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Making Sense of Matilda: Interpreting Literature through Information Behavior Theory

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ABSTRACT

Fictional works about libraries and their different roles have been published over the centuries and read with delight among librarians as well as among the broader audience. Still, literary descriptions of libraries seem to be of marginal interest when it comes to Library and Information research, in spite of the rich material at hand. This article takes a step into the rather empty space of research in this field, combining theories of information behavior with literary analysis of a fictional heroine; Roald Dahl's Matilda.

Introduction: literature AND/OR/NOT library and information science

It is a fact that we could fill whole libraries solely with fiction in which libraries, archives or librarians are being portrayed, described or used as metaphors. Most authors love libraries, and this love seeps out on the pages they write. Given the enormous amount of literary texts where libraries play an important role, either as a setting for vital parts of the plot, or as a metaphor for certain issues, or simply as the necessary condition for the text to be created, it seems like literature represent an untapped resource in LIS research.

Although library figures as a recurrent topos in literary texts throughout history, these connections between books and libraries have generated a rather meager amount of research interest, in comparative literature as well as in library and information science. On the whole, library as a phenomenon is rarely seen as an object of academic analysis and reflection, according to library researcher Michael F. Winther. Why not use fictional libraries in developing library theory, either on the concept of library, the concept of information or models of the way people use libraries and information?

Some studies, though, focus on the librarian, most often dwelling on the stereotypical images that haunt the profession (Burns; Kneale; Rydbeck). A few others have looked into fantasy or science fiction and analyzed the prominent status of the libraries to be found there (Griffen; Gunn 1995). In

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addition, and not to forget, there is a number of essays and autobiographical texts where libraries play an important part as a place for the authors' intellectual development, or as a knowledge base and workplace. Examples can be found in the writings by Frank McCourt, Umberto Eco and Alberto Manguel.

What it means to the greater society to have a library available to all, is beautifully portrayed in Susan Orlean's *The library book*, taking as its point of departure the fire in Los Angeles Public Library in 1986. Even in times of war – or maybe just in times of war – a library serves as a free space for the brain to engage in other matters than the surrounding cruelty and daily fears. Mike Thomson's *Syria's secret Library* tells of a collection of books and its readers on the edge of destruction in the city of Daraya from 2011 to 2016. Both books mentioned are nonfiction, documenting the importance of libraries in diverse settings and societies. The nature of fiction is different, though. Fiction goes beyond documenting, in literary texts the reader is let into the characters' minds, to experience through them what reading and libraries could mean in a human life. Roald Dahl's *Matilda* is one of a myriade of examples.

The few research contributions to the field of library and information science that do pay some interest to literature, have in common a certain feature. Even without a statistical analysis, it is evident that the two most frequently quoted literary authors in LIS studies are Umberto Eco (1932–2016) and Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986). The two are deeply fascinated by the organizing and sharing of knowledge. Borges, for many years director of Argentina's national library, has created some amazing portrayals of libraries and encyclopedias, especially in *Ficciones*. Eco was professor in semiotics at University of Bologna besides his work as a fictional author. Just as Borges, he had a broad range of scientific interests. Both his academic and literary career made libraries indispensable to him, and he explores ideas of, and functions of libraries in his essays and novels. Among Eco's contributions to analyzing libraries, is the novel *The name of the Rose* and the essay «De Bibliotheca», where he includes quotations from Borges' *Ficciones*. This essay has again been quoted by several library researchers (Garrett; Winther; Radford, Radford and Linge; Dahlkild). The repeated use of Eco (and Borges) might signify a lack of available literary reflections on the library as idea and institution.

However, I have found little exploration of literature by means of, for example information behavior theories or classification schemes. Given my academic background of both library science and comparative literature, curiosity arouse about how the two may be combined. While working as a librarian in my earlier days, I tried to make use of the literary studies and the pertaining theories to support my professional practice. In this case, it will be the other way around – I will make use of library and information theory in the reading of a piece of fiction. More specific, I am going to present a reading of Roald Dahl's *Matilda* (originally published 1988), where I make use of

a model from information behavior theory supplemented by children's library theory in order to uncover what this story conveys on reading and libraries.

