

∞ READING ROUND ∞

The Classic Book I'd Like to Rewrite and Why

Chitra Ramaswamy

HERE IS A LITTLE GIRL who loves to read. Come, watch her walk to school up the long wide road leading to the Anglican church on the hill with the spire that soars so high it seems to sway in the changeable skies. The houses on this street are huge, white, Victorian, with big bay windows through which you can see the stage sets forever waiting for the play to begin. Perfectly positioned grand pianos. Bankers' green lamps with their heads reverently bent over gleaming mahogany desks. If houses have expressions, these would be imperious. The little girl lives, for now, in a brand-new house up a gravel drive off the long wide road leading to the church. So she shares, for now, an address with the people who live here, if nothing else.

She is bright, this girl. She can read and spell any word, make up stories on the spot, and her handwriting holds tight to the line. She has already learnt to hide and underplay this, to not show the workings of her brain. She has already learnt a lesson of her era that is not on the curriculum: that a child, especially a girl, should only really be one thing, and a clever girl is not the best and certainly not the most attractive thing to be. A clever Indian girl may be what's expected, but somehow she is worse still.

It is the late 1980s and a new book by this girl's favourite author, Roald Dahl, has just come out. Maybe her mother buys it for her from the WHSmith on the high street or the children's bookshop on the corner opposite the fish and chip shop. Certainly, it's brand new. The cover is glossy, like so much in the 1980s, with **MATILDA** written in big red letters

∞ READING ROUND ∞

and a Quentin Blake illustration of a scrappy little girl reading a book surrounded by towers of books. A book about a clever little bookish girl? Life does not get better than this. And so this clever little girl reads the book about that clever little girl. She learns its lessons. She hates Matilda's parents, who loathe books, love telly, and eat microwaved dinners off their laps, without seeing their creator's class hatred. She loves the slim, sweet, pretty Miss Honey and her tumbledown cottage in the woods. She fears the terrifying Miss Trunchbull and her massive thighs encased in extraordinary breeches. How much she sees, and how little she sees.

And how much she wants to be Matilda. She stares at an HB pencil. She stares at a glass of water. She stares at a pot of her mother's rasam simmering on the stove. She tries with all her mental might to make them move. She attempts what so many clever little girls will attempt through the years. This is how strongly she identifies with the frustrated little girl whose intellect is so neglected and under-valued that her mind makes a magical outlet of its own.

Three decades later, the debate rages on as to whether the editing of Roald Dahl's books by his publisher is an absurd act of censorship or a vital cultural reappraisal.

The fact is, Dahl used racist, anti-semitic, classist, and viciously cruel language in his books.

The fact is, I never noticed.

The fact is, my mind was raised, and raised up, by Roald Dahl.

Today, I am trying to write this essay about a classic book I would like to rewrite, and why.

Here's the thing.

∞ READING ROUND ∞

I have no interest in rewriting other people's books.

I am still trying to write my way into my own life.