

Children's responses to heroism in Roald Dahl's *Matilda*

Abstract

The paper presents findings from a small reader response study conducted in February 2013 with 150 children aged 7-11 in which they discussed extracts and clips from Roald Dahl's *Matilda* (1988) and its cinematic adaptation (1996). Dahl and *Matilda* were chosen because they provoke emphatic responses from adults, often commenting on the effects of Dahl upon young readers, and thus exemplify the uneasy interface between adult perception of children's literature, and the child reader. Frequently the criticism and theory applied to children's literature are an adult's comments speculating on the child's interpretation of the child character created by an adult and, with a few exceptions, critical theory surrounding children's literature has shied away from reader response studies.

After reviewing the critical literature surrounding the book and film of *Matilda*, we summarise the responses to these texts given by the children in a variety of formats. The children's understanding of heroism and their responses and reactions to *Matilda* as a hero-character are used to reflect upon the established scholarship. The paper aims to balance literary adult criticism with audience interpretations of this very interesting heroine and in doing so add to our understanding and appreciation of the effect and effectiveness of Dahl's work.

Introduction

Depictions of the child in literature for children are often polarised and dichotomous: for every Horrid Henry there is a Perfect Peter. Roald Dahl is a fascinating author in that his books for children feature child heroes who are very often neither hero nor villain, but a wild, subversive combination of both. Wild, because they are endowed with powers or allies that enable them to take lawless revenge upon abusive or disliked adults. For example, think of George's triumph over his hideous Grandma. Subversive because, as many critics (Worthington 2012, Petzold 1992, Wilkie-Stubbs 1996) note, Dahl's stories are often fairy tales in which the usual cautionary functions are abandoned, empowering the child to radically challenge and even reject the adult world rather than conform. Examples include *Revolting Rhymes*, whose Little Red Riding Hood shoots her wolf herself, and *James and the Giant Peach*, where James effectively has his nasty aunts killed and escapes the 'real' world of oppression for a fantasy world of freedom. Dahl's child heroes and heroines are not helpless victims awaiting rescue by prince or woodcutter: rather they can be, when provoked, avengers who walk energetically off the beaten track, go looking for their threatening giants and wicked step-parents and retaliate aggressively against maltreatment, not relying upon adults or the rule of law.

This paper discusses a child character who has been viewed as both good and bad; both heroine and wrong-doer: *Matilda*, from Dahl's 1988 novel of that name. *Matilda* is a super-intelligent child (aged 5½ in Dahl's book and 6½ in the 1996 movie) who is ridiculed and mistreated by her ignorant parents, then terrorised by her headmistress, Miss Trunchbull. She is the archetypal oppressed child hero of the fairy tale, 'isolated, but with the capacity of universal relationships' (Petzold, 1992, p.186). But, as her mistreatment by adults puts her under increasing pressure, she begins to punish her parents, and later develops supernatural powers which enable her to take

revenge upon Miss Trunchbull. The successful film (De Vito, 1996) recreates the final dismissal of Trunchbull as an even more humiliating punishment, in which all the school children join in Matilda's fight, forcing Trunchbull to run from a tsunami of thrown missiles. However humorously delivered, there is a vindictive spirit at work in both book and film.

There is a great deal of tension within Matilda's character, making her interesting for the critic of children's literature, and for teachers who may wish to use these texts with young readers. However, when theorists or critics talk about the tones, styles, messages and impacts of children's literature, they are of course writing from the perspective of an adult. A central tension in the creation and study of children's literature is the relationship between the adult (primarily writers and critics, but also all the other adults who play a role in promoting, distributing, praising and berating children's books), and the child reader. The stance of adult critics, who pronounce upon the value to children of children's books, is often problematic—the adult commenting on the child's interpretation of the child character/s created by an adult. This strained relationship between children's literature, criticism and children is apparent in adult perceptions of Dahl's children's books, as we shall see as this paper progresses.

Rather than rely on the extant literature to tell us about Matilda, we wanted to find out what Dahl's child audience feel. In the field of children's literature generally there is an almost total lack of material around children's responses: as David Rudd (1992, p.15) notes, in his study of children's responses to Dahl's *The Twits*, children are rarely consulted when their literature is being discussed. In 1992 Rudd argues that empirical work is 'remarkably absent amongst both literary and social critics' (p.16), and in 2014 that situation does not appear to have changed much. So, with the critical context in mind and wanting to give children a voice, we wondered, what does Dahl's audience make of her particular brand of heroism: are they pleased to see a character like Matilda behaving badly yet still winning? In this paper, we first review the critical literature around the heroic/subversive character of Matilda, and then we report upon a reader response study that was carried out in February 2013 with primary school children. The aim is to balance literary adult criticism with audience interpretations of this very interesting heroine and, in doing so, perhaps add to our understanding and appreciation of affective responses to Dahl's work.

Given the translation of *Matilda* into a successful film and, more recently, a West End musical, critics' and children's engagement with Dahl's narratives crosses media, and so our literature review and investigation considers both the book and film of *Matilda*, as will be explained.

