

## Teacher's notes

# Matilda

by Roald Dahl



## SUMMARY

**M**atilda is a gloriously funny children's book, written by Roald Dahl, the most successful children's writer in the English language. The book was made into a highly successful film in 1996.

*Matilda* is about a very clever little girl called Matilda. She can speak perfectly at the age of one and a half, and read adult books when she is aged four. But Matilda has a problem. Her parents are horrible. Her father is a dishonest car dealer and neither he nor his wife are at all interested in their daughter. All they want to do is watch TV, and that's all they want Matilda to do, too. But Matilda has other ideas. She wants to teach her nasty parents a lesson. She glues her father's hat to his head and 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. There she finds a friend in her kind but poor class teacher, Miss Honey. Miss Honey realizes that Matilda is a genius and tries to help her. It is difficult for her, however, because the headmistress, Mrs Trunchbull, is a terrible bully and does not like Matilda. Everyone is terrified of Mrs Trunchbull - except Matilda. One day, Matilda realizes that she has 'special powers'. She uses these powers to defeat Mrs Trunchbull and help Miss Honey . . .

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Roald Dahl was born in 1916 in South Wales, Britain, the son of 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 crash-landed in the Libyan desert and Dahl suffered serious injuries.

In 1942, Dahl began working at the British Embassy in Washington D.C., USA. There he met the writer C.S. Forester who suggested that Dahl should write about being shot down in the desert. Dahl immediately wrote his first short story; ten days later it was accepted for publication. This was the beginning of Dahl's literary career. He soon became a highly successful short story writer - his most famous short story collection is entitled *Kiss Kiss*, published in 1959.

In 1953, Dahl married the actress Patricia Neal and the couple moved to England the next year. They had four children, the oldest of whom died at the age of seven, sending her father into deep grief. The couple divorced in 1983 and the author remarried.

In 1960, Dahl started writing stories to amuse his children. Many of his books became international bestsellers and children from all over the world wrote to him. In addition, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *The Witches*, and *James and the Giant Peach*, *Danny the Champion of the World*, and *The BFG* all became successful films.

Roald Dahl died in 1990, at the age of 74.

## BACKGROUND AND THEMES

Roald Dahl often said that the key to his success as a children's writer was 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 civilizing this thing that when it is born is an animal with no manners, no moral sense at all.'

*Matilda* is a very good example of Dahl's philosophy. Matilda's parents and her headmistress are monsters who are in positions of power. They are adults seen from the child's point of view; they want to threaten and hurt the children in their care. Dahl's children's books often put good against evil, - bad, bad adults against innocent, clever children who always win in the end.

Dahl's stories are very funny and children love them for this reason. The bad adults are outrageously, comically bad, satirizing real life in a way that children recognize and find highly amusing. The author turns normal behaviour upside down. Parents normally complain that their children watch too much television. Matilda's father, however, insists that she watch it. "And what's wrong with watching the TV?" her father said. His voice was suddenly soft and dangerous. Things in Dahl's stories are exaggerated. Matilda's teacher, Miss Honey, is so poor that her tiny sitting room has no real furniture, only three

E

1

2

3

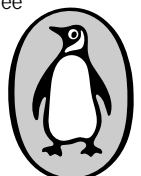
4

5

6

PRE-INTERMEDIATE

MATILDA



## Teacher's notes

boxes. Miss Trunchbull, her aunt, has stolen Miss Honey's house and forced her to work for £1 a week. Children recognize both the humour and absurdity of the situation and the injustice of it. Children, who are in the power of others, are deeply responsive to any kind of injustice, and it is this injustice that Dahl constantly plays on in his stories.

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

The world of a child is a magical one, not yet limited by reality. Did we not dream that we could fly when we were children? In Dahl's stories, children do fly - they overcome the limits of their world, defeat the wicked, and rescue innocent victims. Dahl originally wrote his stories for his own children. His daughter Ophelia writes, 'The most important quality about my father was his ability to make everything seem like an adventure...'

Dahl's stories convert easily to films. All of the films based on Dahl's stories, including *Matilda*, have been very popular with children all over the world.

## Communicative activities

The following teacher-led activities cover the same sections of text as the exercises at the back of the reader, and supplement those exercises. Supplementary exercises covering shorter sections of the book can be found on the photocopiable Student's Activities pages of this Factsheet. These are primarily for use with class readers but, with the exception of discussion and pair/groupwork questions, can also be used by students working in a self-access centre.

## ACTIVITIES BEFORE READING THE BOOK

Photocopy the illustrations on pages 3, 5, 6, 11, 14, 22, and 34, and cut off the captions. Put students into small groups. Give each group a set of photocopied illustrations. Students must match the pictures with the chapter headings on the Contents page. They must also give the reason why they have done this. For example, they might say, 'This picture shows a fat boy eating chocolate cake and Chapter 3 is called 'The Chocolate Cake'. (Note: tell students that two of the chapter headings do not have illustrations.)