Matilda and her family: the good, the bad and the ugly

Some of you readers may remember that the first chapter in *Matilda* is called "The Reader of Books". From this chapter on, the whole story unfolds, where the main character Matilda manages to free herself from suppression and injustice. With a little help from the library. The protagonist's situation is introduced this way, from her parents' perspective:

> They had a son called Michael and a daughter called Matilda, and the parents looked upon Matilda in particular as nothing more than a scab. A scab is something you have to put up with until the time comes when you can pick it off and flick it away. Mr and Mrs Wormwood looked forward enormously to the time when they could pick their little daughter off and flick her away, preferably into the next country or even further than that» (Dahl 4).

From this quotation we can assume that Matilda, four years old, does not get much follow-up from her parents. On the contrary, she is left alone at home for many hours every day, while her father goes to his job as a secondhand car dealer, and her mother goes off to play bingo. There is TV and nothing else to stimulate the girls' intellect.
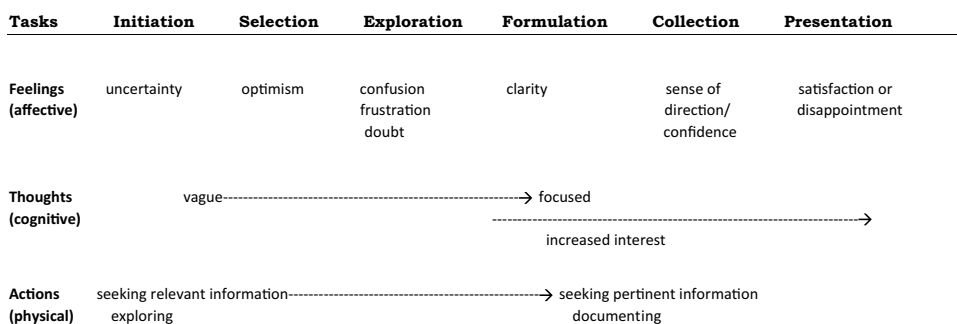
Information seeking process – stage one: stated information need

Matilda turns out to be extremely bright, and she learns to read by studying magazines and newspapers around the house. And then a problem arises:

> The only book in the whole of this enlighted household was something called *Easy Cooking* belonging to her mother, and when she had read this from cover to cover and had learnt all the recipes by heart, she decided she wanted something more interesting. (5).

We could call this state of Matilda's an undefined information need. According to Robert S. Taylors writing on question-negotiation and information seeking in libraries, the user who seeks information goes through an initial phase of more or less conscious need for information. "It may only be a vague sort of dissatisfaction" (182) he states. This is where we find Matilda's position in the quotation above. Matilda's need for "something more interesting" to read is defined as a problem, and she starts seeking for information to solve that problem. This could be illustrated by Carol Kuhlthau's model, by which we can follow Matilda's information search process:

This model, quite familiar among library students and information researchers, and existing in various versions, was developed back in the beginning of the nineties, and was originally based on school library users, and the way they searched for information related to their assignments. Later

Tasks	Initiation	Selection	Exploration	Formulation	Collection	Presentation
Feelings (affective)	uncertainty	optimism	confusion frustration doubt	clarity	sense of direction/ confidence	satisfaction or disappointment
Thoughts (cognitive)	vague---→ focused					
				---→		
				increased interest		
Actions (physical)	seeking relevant information---------------------------------------→ exploring			seeking pertinent information documenting		

Figure 1. Carol Kuhlthau's model of the information seeking process (2004). CC By Attribution 3.0 Hong Kong License. https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/37883013.pdf.

on, this process model was informed by other studies in different kinds of libraries and with different user groups. The model is inspired by other theorists, among them Robert S. Taylor, and by the educational theorist John Dewey and his thoughts on learning through problem-solving. Dewey's model of reflective thinking has been compared with Kuhlthau's model. Dewey's five steps are 1) Becoming aware of difficulty, 2) Identifying the problem, 3) Assembling and classifying data and formulating hypotheses, 4) Accepting or rejecting tentative hypotheses, 5) Formulating conclusions and evaluating them. According to Matilda's case, she has both become aware of her information need, and she has identified the problem: How to get something interesting to read?

If we relate Matilda's feelings and thoughts concerning her information need to Kuhlthau's model, we could point to "Initiation" on the upper task-line, and her feelings are stated to be "uncertainty" – she does not know what she wants, just "something more interesting", and her first action, or move, is to ask her father for a book.

'Daddy', she said, 'do you think you could buy me a book?'
'A *book*?' he said. 'What d'you want a flaming book for?'
'To read, Daddy.'
'What's wrong with the telly, for heaven's sake?' (Dahl 6).