The critical context

Critical consideration of Dahl has ranged from vitriolic attacks to a more thoughtful analysis of Dahl's deep-rooted mistrust of adult institutions, his understanding of the nature of children, and his use of caricature and pantomime. Dahl's depiction of children and adults as antagonists is at the root of this critical stand-off. Dahl himself said, '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' (Dahl, 1990). In Dahl's idiosyncratic fairy tales, children are pitted against wicked adults who seek to control and abuse them. When it comes to self-preservation,

Matilda indeed has few morals: employing physically painful tricks, supernatural terror, and even animal abuse in her revenge. This angelic and innocent victim becomes a fully conscious nemesis as the story progresses.

Dahl has therefore attracted criticism from adults who fear his intentions and are worried that their children will be corrupted by the devilish retribution which Matilda, and Dahl's other feisty child heroes take upon unpleasant adults. As Peter Hunt suggests: 'Can such a zestful exploitation of childish instincts for hate and revenge, prejudice and violence, be as innocent as it appears?' (Hunt, 2001, p.57). Also conflating one aspect of Dahl with another, Alex Carnevale (2011) uses scrutiny of Dahl's biography to attack Dahl's literature generally, with special bile reserved for the gestation of *Matilda*:

the original draft of the book painted the protagonist as a devilish little hussy who only later becomes "clever", perhaps because she found herself without very much to do after torturing her parents.

Other critics have also accused Dahl of writing unheroic characters: Sarland claims that Dahl's 'protagonists are heroines and heroes primarily because that is their plot role, not because there is anything in their psychological makeup that makes them inherently "heroic"' (1999, p.37).

Dahl's tone also comes under attack. Heather Worthington (2012) refers to a 'slippage in Dahl's writing, between his adult and child registers' (p.127), which seems to point to the previously mentioned tension between adult writer and child audience, and which contributes to adult anxieties about the suitability of Dahl's work.

Worthington also notes that themes from Dahl's adult books, such as crime and violence, appear in his children's writing. With this aspect of Dahl's output in mind, Hunt (2001) and Worthington (2012) suggest that Dahl should be read with a wary eye. Worthington claims that Dahl's fiction seems to condone law-breaking and might act as a 'negative influence' (p.133), implying that certain children might be encouraged to commit crime. Dahl, Worthington argues, only 'gets away' with the crime and violence enacted by his child characters because of the fairy tale settings and plots (p.124). Hunt (2001, p.58) suggests that Dahl's 'fierce psychological realism shifts his fantasy onto an uncomfortable plane', and goes on to cite several of Dahl's books as possible sources of discomfort for their readers.

Along similar lines, critical responses to Danny De Vito's 1996 film of *Matilda* have noted the film's extremity and the way it 'captures [the] wickedness' of the book (Wilmington, 1996) – unlike other Dahl adaptations, such as 'Disney's glowy, gossamer adaptation of *James and the Giant Peach*' (Rea, 1996) in which characters and actions 'are inevitably softened and smoothed' (Lawson, 1996). The overriding feeling seems to be that 'this film was very much the same story Dahl intended' (Eorio, 2012).

Despite this, it should be noted that significant alterations are made to the film's storyline, most notably the move from 'a sleepy village in England to the blaring strip-mall brightness of suburban America' (Eorio, 2012), the addition of De Vito as an external voice-over narrator (distinct from his character of Mr Wormwood), the removal of the parrot-up-the-chimney scene, the addition of a scene in which Matilda breaks into Trunchbull's house, and the rewriting of Trunchbull's final defeat into much more of a joint effort by the entire school of children. However, the book's narrative arc and Dahl's larger-than-life 'caricatures' (Wilmington, 1996) are

preserved: Rea (1996) draws attention to the way ‘DeVito sticks the cameras right up against the hairy nostrils of his child-hating grownups: Harry and Zinnia Wormwood and Agatha Trunchbull (Pam Ferris), Matilda’s towering terror of a school principal. (The movie is full of fish-eye close-ups, cartoonish caricatures of authority figures.)’ Low camera angles and close-ups are used throughout to give a sense of menace to Trunchbull, and dark shadows and skewed angles enhance the trapped feeling of Matilda’s home.

Rea comments:

I’m not sure what kids are going to make of *Matilda* and its perception of an adult world crawling with menacing, malevolent despots. They’ll probably love it - and the film’s resourceful, resilient star. Parents, on the other hand, might be squirming in their seats from DeVito’s unrelenting send-up of the crass and the cruel.

One reviewer, at the far end of negative reactions to *Matilda*, also speculates about children’s response to the film, saying:

Glamorizing (Matilda’s) negative attitude toward parents and school and resolving it by separation sends a message that my children don’t need to hear. (Bates, undated)

On the other hand, Matilda is one of Dahl’s most popular characters, having been reborn in feature film and musical. An underdog protagonist of the type so often used by Dahl, she is seen by many critics as heroic. Mark West (1992) claims she is the ‘noblest’ (p.93) of all Dahl’s heroes: ‘There is a heroic quality to Matilda’s character that is even more impressive than her incredible intelligence’ (p.92). She is fighting against tyranny, West argues, and ‘it is her indomitable spirit that makes her a hero’ (p.92). Worthington (2012, p.126) agrees with West, saying, ‘Justice is often implicit in the revenge that is at the centre of much of Dahl’s fiction’. In Matilda’s case, ‘A small victory or two would help her tolerate their idiocies and stop her from going crazy’ (Dahl, 1988, p.29).