## ACTIVITIES AFTER READING A SECTION

## Chapters 1 - 3

- Put students into small groups. They choose another title for each chapter. Each title must be an actual sentence from the chapter. The group must also give the reasons why they chose the sentences.
- Put students into pairs. Students describe Matilda from the point of view of (a) her father (b) Miss Phelps. Then

they describe Mr Wormwood from the point of view of (a) Matilda (b) his wife.

## Chapters 4-6

- Put students into small groups and ask them to answer the following questions.
  - Who do you think is worse, Mr Wormwood or Miss Trunchbull? Explain your reasons.
  - Do you think there really are teachers like Miss Trunchbull?
  - Do you think there really are parents like the Wormwoods?
  - What makes *Matilda* a funny book?
- Put students into small groups. They write a description of 'The best teacher in the world'. Then they read their descriptions out to the class. Some of these could be quite funny!

## Chapters 7-9

Put students into pairs. Ask them to agree on four words to describe each of these people:

- (a) Matilda (b) Mr Wormwood (c) Miss Trunchbull (d) Miss Honey

## ACTIVITIES AFTER READING THE BOOK

- Put students into small groups. Ask them to write a quiz on the book - 10 questions in all. Then each group gives its quiz to another group. The winner is the group that answers its questions the fastest.
- Put students into small groups. Ask them to decide on an animal that each of the four main characters (Matilda, Mr Wormwood, Miss Trunchbull, Miss Honey) are similar to. They must give reasons for their choice. Each group then reads out their choices to the class. Write the animals' names on the board under the character headings.

## Glossary

It will be useful for your students to know the following words. They are practised in the Before You Read sections of the exercises at the back of the book. (Definitions are based on those in the Longman Active Study Dictionary.)

## Chapters 1-3

**backwards** (adv) moving in the opposite way to the usual way

**drill** (n) a machine that is used for making holes in something hard

**gearbox** (n) the part of a car that has gears in it (gears make the car move)

**ghost** (n) if a person dies, he/she may come back to earth as a ghost. People are frightened of ghosts

**glue** (n) this is sticky and joins things together

**parrot** (n) a coloured bird that can speak

**sawdust** (n) very, very small pieces of wood

## Chapters 4-6

**argue** (v) to disagree with someone and shout angrily

**believe** (v) to think that something is true or someone is speaking the truth

**multiply** (v)  $2 \times 2 = 4$ : two multiplied by two is four

**newt** (n) a small animal that has a long body, four legs and a tail, and lives in water

**spell** (v) to form a word by putting the right letters in the right order

## Chapters 7-9

**blackboard** (n) a large, black, smooth piece of wood that teachers write on

**blow up** (v) to break into small pieces

**chalk** (n) teachers write on a blackboard with this

**will** (n) an important letter which says who will receive your money after you die



## Student's activities

Photocopiable

Students can do these exercises alone or with one or more other students.

### Activities before reading the book

- Read the Introduction in your book, then answer these questions:
  - Something 'strange' happens to Matilda. 'After that, Matilda was not frightened of anybody - not even the terrible Miss Trunchbull.' What do you think happens to Matilda? Why isn't she frightened of anybody any more?
  - We learn that Miss Trunchbull is 'frightening.' In what way do you think she is frightening?

### Activities while reading the book

#### CHAPTERS 1 - 3

##### Chapter 1

- Answer these questions.
  - Who are these people?  
Matilda, Mr Wormwood, Michael, Mrs Phelps
  - What can Matilda do at these ages: 1½; 3; 4
  - Why does Mrs Phelps watch Matilda with surprise and excitement?
  - Matilda's father doesn't want her to read books. Why not? Do you think he is a good father? Why/why not?
- Which do you prefer, watching television or reading? Why? Ask your class. How many people prefer reading and how many prefer watching TV? Make a list of names:  
These students prefer reading  
These students prefer watching TV

##### Chapter 2

- Are these sentences right or wrong?
  - Matilda's father buys and sells cars.
  - Matilda's father is an honest man.
  - Matilda's father puts sawdust in the gearboxes of cars.
  - Matilda's father drives cars backwards for thousands of miles.
  - Matilda is angry with her father because he is not honest.
  - Matilda wants to watch TV with her family.
- Discuss these questions.
  - "And what's wrong with watching TV?" her father said. His voice was suddenly soft and dangerous.' Do you think these sentences are funny? Why/why not?

## Matilda



- In your opinion, is there anything wrong with watching TV? Give reasons for your answer.
  - The last line of this chapter is: 'Now it was time to do something.' What do you think Matilda could do?
- What is unusual about Matilda's parents and her life at home? Is your home like this?

##### Chapter 3

- What do you know about these things?
  - Why can't Mr Wormwood take his hat off?
  - What does Mr Wormwood do to Matilda's library book?
  - Why do Mr and Mrs Wormwood run out of the dining room?
  - In this chapter Matilda shows her father that she is very clever. How does she do this?
- There is a picture on page 6. It shows Matilda with her father's hat. Think of another good picture for this chapter. Draw the picture and describe it to a friend.

