Suffocation of Imaginations: The Power of Children's Minds

While delving into stories that influenced my childhood, I noticed myself searching for my current values, ideas, and comforts in the narratives, instead of remembering why I really loved these when I was a kid. From cardboard books to classic chapter books, my wife and I have a special bookshelf, next to our four-year-old's bed of course, stocked with our memories from when we were kids. Reflecting upon my child and childhood books, I was reminded of the introduction chapter to the book *You Play the Girl* by Carina Chocano in which she reflects on her own parenting of her daughter: "I didn't set out to lead her on a tour of my literary coming-of-age, nor did I anticipate, on revisiting them, that I would recall the stories I'd love as a kid more vividly than actual events from my childhood" (xiii). Stories are a way for me to remember how it felt as a child, to show my own kid a piece of me, and to connect with my partner—sharing books with each other has been one of the deepest bonds we've been able to share. Classic stories of strong female heroines who live in books, like Belle from *Beauty and the Beast* and Matilda from *Matilda*, tend to be the ones that pop into my mind as my heroes. With a lens of self-discovery and a curiosity to makes a story stick with a person into adulthood, I began to examine Ronald Dahl's *Matilda*.

First published in 1988, two years before I was born, *Matilda* introduces an idea of control and freedom to children against authoritarian-type oppressors: parents, teacher, principals, bullies. Dahl's push and pull through his story is amplified by the most memorable illustrations by Quentin Blake, which continuously bring me a certain type of comfort and joy. As I reread the story, I came to realize that, as a child, the ideas that struck me the most were how brilliant the protagonist, Matilda, is and how admirable it is to use one's mind to get what

one wants or needs. As an adult, though, I am able to see deeper binaries that make the story connect and stay with me. Perry Nodelman, a lover of children's literature, essayist, and professor, dives into what makes children's literature so pleasurable in "Pleasure and Genre: Speculations on the Characteristics of Children's Fiction"; he examines the balance between teaching the reader and bringing hope and pleasure. Nodelman zooms in on how binaries play into the enjoyment of literature:

> In Pleasures of Children's Literature, I list common binaries that relate to two basic ones—home and away. I suggest that homes tend to represent safety and boredom, places away from home danger and excitement; that homes tend to represent communal connection and suffocation, away individual freedom and isolation, and so on.

In a contrast to these usual binaries, Matilda's home represents danger and isolation; whereas, her classroom—with her peers and her teacher Miss Honey—represents communal connection and freedom. Dahl switches the tug-and-pull binary.

In *Matilda*, Dahl plays around with extremes—extreme abuse, extreme intelligence, extreme poverty, extreme greed, and extreme powers—which seems to illustrate, clearly, the protagonists versus the antagonist. The use of extremes creates a simplistic view for the reader; Nodelman believes children's tales resonate "because they seem so simple and yet allow for so much thought" (Pleasure and Genre: Speculations on the Characteristics of Children 2). The extreme oppressor ripping up a child's library book because they won't watch tv like a good kid, as does Matilda's dad, or picking up a child by their pig tails and throwing them over a fence because they didn't like the child's hair, as does The Trunchbull, allows children to float through the story in a humorous way, yet understanding and relating to the oppression they may feel.

Matilda lives in a home of oppression through neglect and suffocation of her intelligence. An extremely bright child, "there was no doubt in her [Miss Honey's] mind that she had met a truly extraordinary mathematical brain, and words like child-genius and prodigy went flittering through her head" (Matilda 75), she receives no notice or interest by her family. A strand of neglect towards children—not seeing children as valid or fully human—runs through the whole tale. This strand of oppression leads to the feelings of lack of control. Children have no real control in life; they are told what and how to do every activity they participate in. The magical—actual and fantastical—elements of Matilda are the instances where the child takes a part of control away from the authoritarian adult.