Hunt also balances fears around Dahl’s writing with the argument that Dahl himself said he was writing farce and pantomime, and that, therefore, the violent and vengeful acts of his child heroes would not be read as a blueprint for actual life, but as ‘cartoon effects’ (Hunt, 2001, p.57).

Ultimately Worthington (2012, p.124) argues that *Matilda* is ‘suitable’ for children, and contends that his work offers cathartic positions which

allow child readers a safe space in which to explore their personal and social anxieties and to vent, in their imagination and/or unconsciously, their own feelings of anger and resentment towards the adults who control their world (p124).

She even goes as far as saying that *Matilda* has ‘bibliotherapeutic’ (p.128) qualities, quite the opposite effect to that which some critics believe the books might produce. But even this is a view based on intellectual reasoning and, ultimately, speculation – how does Worthington know that Matilda might be bibliotherapeutic for child readers?

So it is a mixed picture, as far as the adults are concerned, and critics do not agree upon how children respond to Dahl's work. Matilda, the noble heroine or vengeful dark angel, might do children a cathartic good, or may damage their innocent minds with thoughts of rebellion and revenge. In terms of the impact that a character such as Matilda might have upon child readers, the existing critical literature predominantly makes assumptions based on textual analysis and arguments around media effects, but, of course, no feedback from child readers themselves. With these critical positions in mind, we now move on to consider the results of our reader response project, conducted in January and February 2013 at three Dorset primary schools.

Methodology

We worked with 150 students across seven classes, and three schools (5 x Year 6, i.e. 10/11 year-olds; plus 2 x Year 3, i.e. 7/8 year-olds). Our procedure was first to conduct a twenty-minute whole-class discussion on the topic of heroes (in fiction primarily, but also in films and in the real world). We then showed fifteen minutes of clips from the film *Matilda* (1996), selecting scenes that followed the arc of the novel by demonstrating Matilda's home life, her intelligence and powers, and her ultimate retaliation against the behaviour of her parents and Miss Trunchbull (see Appendix 1 for a detailed breakdown of the clips that were shown). We conducted ethnographic research at this point, observing and noting down the children's reactions. Finally, to complete the one-hour session, we asked the pupils to complete individual questionnaires, with a further worksheet for the speedier pupils (see figure 1), asking them to reflect on Matilda's actions in their own words, and to give further thoughts about the nature of Matilda's heroism and heroes more generally.

We made the decision to use clips from the film to stimulate the work done subsequently with the questionnaire, due to time constraints within the school day, and to mitigate the different ages and reading levels of the children. Clearly, a different approach would be to spend time with just the novel: but the reality of children's engagement with Dahl's narratives comes via both book and film. Many of the answers given in the questionnaire (for example Matilda breaking into Trunchbull's house) referred to events not shown in our clips and so this study takes place against a backdrop of an informed interpretative community (Fish, 1976) that draws on multiple sources in its reader response.

However, the clips we showed were selected to mirror the narrative of the book as far as possible. For example we removed Danny de Vito's voice-over that justifies Matilda's revenge ('Harry Wormwood had unintentionally given his daughter the first practical advice she could use. He had meant to say, "When a child is bad". Instead he said, "When a person is bad", and thereby introduced a revolutionary idea: that children could punish their parents. Only when they deserved it, of course'). However, the 'viciously funny caricatures' (Wilmington, 1996) remain and critics conclude that De Vito's *Matilda* is a 'faithful reading' (Rea, 1996) of Dahl, thus the questionable status of Matilda's heroism is evident in film as in book.

For the purposes of this study, data was needed about the experiences and interpretations of individuals on a large enough scale to enable useful conclusions to be formed. As Thomas Lindlof points out, 'one does generalize in qualitative research, but not in a way that tries to attain the scope of a universal law' (Lindlof, 1995, p.57). Therefore, our sessions combined qualitative focused discussion, with

some structured writing, and from those sessions we gained data which provided both qualitative and quantitative findings. By using three methods to gain responses, we effectively ‘triangulated’ our research.

[Insert Figure 1: Questionnaire and worksheet]

The group discussion is a staple of reading groups and book clubs and, of course, classrooms: one argument for using such a tool therefore is that it would be a familiar and unthreatening way to involve young readers or viewers in an exploration of their reactions to *Matilda*. Lindlof argues that focus groups can ‘create settings in which diverse perceptions, judgements, and experiences concerning particular topics can surface’ (Lindlof, 1995, p.174), which was exactly what we hoped for. The discussion grew around the question of ‘What is a hero?’, where we asked questions and followed new threads as the children raised them. For example, the children quickly wanted to talk about the difference between ‘super’ heroes such as Batman, and ‘ordinary’ heroes like their parents, so this was covered in every class.