Information seeking process – stage two: looking for resources

The first action obviously did not lead to anything but "dissatisfaction", and Matilda realizes she has to look for books outside the house. Her next action is to walk to the public library in the village, and the first scene from that visit is quite interesting from an information behavior point of view. Let us take a look at the first conversation between Matilda and the librarian:

When she arrived, she introduced herself to the librarian, Mrs Phepls. She asked if she might sit a while and read a book. Mrs Phelps, slightly taken aback at the arrival of such a tiny girl unaccompanied by a parent, nevertheless told her she was very welcome.

'Where are the children's books please?' Matilda asked.

'They're over there on those lower shelves', Mrs Phelps told her. 'Would you like me to help you find a nice one with lots of pictures in it?'

'No, thank you' Matilda said. 'I'm sure I can manage' (7).

At first, the verbal exchange seems to unfold nicely, the librarian welcoming the child like any other user (even though she is "taken aback"). Matilda's question is very general and shows her state of uncertainty and yet determination; "where are the children's books please?". She gets the information she wants initially, but then we notice the breakdown of communication. The librarian misjudges the intellectual level of her communication partner, and she talks to Matilda as if she was any 4-year old, illiterate girl who only will be interested in pictures in the books. She fails in conducting an open-minded interview with the child user, as described by Lynne McKechnie. McKechnie underline the importance of a librarian being nonjudgmental when interacting with children, and she stresses the importance of assessing the reading level of the young user. Matilda turns down the offered help from the librarian, as it seems she does not trust her as a reader adviser, after being treated as an illiterate. Result: Her feeling is "disappointment" according to Kuhlthau's model, and following Dewey, she has rejected the hypothesis put forward by the librarian, who (in spite of her name) is of no help to Matilda.

Information seeking process – stage three: negotiating the need

Their next conversation takes place some weeks later. And by then, the librarian has understood that Matilda, who comes to the library every working day, is a very special and supersmart little girl. And, luckily, the girl has not lost all confidence in the librarian.

After having read every single children's book in the place, she started wandering round in search of something else, she was "exploring" in Kuhlthaus' terms. She still has an information need – and her status is at this point "confusion". Matilda asks the librarian for reader advice.

'I'm wondering what to read next', Matilda said. 'I've finished all the children's books.'

'You mean you've looked at the pictures?'
'Yes, but I've read the books as well.'

Mrs Phelps looked down at Matilda from her great height and Matilda looked right back up at her.

'I thought some were very poor', Matilda said, 'but others were lovely. I liked *The Secret Garden* best of all. It was full of mystery. (. . .)

Mrs Phelps was more stunned than ever, but she had the sense not to show it. 'What sort of a book would you like to read next?' she asked.

Matilda said, 'I would like a really good one that grown-ups read. A famous one. I don't know any names.'

Mrs Phelps looked along the shelves taking her time. She didn't quite know what to bring out. How, she asked herself, does one choose a famous grown-up book for a four-year-old girl? Her first thought was to pick a young teenager's romance of the kind that is written for fifteen-year-old schoolgirls, but for some reason she found herself instinctively walking past that particular shelf.

'Try this', she said at last. 'It's very famous and very good. If it's too long for you, just let me know and I'll find something shorter and a bit easier.'

'*Great Expectations*', Matilda read, 'by Charles Dickens. I'd love to try it' (Dahl 9).

This rather long quotation shows a different quality in communication than the previous conversation between the two. The librarian treats Matilda as an equal, takes her question serious and she takes care not to show her surprise by this little girl's abilities. The information process we witness in this piece of text goes as described by Kuhlthau from the task "formulation" of a more clear idea of what Matilda wants, to the "collection" phase where the librarian considers what to choose for the young reader.

Information seeking process – stage four: problem solved

Matilda gets totally absorbed in reading, and finishes the book declaring that she loved it. By then she has reached the final part of the model; her interest has increased, and her feeling is clearly stated as "satisfaction". This feeling does not only regard the actual book, but even the established process of how to get to more books of interest to her. The librarian has proven to be professionally skilled; she knows the collection well, she understands the needs of the user, and she is able to combine these basic skills.

Matilda's information search process has a happy ending. Although this is of course not the ending! It is really the start of Matilda's intensive reading of English classics, brought to her by the librarian. It is also the beginning of a change of living conditions. The most interesting parts of this story thus take place after the stages in Kuhlthau's model is over and done with. The model cannot predict any changes in a person' life or offer any suggestions about what information lead to <u>after</u> being processed, neither when it comes to actions, thoughts or feelings. If we are interested in the effects of reading, we have to look for other means. We may start by looking at the amazing long list of books in *Matilda*.

