matilda* was the first novel in which I, a shy, bookish child, saw myself. It didn’t matter that I was growing up on a farm in rural New Hampshire and she lived in an English village. I was her. She was me. I was right there beside her as she read alone in her room, sipping from a cup of hot chocolate. When “books transported her into new worlds and introduced her to amazing people who lived exciting lives,” I

went with her, too.

After I realized that there were other kids who had read and loved her story, I was disappointed and a little indignant. *Matilda* was my book. I felt like someone had sold me the Brooklyn Bridge. But by my zillionth reading, I welcomed the kindred spirits. The other kids who got it, who understood why this novel was so (dare I say?) sacred, began to feel like members of the same club instead of competition. *Matilda* captures how Dahl trusted his readers to appreciate the subversive. You got it if you laughed at the ridiculousness of the Trunchbull insisting she was never a baby or the fantastic way the narrator takes apart parents who fail to recognize that “their own child is the most disgusting little blister you could ever imagine.”

In *Matilda*’s craftiness and magical talents, I (and countless other indoor kids) found the promise that someday my reading, my easy friendships with adults, and my natural inclination toward solitude would all pay off. Though I had no need to play tricks on my parents like *Matilda* does to hers, and my efforts to move objects with my mind might not have worked out as hoped, I did take away an important lesson from my frequent rereadings. Mrs. Wormwood might tell Miss Honey, “Looks is more important than books,” but *Matilda*’s success makes obvious how wrong she is. It’s books that pay off in the end.

That *Matilda* was quiet and polite was a welcome change from all the precocious heroines I encountered in most of my other reading. Now I see her in Lemony Snicket’s Violet Baudelaire, and in J.K. Rowling’s library-loving Hermione Granger. After *Matilda*, I discovered and fell in love with Claudia Kincaid from E.L. Konigsburg’s *From the Mixed-Up Files of Ms. Basil E. Frankweiler* and Mary Anne from Anne M. Martin’s *Baby-Sitters Club* series.

Matilda’s dilemma of being smarter than the adults in her life is an exaggeration of the aggravations most children feel at their lack of control over their world. Childhood is

not all candy stores and recess; it's frustrations and confusions, too. "The fact remained," Dahl wrote, "that any 5-year-old girl in any family was always obliged to do as she was told, however asinine the orders might be." Being at the mercy of adults is maddening. You are stuck in this little body that will not let you reach the counter, and are always being told "get down from there" or "that book is too old for you." Normal children are forced to yell, throw tantrums, or sulk in the face of injustice, but Matilda gets to use her telekinesis for revenge after the Trunchbull falsely accuses her of a putting a newt in her water pitcher. Her victory is a victory for any child who has had to follow "asinine orders."

Many, many, many years have passed since I first read *Matilda* while tucked in a corner of a bookstore in Kennebunkport, Maine. Though I have (thankfully) lost the perm and found a pair of glasses that fit a bit better, Dahl is still my favorite childhood author and Matilda is still my geek mascot. But today, I embrace her not only for her nerdiness but for her message. *Matilda* is Dahl's only female-centric work. In *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, Mr. Wonka gives Charlie a candy factory. In *James and the Giant Peach*, James flies across an ocean aided by overgrown insects. And in *The BFG*, Sophie gets help from a friendly giant. But in *Matilda*, a young girl takes on adults all alone—and comes out on top.

For my job as a children's book-reviews editor, I've read more novels and picture books for kids than anyone above the age of 10 can justify. On my bookshelves, Silverstein is squashed between Frost and Lorca. Given what crosses my desk these days, I doubt that *Matilda* would make it out of many an editor's slush pile in the current publishing climate. It goes against too many rules: It's a hard sell to get 9-year-olds interested in a 5-year-old protagonist; the first quarter of the book is episodic; and Matilda doesn't even have supernatural power until Page 165. (Would readers have waited that long for Rick Riordan's Percy Jackson to realize he's a demigod?)

Matilda received good but not glowing reviews when it was first published, and yet it has that unputdownable quality that Dahl strove for with all his writing. When he finished it, he found a calmness that had eluded him with his previous books. According to Donald Sturrock, Dahl's biographer, "After *Matilda*, he no longer felt any great pressure to complete things until he felt they were truly ready." He died two years after its publication. *Matilda*'s lasting popularity—there are 4.5 million copies in print in

the U.S. alone—would have made him more satisfied than Bruce Bogtrotter after the Trunchbull forces him to eat an entire chocolate cake.

Though it cost him friendships, his publisher, and his health, Dahl took *Matilda* from a story where the protagonist is an evil cheater to a novel that proved that he could, for one last time, make kids laugh, make them feel powerful, and play to their basest sense of humor while challenging their highest appreciation for absurdity. In these days where irony is king and thus identifying as a geek is tongue-in-cheek celebrated, it's easy to not recognize what Dahl did earlier than anyone else: With *Matilda*, he made being a nerd cool before being a nerd was cool.

Twenty-five years later, indoor kids everywhere are still cheering for their heroine—albeit quietly.