Puchta and Potter (2004) state that the researcher’s task is to balance control of the discussion, discouraging irrelevant material, whilst encouraging participation. In practice, this last duty was fairly easy, since all the participants were very keen to have their say. We were aware that it is possible that participants could be influenced by other group members to say certain things, perhaps following what appears to be a consensus. Indeed some children were more talkative than others, and it was possible to see pockets of consensus emerging as the more confident children led the conversations. To counter this, during the discussion sessions we ensured that each group member had a chance to speak, and that individual opinions were always given credence, and in fact the young readers did not always agree with each other’s perceptions of heroes in various worlds, ranging from films through books to real life.

In addition to the discussions, a questionnaire was used to gain individual responses from all the children. Several empirical studies from literary research have used post-reading questionnaires as a way of structuring the gathering of data, helping to reveal patterns and themes in readers’ concerns (Miall and Kuiken, 1995; Nell, 1988). Judith Bell (1999, p.119) points out that ‘the more structured a question, the easier it will be to analyse’, and Martin Denscombe (1998) notes that structured, closed questions provide ‘pre-coded’ data which can easily be analysed. However, we also wanted pupils to be able to ‘speak their minds’, so we wrote a very simple type of questionnaire (see figure 1) which directed the children to answer questions in such a way that they could follow-up the whole-class discussion using their own words, and give more personal opinions than perhaps the group experience might provide. We used ‘gapped’ sentences, simple questions, and yes/no questions, to allow a range of types of age-appropriate responses. The point of the questionnaires was not to provide large-scale quantitative data which could be extrapolated out to the general population of all readers everywhere; but to expose quickly visible trends within these participants’ responses which could be explored more deeply in the subsequent analysis.

We also created a worksheet with an extract from the novel *Matilda* (see figure 1) asking the children for their thoughts on Matilda’s actions. This ‘extra’ source of response gave us rich qualitative material. It should be pointed out that not all the children had time to complete this task, so the responses we gained here were used as supplementary, rather than core, data. The use of the questionnaire and worksheet

was thus an attempt to capture affective responses to the narrative in qualitative and quantitative form that further informed the issues raised in group discussion.

In any empirical research, the question of sampling is significant: David Silverman (2005) points out that ‘many qualitative researchers... seek out groups, settings and individuals where... the processes being studied are most likely to occur’ (p.48). It was thus logical to seek out groups of children who were reading and studying *Matilda* and/or other Dahl books within their curriculum. The school teachers were very helpful in this regard, and we were able to speak with children who knew the story of *Matilda* well. Many of the Year 6 pupils had read *Matilda*; not surprisingly, and almost all knew the film. Our sample thus represents Dorset children familiar with multiple versions of *Matilda* and studying under the 2013 curriculum.

The literature around reader response research (I.A. Richards (1924), Wolfgang Iser (1976), and Stanley Fish (1970)) all gives, in varying degrees, status to the ‘informed’ reader. Although Fish may have recanted the informed reader concept, and we do not argue that only ‘informed’ readers’ views can be considered valid in the study of literary responses, for this study’s objectives to be met it was necessary that readers did know something about *Matilda* and other kinds of heroes, because it would be extremely difficult for them to comment on the ways in which heroes are presented, or the ways in which fictional heroes affect them as readers, if they did not have some prior knowledge. This follows Fish’s well-known concept of the interpretive community (1976) which we feel has real application in our study, as the children certainly did react to each other’s ideas about *Matilda*, as we will see below. So we conferred with the class teachers before we met with the pupils, to make sure our lines of discussion and questioning would make sense for the pupils.

We also noted the later reader response work of Benton and Fox (1985) which argues that readers enter a ‘secondary world’ located ‘in an area of play activity between the reader's inner reality and the outer reality of the words on the page’ (Benton and Fox 1985). These critics thus define reading as highly individual and note the importance of changing impressions and ‘mind’s eye pictures’ during the ‘journey’ of reading. They consider the contrast between readers’ initial impressions and their later opinions, drawing on written responses recorded individually, and those discussed and shared in groups, and so our study took in both formats.

Following our visits to the schools, the class discussions were recorded and transcribed, and then the transcripts and the questionnaire sheets were analysed for emerging patterns and themes. There were no prior assumptions, so the data led the analysis. This was undertaken using the ‘data reduction’ approach of Michael Huberman and Matthew Miles (1994). This sequence moves the data from its bulky, unprocessed state into smaller, usable chunks which more easily lend themselves to analysis and discussion.

Alongside the above sequence, ‘analytic coding’ (Denscombe, 1998, p.211) was carried out: this places the data in more viewable categories. Given that coding in itself is a selective and interpretive exercise on the part of the researcher, there is also the risk, sometimes seen as a weakness of qualitative analysis, that a few telling examples might be used to support analytical argument (Silverman, 2001), rather than allow the reader to ‘see’ in full the data that was generated. To minimise the risk of ‘pre’ coding by subjective selection of data elements, categorisation of the discussion and questionnaire data was developed from the data itself, by initially noting *every* substantive comment made by a respondent. Each substantive comment from all three data sources (the transcription and two worksheets) was referenced, and then initially

placed in a category. These initial categories were suggested by the gradual occurrence and recurrence of respondents' comments, and were continually modified until we were satisfied that the categories (or analytic codes) made sense in terms of common and key themes respondents were themselves raising.