Mrs. Phelps' recommended reading

At this point in the story, Roald Dahl presents the reader with a long list of books that Matilda read during 6 months, following *Great Expectations*. The books are listed like this:

Nicholas Nickleby by Charles Dickens
Oliver Twist by Charles Dickens
Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë
Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen
Tess of the D'Urbervilles by Thomas Hardy
Gone to Earth by Mary Webb
Kim by Rudyard Kipling
The Invisible Man by H.G. Wells
The Old Man and the Sea by Ernest Hemingway
The Sound and the Fury by William Faulkner
The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck
The Good Companions by J.B. Priestly
Brighton Rock by Graham Greene
Animal Farm by George Orwell
(Dahl 12)

The list is an unusual part of a story, as it inserts a pause in the narrative, and it stands out from the rest of the written text. It has to be of importance, somehow. What does it mean, why does Roald Dahl insist on having the reader to go through that list, instead of reading on about what happens to Matilda? How do we read the list, which seems to insist on its significance?

Not surprisingly, the list has been criticized for being dominated by male authors (see, for example, Guest; Beauvais), which is true, but in my opinion that is the least interesting about it. The way the list is included in the story, it visually looks like a poem. Umberto Eco claims about lists in his book *The Infinity of Lists* that lists have an inherent, special poetry. He writes that a poetic list sheds light on a conceptual room where the elements in the room are equal. By creating a coherence between the elements; a framework for interpretation, intellectual, emotional and esthetic depths are created, that goes beyond the meaning of each element. One way of reading this list, is to understand it as a metaphor for the intellectual and emotional awakening of Matilda, where she through her extensive reading of the books on the list develop her capacity of understanding literature as well as life.

Considering how strongly Dickens' *Great Expectations* appeals to Matilda, it is tempting to combine the context of her own life with the story of the novel. *Great Expectations* is known as a dramatic, sentimental, and entertaining story of the life from boyhood to adulthood of an orphan, who has to struggle his way through life, seriously bullied by those who control him.

As we read on about Matilda, we understand that Dickens' novels and many of the other classical novels that Mrs Phelps makes her read, reflect Matilda's

own life in different ways. One may point to features of the texts, to show elements of appeal, as reader advisory specialist Joyce Saricks describes, but the appeal to Matilda has to do with more than intratextual qualities. It is rather the circumstances for her reading that make the books mean so much to her. The second conversation between Matilda and the librarian show some crucial points in reader advisory. It is not just about the qualities of the book, it is very much about the reader, as Keren Dali has underlined in her revision of Joyce Saricks' list of elements of appeal. Mrs Phelps gets to know Matilda's preferences, she understands something about her background, that she is being neglected at home, and Mrs Phelps has the competence to bring out the books that she think may correspond to this eagerness to read something good – understood as good for Matilda, in her context. When the relation with the librarian who understand Matilda's need is established, and Mrs Phelps present to her the books that meet this need, Matilda's information problem is solved.

As we know this library chapter forms the first part of the story, it is a plausible interpretation to read the rest of the story as a result from this acquired reading habit. It is a story about reading promotion that works well. Does it work a little too well? Roald Dahl's book has long figured as a favorite to librarians who are thrilled to read and who love to promote a text that demonstrate their own possible influence and abilities. Few have spoken of the more questionable attitudes that this text also includes, when it comes to the cultural divide between the readers and the nonreaders.

Reading as a sign of cultural class distinction

Matilda wants to change her parents. Her acts of revenge against her father has failed because he has not learnt how to behave himself, she thinks. She is convinced that if her parents would "read a little Dickens or Kipling they would soon discover there was more to life than cheating people and watching television." (Dahl 23).

These parts of the text send an ambiguous message of, on one hand, a deep and heart-felt love for literature, and a strong belief in the power of reading to bring about changes, and on the other hand, a rather negative attitude to popular culture. To equal cheating and watching TV will be seen as strange or even narrow-minded by those children who grow up with few books and more TV or iPads around. Besides, we may well ask: what perspectives of change does authors like Dickens and Kipling really bring to contemporary readers?

It is reasonable to interpret books and reading as signs of social class in this story. Books and reading works as metaphors for the good and cultivated life, and soap operas and bingo speaks of the uncultivated, barbaric and bad sort of life. There is a significant social and moral distinction between the good and well-read people, and the ignorant and bad nonreaders. Education, library,

literature and reading are connected to the adult heroines of the story, both Matilda's teacher Miss Honey and the librarian Mrs. Phelps are described as wise, friendly, compassionate, thoughtful and cultivated members of the educated class.