#### CHAPTERS 4 - 6

##### Chapter 4

- Matilda surprises Miss Honey a lot. Why?
- Answer these questions. The answers are all numbers.
  - How old is Matilda when she goes to school for the first time?
  - How many children are there in Matilda's group?
  - How old is Miss Honey?
  - What is fourteen multiplied by nineteen?
  - How many children in the group can spell 'cat'?
- 'Never argue with her. If you make her angry she will . . . '
  - Who says this?
  - Who is she talking about?
  - Complete the sentence 'If you make her angry she will . . . '
  - Now write five more endings for the sentence. For example: If you make her angry she will eat you for breakfast.

##### Chapter 5

- Answer these questions.
  - Why does Miss Honey go to see Miss Trunchbull?
  - Why does Miss Trunchbull like Mr Wormwood?
  - Miss Trunchbull hasn't met Matilda. Why does she think she is a 'bad girl'?

E

1

2

3

4

5

6

PRE-INTERMEDIATE

MATILDA



## Student's activities

- (d) Why does Miss Honey go to see Matilda's parents?
- (e) Why doesn't Mr Wormwood want to see Miss Honey?
- (f) Miss Honey tells Matilda's parents that she is reading books by Dickens. Why aren't they excited?
- 2 In groups of three, act the conversation between Miss Honey and Mr and Mrs Wormwood.
- 3 Mr and Mrs Wormwood are bad parents. Write down five things that bad parents do. Then write down five things that good parents do.

**Chapter 6**

- 1 Put these sentences in the right order.
- (a) Bruce Bogtrotter eats a large chocolate cake in front of all the children in the school.
- (b) Lavender puts a newt in a glass of water.
- (c) Bruce Bogtrotter goes into the school kitchen and steals Miss Trunchbull's special chocolate cake.
- (d) Miss Trunchbull throws Amanda Thripp into the sky.
- (e) Miss Trunchbull crashes a plate down on Bruce Bogtrotter's head.
- (f) Lavender goes down to the river at the bottom of her garden.
- 2 Which do you think is the funniest part of this chapter? Why? Which person in the chapter do you like best? Why?

## CHAPTERS 7 - 9

**Chapter 7**

- 1 Answer these questions.
- (a) What question does Miss Trunchbull ask Rupert?
- (b) What does she ask Eric to do?
- (c) What two questions does she ask Matilda?
- (d) What question does Miss Trunchbull ask the class, after the glass breaks?
- 2 Work with another student. One of you is Miss Trunchbull, the other is Rupert, Eric and Matilda. Act out the scene in the classroom.

**Chapter 8**

- 1 Answer these questions.
- (a) What does Matilda show Miss Honey that she can do?
- (b) How did Miss Honey's father die? What do you think really happened to him? Why do you think this?
- (c) What bad things did Miss Trunchbull do to Miss Honey?
- (d) Miss Honey's father made a will. Why is it important to find this will?
- (e) Who do you think wrote the letter about the house? Why do you think this?

- 2 Answer these questions.
- (a) At the end of the chapter, Matilda says, 'I want to go home and think about this.'  
What does Matilda mean when she says 'this'?
- (b) Matilda then says, 'I've got a bit of an idea, and ...' What do you think Matilda means?
- (c) What do you think Matilda's idea could be?
- (d) How do you think the story will end?

**Chapter 9**

- 1 Answer these questions.
- (a) When Miss Trunchbull falls on the floor, Matilda thinks, 'I did it.' What did she do?
- (b) Why does Miss Trunchbull leave the school and the village?
- (c) What 'suddenly arrives' at an office? Who do you think sent it?
- (d) Where are Mr and Mrs Wormwood going? Why isn't Miss Honey surprised?
- (e) What happens to Matilda?
- 2 How do you feel when:
- (a) Miss Trunchbull catches Wilfred's feet in her hands?
- (b) The chalk starts moving across the blackboard?
- (c) Miss Trunchbull falls to the floor?
- (d) Nigel pours cold water over Miss Trunchbull?
- (e) Miss Honey gets her house back?
- (f) Mr and Mrs Wormwood say they will leave without Matilda?
- (g) Matilda stays with Miss Honey?
- 3 Look at these names: Wormwood, Trunchbull, Honey. Look up *worm*, *bull* and *honey* in your dictionary. Why do you think Roald Dahl chose these names? Choose new names for these people. Then compare with your friends. Which are your favourite new names?

**Activities after reading the book**

- 1 Which parts of the book do you like the best? Explain why.
- 2 Impossible things happen in *Matilda*. What are they? Write them down. Do you think they are funny? Do you think they make the story better or not?
- 3 Perhaps you have seen the film 'Matilda'. How is the story in the film different from the story in this book?
- 4 Write the conversation that Matilda and Miss Honey could have when they go to Miss Honey's house at the end of the story.