So, for example, when coding the response in the questionnaires, initially the word 'intelligent' as a description of Matilda served as a category, but other words soon appeared, to describe Matilda's cerebral qualities, such as 'clever', 'smart' or 'brainy'. These were all grouped together and regarded as one category (see the appendices for an illustration of how this process generated final collated data).

Inevitably, there are some limiting issues to be considered: it is clear that the researchers' presence in the classroom discussion sessions would influence to some extent what was said by participants and therefore what data might be gathered. The design of the questionnaire was clearly heavily influenced by researcher decisions. These aspects of the research design might be seen as threats to reliability.

However, although of course we did decide upon which questions to ask in the discussion, and in the questionnaire, we certainly did allow every child to offer their own answers and comments, and we followed threads of discussion that appeared. The questionnaire and worksheet, although structured to allow for later coding analysis, did also provide the pupils with space for their own thoughts to emerge. It is thus believed that researcher influence was reduced to an acceptable minimum, and that this study is reliable.

The conclusions in this report reflect the natural endpoint of a journey which we as researchers have taken, from a question ('what sort of a heroine is Matilda?'), leading to a literature review, leading to a further question ('how do children themselves regard Matilda?') leading to a research methodology and fieldwork. It is hoped that this approach regarding any findings lends to this study the reality of readers' own responses to a literary text. That is the overall philosophy of the study.

Findings and discussion

- *Defining heroism*

In general discussion about heroes and what makes a hero, children tended towards listing fictional or famous characters, people they knew personally, or defined this through heroic or altruistic acts. Their answers showed that they were not conflating 'hero' with 'protagonist', despite Sarland's comments on Dahl discussed above. All of the group discussions began with a list of superheroes (Superman, Batman, Spiderman and so forth) and had to be guided away from this. This emphasis on the literal was significantly more prominent in the Year 3 children. Soldiers and sporting heroes also featured prominently. The quantitative data taken from individual questionnaires (see Appendix 2) showed that children's answers were largely constructed by the news and entertainment media (sporting heroes and superheroes) and personal experience (parents and family). Superheroes dominated the Year 3 responses (73%), while parents were the most common answer given in Year 6 (66%). A typical group discussion moved from listing fictional superhero characters to known people such as 'My mum, because I feel safe with her', or relatives who had heroic professions (fireman and similar) or had performed heroic acts. Professions were mentioned along with supportive reasoning, such as 'A doctor would be a hero because they save people'.

After prompting with further questions such as ‘Could you be a hero?’ children demonstrated a sophisticated understanding in discussion that this title was based on actions and that these could vary widely: ‘It’s just helping the people that need it.’ They pointed out that ‘you could do something really complicated like save somebody’s life, but you could also help somebody, like maybe an older person, cross the road, that would kind of help you be a hero.’ There was a tendency to privilege the dramatic (‘saving people’s lives’; ‘helping people’; ‘saving them from a fiery building’) but this was teamed with an awareness that ‘a hero doesn’t have to be like a super hero it can be like an ordinary person’, and ‘you don’t need like special powers or anything’. The quantitative data from the individual worksheets (see Appendix 2) showed a much stronger focus on superficial elements (for example ‘powers’) in Year 3 (53%) as opposed to personality (such as ‘being kind’) in Year 6 (48%). However, the single most common answer given by the Year 3 children was ‘to save people’ so perhaps powers were being cited primarily as a means to do so.

- *Matilda and heroism*

We then asked children to consider Matilda’s character, asking whether they thought she was a hero (or not), and why. The majority of both ages thought she was definitely a hero (82% of Year 3, and 92% of Year 6), but reasoning here seemed split between her attributes and her actions (see Appendix 2). ‘Her power’ or ‘her eyes’ were the most dominant answers given in the oral discussions by Year 3 (44%), although the Year 6 children took this point further, with only 8% citing her ‘magic powers’ while 80% argued that it was the use she made of these which made Matilda heroic: ‘she saved her new friends’. The reasons given for claiming she was not a hero were limited to her bad behaviour (breaking and entering, mean tricks) or no response was given.

There was some disagreement however, and some children felt that Matilda’s other actions made her less heroic, pointing out that ‘she just abandons her family, oh no I don’t need you any more’ which was felt to be ‘a bit harsh’. A minority in each group seemed to dislike her as a character: ‘she’s a show off’, or ‘she’s wicked to the family, to get her revenge, and to her teacher. The only real hero is Miss Honey’. One group had a very vocal minority who strongly adopted the idea that Miss Honey was the real hero of the piece (‘Miss Honey is one of the heroes because at the end she takes in Matilda and looks after her, because her family aren’t nice to her’). In trying to rationalise Matilda’s dubious status, one child concluded, ‘I think she’s not a hero, but she still has powers, so she’s technically a supervillain’.

In both Year 3 and Year 6 the majority of children, however, argued the case for Matilda as a hero, and seemed willing to overlook her less positive qualities. For example they commented, ‘she could be a hero and like not always make the right choices, because like nobody’s perfect’ and pointed out, ‘you can be a hero and be naughty, but not too naughty because if you are too naughty you’re going to be bad.’ They summarised: ‘you need to be like a nice person, there’s no such thing as a bad hero.’