In the first few chapters, Matilda realizes quickly that her parents are not necessarily "good" people, which inspires her to play tricks on them to teach them a lesson using a parrot acting as a ghost to scare her parents by putting super glue in her father's hat. While at school, the students realize they are able to play tricks and seek revenge against the horrid principal, The Trunchbull. At school everyone—including the teachers—has a common abuser, and they seem to relate through the idea that no one can help them:

> "How can she get away with it?" Lavender said to Matilda. "Surely the children go home and tell their mothers and fathers. I know my father would raise a terrific stink if I told him the Headmistress had grabbed me by the hair and slung me over the playground fence."
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> "No, he wouldn't," Matilda said, "and I'll tell you why. He simply wouldn't believe you." (Matilda 117)

Although the school seems to be where these kids receive the most harm, like Matilda, this is where they have their community because their peers believe them and support their

growth/mischief. The sounds of Matilda and her classmates chanting in support of Bruce Bogtrotter to take another mouthful of cake as a punishment from The Trunchbull presents the communal connection of the oppressed.

Towards the end of the tale, Matilda learns she is able to use her brain power as actual power by making things move. Dahl titles this brief ability as the miracles by way of chapter titles: "The First Miracle", "The Second Miracle", and "The Third Miracle". Matilda uses her magical new-found powers for good to stand up against the people who use their powers for bad: The Trunchbull's brute strength against Matilda's brain. This idea is the most interesting because it implies that minds are what is truly getting harmed by oppression. If children's stories are too extreme or magical, like trying to tell their parents about the punishments The Trunchbull bestows upon them, the children are not believed; their imagination is not seen as practical or useful, like Matilda's father trying to stop her from living through her magical stories/books; classrooms that are designed to teach math and writing in a fearful testing environment take from kids minds to work out problems through experience, like The Trunchbull making kids answer times tables quickly or else they get thrown around the room. The binary of home and away applies to home being around authoritarian adults who smother children's imagination, and away is the safety of freely exploring one's imitations and intelligence without limitations.

At the end of *Matilda*, all of Matilda's oppressors have fled due to the wrong and bad doings they have done in life: Matilda uses her powers to pose as Miss Honey's late father's ghost whom, assumingly, The Trunchbull murdered, so The Trunchbull flees town; Matilda's father is in danger of being arrested for selling stolen cars, so he flees to Spain. Matilda now lives with her first teacher and inspiration, Miss Honey, and she is attending a challenging class that inspires her mind, and she has no need for magical brain power anymore:

> "Well," Miss Honey said, "it's only a guess, but here's what I think. While you were in my class you had nothing to do, nothing to make you struggle. Your fairly enormous brain was going crazy with frustration. It was bubbling and boiling away like mad inside your head. There was tremendous energy bottled up in there with nowhere to go, and somehow or other you were able to shoot that energy out through your eyes and make objects move. But now things are different. You are in the top form competing against children more than twice your age and all that mental energy is being used up in class. Your brain is for the first time having to struggle and strive and keep really busy, which is great. That's only a theory, mind you, and it may be a silly one, but I don't think it's far off the mark." (Matilda 230)

With a new parental figure, Miss Honey, who listens and suggests, not tells, Matilda is able to mentally grow.

As a child, storytelling in any form—books, movies, music, and the ones I created—provided me with the freedoms of exploring the world and myself without boundaries. *Matilda* was a book I could pick up over and over again, and each time it brought me entertainment and pleasure. When I felt unheard or powerless, I could travel to a place where my love for reading and learning was a super power; a place where I could fight back against the ones who were harming me; a place where I was not alone. Margaret Talbot, a staff writer for The New Yorker, writes about Dahl's work and painful life in the article "The Candy Man"; Dahl had a most curious way of reaching his audience, young and old. "Most of Dahl's young readers are presumably not mistreated, and yet they intuitively understand that the beatings and humiliations meted out to his young characters are metaphors for the powerlessness of being a child. And they appreciate that Dahl so nakedly takes their side" (The Candy Man). With extreme characters and

situations, *Matilda* captures pleasure with humor and entertainment, but with stands of loneliness, suffocation, powerlessness, and the beauty of communal connections, the book teaches all its readers that there is hope in the world.

Works Cited

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