Refocusing the group discussion on her actions led them to reflect further on the things she did, with mixed feelings: ‘when the headteacher came to see their class Matilda put a newt in the water’ (although it is in fact Lavender that does this). Some of the older children disagreed strongly on this point (in terms of Miss Trunchbull’s feelings, and also as regards cruelty to the newt): ‘that was a nice thing’, ‘a naughty thing’, ‘good and bad’, ‘she’s a horrible lady but it’s kind of naughty’.

Overall, the older children viewed Matilda as heroic while acknowledging and

trying to justify her more negative acts. Matilda was deemed a hero because 'she has powers as well as helping children by getting rid of Miss Trunchbull' or because 'she saves people from Miss Trunchbull. However she does do bad things because she breaks into Miss Trunchbull's house'. Another child commented that 'she saved her friends however she did take Mrs Trunchbull's punishment a bit far'. Justice was a clearly felt concept, for example: 'she [Matilda] might not save the whole world or save someone from a burning building but she heped [*sic*] all of her classmates and she also defeated the baddy witch [*sic*] was the Miss Trunchbull and if they were mean to her she could be mean back'. However the contradiction here was acknowledged too, and another child pointed out that Matilda is 'not like any other superheroes because she douse [*sic*] not always use her powers for good things'.

There was a divide between the older and younger children in whether they felt Matilda was like other heroes. The majority of Year 3 felt that she was like other heroes (62%), whereas only the majority of Year 6 felt that she was not (64%). However, the reasoning for viewing her as unlike other heroes was quite superficial: as one Year 6 student said: 'she is not like other heroes because she is a normal person and she goes to school'. There were lots of similar responses, including reasons such as: 'her powers are not like other heroes'; she is 'just a kid'; she is 'normal'; she 'can't fly'; she 'goes to school'; she is 'too young' and so forth.

That said, there was also some deeper reflection on her actions and behaviour. Matilda was felt to be like other heroes because 'she seyvs [*saves*] the school' and parallels were drawn with heroes such as the Incredible Hulk because 'the Hulk gets angry and turns into a monster and it is strong like Matilda her eye is strong'. Other students had problems with the idea that a hero could use their powers for things considered wrong, (she is 'not like any other superheroes because she douse [*does*] not always use her powers for good things') and one respondent suggested that Matilda is 'not like any other heroes because she uses her power not for the right thing. And they go'. This creation of cause and effect (that her powers are removed because she does not use them correctly) is not present in either the book or the film (in the book Matilda's powers fade due to her intelligence finding another outlet; the film ends with her still having her powers) thus it is interesting that children extended their notion of justice to create this interpretation.

When asked for examples of other controversial heroes in the group discussion, the children cited characters such as, 'The Incredible Hulk, when he's angry, he ... destroys everything around him, even like civilians'; 'The Penguin, the baddy from Batman ... at the beginning he's horrible but at the end he comes good and does something'; 'Catwoman ... she has a bit of a bad side ... she's actually quite good; she helps Batman at the end'; 'Hercules, he saves Meg ... a hero might save someone's life and then they might get a reward or something. So Hercules got a reward of being one of the gods'; 'Men in Black ... because they kill the aliens ... because they can take over our world'; and (more confusingly) 'Daleks ... but they're bad guys ... well people that fight the Daleks are obviously heroes to the other people.' The majority of examples given were based on movies or television shows where heroic identity is obviously clearly coded and stated; however it is interesting to note that the older children had a more subtle understanding of right and wrong and allowed that different 'sides' could each have their own heroes.

When asked to focus specifically on Matilda's non-heroic actions, the most common answer given was the tricks she played on her family and Miss Trunchbull, which scored nearly twice as highly as the other answers given (55% of year 3 and 59% of year 6 said this). Additionally, 36% Year 3 felt quite strongly that being

‘normal’ meant she couldn’t be a hero (while Year 6 did not rate this as a reason). Both identified that her behaviour could prevent her being viewed as a hero although this was felt much more strongly in Year 6. For example, an unheroic thing she does is ‘put superglue in her Dad’s hat’ or that ‘she’s very naughty and uses her powers for stuff that’s wrong’. Another respondent combined both points, saying that ‘she goes to school and brakes [breaks] into a house without poission [permission].’ However, following their previous reasoning that Matilda is not like other heroes as she is a schoolgirl, many Year 6 children wrote down ‘reading books’ and other ‘normal’ activities for unheroic things, taking the question very literally.

- *Response to character*

Moving away from definitions of heroism, we also asked the children to describe both Matilda and Miss Trunchbull. Characters’ nature dominated here for Year 6, for whom Matilda’s intelligence was the most frequent answer given (40%). Year 3, however, favoured behavioural traits such as kindness (50%), which was also a popular answer with Year 6 children (22%), along with bravery (21%). This seems to indicate that, despite the qualitative comments made in group discussion, for the older children behaviour was less important than nature or personality as a character descriptor. The younger children were also more inclined to use superlatives such as ‘amazing’ or ‘fantastic’ (24%) which barely featured in the responses from the older children. Matilda’s powers were cited fairly evenly by both groups but were felt to be not as descriptive of the character as personality traits.

A similar question was then asked regarding Miss Trunchbull. Here, behaviour (nasty, mean, angry) dominated in both groups (75% of Year 3 and 63% of Year 6) but there was a much greater emphasis on appearance (fat, ugly, big) which scored second-highest in both age groups (20% of Year 3 and 23% of Year 6). The character’s nature/personality (evil, bad) was less important in both groups (5% of Year 3 and 15% of Year 6). Again this distribution shows that Year 3 put greater emphasis on tangible qualities (behaviour and appearance) rather than personality/nature. None of these options were provided by the researchers; the children chose their own words to complete the questionnaire throughout.

However the spread of results as a whole seems to indicate that children felt that Miss Trunchbull was characterised predominantly by her behaviour and appearance, perhaps because she is a much less subtly focalized character in book and film, whereas Matilda was identified more by her nature (by the older children) and her behaviour (by the younger ones). As noted, Benton and Fox (1985) argue influentially that reading can promote more subtle awareness of human behaviours, and so the more subtle attitude of our older readers supports this theoretical model. They define the activity of reading as a process of picturing, anticipating and retrospectively, interacting and evaluating; which is consistent with our findings that older readers were able to offer a more subtle evaluation (based on character and nature, rather than behaviour and appearance) than the younger participants.

Conclusions

In discussing concepts of heroism and Matilda with young readers, we found that they were overwhelmingly able to see the ‘justice’ in Matilda’s acts. However, they were also aware that not everything Matilda does is heroic. They offered other solutions (for example that she should talk to her parents), but the majority felt that because

Matilda's actions were justified, she was a hero. From this, we would argue that they responded much more to Dahl's sense of conservatism and justice than the anarchy and naughtiness or the crime and violence that some adult critics fear seeps through from Dahl's adult writing and contaminates his work for children. The children used sophisticated reasoning to argue that Matilda could remain a hero despite not always doing 'the right thing', although younger respondents in particular were more likely to be very literal in their responses, for example in referring predominantly to superheroes in their thoughts about heroism in literature and life. Their thoughts about heroism also seemed more strongly influenced by the news and entertainment media than those of the older children.

In relation to the range of perceptions provided by the adults, what might we conclude? On the one hand, we found no evidence to support those who fear Dahl's intentions and the potential negative effects on children (Bates, undated; Carnevale, 2011; Hunt, 2001). The young readers in our study not only had a clear sense of right and wrong, they also understood that heroes in any world have to demonstrate a range of attributes, and have to deal with their environment in appropriate ways. So, Matilda, fighting against oppression, aiding her peers to gain freedom from tyranny, is a heroine: but equally, our respondents also saw that at times Matilda goes too far. We would say that this a very well balanced response to a fictional character who, in the eyes of some nervous adults, is dangerous and unsuitable. Clearly, our readers will have been influenced in their interpretations of the fictions by their socio-cultural backgrounds (and we did not take account of these variables in our study); but across the groups and the age range there was a strong consistency in this ability to read into the complexity of Matilda's position and actions, demonstrating a more subtle awareness of human behaviours.

On the other hand, there is also little to support the idea that Matilda could be a 'bibliotherapeutic' (Worthington, 2012) influence: our respondents know she is out of the ordinary, they know the world of Matilda is part realistic, part fantasy, and this of course supports Dahl's own contentions (Hunt, 2011, p.57). Worthington's contention is simply based on the received wisdom that literature can teach us and influence our real-world behaviour – this is not able to be supported within our data set. Nonetheless, and perhaps more clearly evidencing affect in relation to *Matilda*, our ethnographic research did note cathartic responses (Worthington, 2012) from the children while watching the clips of the movie. For example, they were tense, leaning forward at moments of danger such as when Trunchbull throws a child over the school fence (gasps, wincing, worried faces, open mouths, even 'Oh no I hate this bit'), but this changed to relief when the child clears the spiked fence ('She was lucky'). Many participated in the movie: predicting scenes ('She's gonna put glue on his hat'), repeating lines ('Good loft, excellent release'), commenting on things they recognized ('Cheerios!'), providing sound effects ('Ouch!' 'Bang!'), and even changing their posture (when Trunchbull shouts at the class 'Stomach in, shoulders back!'). They were engrossed as Matilda discovers her powers, and wide-eyed when she uses them to terrify Trunchbull by writing on the blackboard. Finally, there was a great deal of relief and commentary at Trunchbull's final defeat (smiles, laughter, talking, giggling, comments such as 'Epic fall!').

Our findings therefore indicate that we should give more credence to the notion, often put forward by children's authors defending controversial texts, that children are actually very able, active readers who are able to apply balancing reasoning to their reading. Certainly a broad comparison between our Year 3 and year 6 respondents showed a narrower, media-directed view of heroes in the younger

responses; but overall, we left our participant schools feeling that children can read into, negotiate with and resist discourses very effectively. They may lack experience, but they draw explicitly on what they have, and they do not lack insight.

Dahl's work, as we saw in the literature review, has often been adversely criticized via a conflation between his biography and adult writings and his text: in light of this study, we see no reason to continue with this line of discussion. The young readers we worked with did not claim any knowledge of Dahl's life and clearly therefore it cannot impact upon their responses to the texts he has created.

What Dahl's stories do, as many critics do also note, is blend fairy tale and social realism, subversion and conservatism, satire and comedy, and frame it all within a morality that favours children above all else. The children we worked with enjoyed Matilda's 'revenge' upon her parents and her rebellion against Trunchbull – in many senses, this is the material of any adventure/fantasy fiction, the hero doing battle against evil forces. Even more interestingly, albeit not found in our review of the literature around Dahl and his child heroes, Matilda turns out to be a very postmodern kind of hero: she has intelligence, power, courage, but she also has spite and malice, and thus occasionally can misbehave. A powerful conclusion from our data is that children respond to the 'reality' of Matilda – she is a real little girl, with real problems and feelings, who does what any real little girl would do in her circumstances (if she had supernatural powers!).

Dahl has created a flawed heroine who blurs the lines between fantasy and reality, and these child readers were able to negotiate their readings of her heroism by weighing up a complex mix of narrative elements, such as Matilda's family, the treatment she endures, her personality, her powers, and her response to provocation. Perhaps most powerfully, even adding to the concepts and pragmatics of reader response theory, the children are able to interpret the interface between fictional codes (e.g. hero/villain, and cause and effect) and the real world they experience. This speaks strongly against those critics and reviewers who would tend to demean, even write-off the interpretive/imaginative responses of child readers. The children in this study have a good understanding of the formal components of narrative fiction, an appreciation of moral scenarios, an awareness of real world issues, and a facility to read in, between and across fiction and reality. In fact, they do what reader response and audience reception theories suggest adult readers do: they operate within and outside interpretive communities (Fish 1970, 1976), they inhabit a virtual space (Iser 1976), or secondary world (Benton and Fox 1985) in which the text and their imaginations create the narrative and they negotiate their own meanings from the stimulus of the text and their socio-cultural context (Hall 1973, McQuail 2000).

This study has led us to believe that children's responses to children's literature – already massively overlooked in comparison to the perceptions of adult reviewers and critics – need to be further explored. The subtle and insightful responses to Matilda we have gathered challenge and even contradict the perceptions of adult critics in many ways. Innovative research into child-reader responses can reveal new insights into the relationship between adults and children in that fascinating environment, children's literature.

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APPENDIX 1:

Details of the fifteen-minute montage of clips from *Matilda* that were shown (each section separated by a brief 'fade to black'):

00:07:20–00:07:52: Matilda's home life

Matilda is reading, backdrop of peaceful music. She is interrupted by Mr Wormwood ("Did any packages come today?") who gets her age wrong, then becomes angry. He drags her down the hallway and throws her book on the floor ("Get up. Give me that book!")

00:09:10–00:10:26: Matilda is a genius

Mr Wormwood comes home from work ("Son, one day you're gonna have to earn your own living") and boasts about the profit he has made on various cars. Matilda gets the complicated sum right and he accuses her of being a cheat ("Are you being smart with me? If you are, you'll be punished." "Punished for being smart?" "When a person is bad, that person has to be taught a lesson").

00:15:20–00:17:50: The superglue trick and cake at Cafe Le Ritz

In his garage, Matilda points out to her father that his business practices are wrong ("Daddy, you're a crook") and they argue. He says "There's nothing you can do about it" and there is a meaningful shot of a tube of superglue and his hat. Matilda's mother interrupts saying she has won at Bingo and they are all going to Cafe Le Ritz. When they get there Mr Wormwood can't remove his hat. In the process of trying to pull it off both her parents fall over, knocking over a large trolley of desserts, and a cake flies through the air and lands in front of Matilda, who eats it.

00:24:58–00:26:30: Miss Trunchbull throws Amanda Thripp

Matilda is in the schoolyard and whispers "Here she comes" as Miss Trunchbull appears. Miss Trunchbull shoves her out of the way and confronts Amanda Thripp, a small blond girl with pigtails. Trunchbull picks her up by the hair and throws her like an Olympic hammer. Amanda barely clears the spiked iron fence, but then glides along the ground, collecting flowers as she skids to a halt, and stands up unhurt with a flourish.

01:05:48–01:06:48: Matilda has magic powers

Matilda is at home alone, concentrating on her breakfast cereal. As she thinks about all the horrible things her parents have said to her (shown in flashback) the narrator explains "No kid likes being yelled at. But Harry's ranting and raving gave Matilda the key to her power. To unlock that power, all she had to do was practice." Matilda

knocks over the box of breakfast cereal just by staring at it, then levitates it and pours herself a bowl, then adds milk and a spoon.

01:17:33–01:24:53: Trunchbull’s defeat

Matilda says to Miss Honey “No more Miss Nice Girl” as Trunchbull enters their classroom. Trunchbull shouts at all the children to line up (“Stomach in, shoulders back!) and accuses one of them of breaking into her house. Miss Honey tries to take the blame, but Trunchbull threatens her. Matilda distracts attention by levitating the chalk and writing a message on the blackboard that scares Trunchbull, who faints. The children all join in and ultimately drive Trunchbull from the school by throwing food and anything else to hand at her. The narrator concludes “Trunchbull was gone, never to be seen or heard from, never to darken a doorway again.”

APPENDIX 2:

[Tables of quantitative data]