Matilda's parents, on the other hand, are enemies of any reading culture, and they are exposed as vulgar and narrow-minded in all possible ways. Mr. and Mrs. Wormwood distance themselves from higher education. Mrs. Wormwood defend this as her choice in her conversation with Miss Honey: «You chose books. I chose looks» (Dahl 91), while Mr. Wormwood attacks the universities because «All they learn there is bad habits!» (92).

The Wormwoods appears to be part of the uneducated, but rather well off class of so-called «self-made men». Mr. Wormwood has been compared to "The Essex Man" (Beauvais 280), a stereotypical noveau rich, tasteless and very conservative man – a kind of caricature of English thatcherism in the eighties. The Wormwoods have to flee from the police in the end, while the poetry-loving teacher Miss Honey rightful can have her inheritance, including an elegant villa, where Matilda moves in.

Because Matilda is the one to identify with, the values she represents are the values promoted to the readers. The value of reading and education is uncontroversial, but is it OK to devaluate and look down on popular taste, and turn down parents (or others) who do not share the cultivated taste?

In this story, libraries, books and reading are set against dealing of used cars, bingo and soap operas. This demonstrates a cultural class divide, where it is obvious with which side one should sympathize. Roald Dahl shows no mercy on those who prefer TV to books. Matilda's exchange of family is a shift from the new rich to the educated upper class, where she feels at home.

There is a long, long list of research and critique of Roald Dahl's books. Few critics have discussed this class question in *Matilda*. Clémentine Beauvais is among those few. She suggests why these questions have not been discussed:

> If the class tensions of *Matilda* have been and continue to be overlooked, it is largely, I argue, because they lean on a portrayal of child precocity that is likely to be particularly seductive to a secondary audience of middle-class parents, caregivers, mediators, and professional readers of children's literature. (Beauvais 278)

Furthermore, Beauvais claims that the list of English classical novels that the librarian gives to Matilda, is an extract of Harold Blooms famous list in *The Western Canon*, which expresses the superiority of literature written by white, traditionally educated, middle-class men.

The problem with this interpretation is, that the real troll in the story, the violent headmaster Miss Trunchbull, is herself a well-read woman; she knows her Dickens. Her perspective is different though; she reads to seek inspiration from the worst teacher ever in literature, Wackford Squeers in Dickens

Nicholas Nickelby. It is not evident that Matilda and Miss Honey are basically, good persons *because* they read good books. The story demonstrates rather that readers take from literature what they need and what they look for.

Reasons to read – and reasons to talk about *Matilda*

American children's library expert, Virginia Walter has written extensively on promoting reading to young people. She lists a number of reasons why children should read quality literature (55). Several of her arguments are supported by Roald Dahl's story about Matilda. One of them is that reading literature increases the reader's vocabulary and provides her with words, which expands her thoughts and mind. Additionally, the books provide the reader with experiences beyond those she can get from her near surroundings. Dahl expresses this very clearly in his description of Matilda's reading:

> The books transported her into new worlds and introduced her to amazing people who lived exciting lives. She went on olden-day sailing ships with Joseph Conrad. She went to Africa with Ernest Hemingway and to India with Rudyard Kipling. She travelled all over the world while sitting in her little room in an English village. (Dahl 19).

The quote is an echo of Brontë's heroine Jane as a small girl, hiding behind the curtains with a book, creating a space for herself, away from her hostile relatives.

A third reason to read is that children need literature that may help them make sense of their own life. In the case of Matilda, Dickens' and Brontë's novels are among the stories to which she can compare her own experiences. A fourth, and especially important reason is that reading of good literature contribute to empowerment, meaning that children can take control of their own life. This is something Matilda achieves in the story. From the very beginning of her reading of books, she starts being more determined in changing her circumstances of life. She succeeds. In the end, she has replaced her parents with her beloved teacher, a part of the book that caused protests from adults – both teachers and parents (Royer; Pope and Round; Knudsen). The library and the reading of books contribute to empower her. The library reveals a new world to Matilda, with other ways of living and thinking. From that day, when she discovered reading fiction, she builds up the guts and the ideas to stand up against unfair treatment. "All the reading she had done had given her a view of life that they (her parents) had never seen." (Dahl 29).

Conclusion

The story of Matilda demonstrates the vulnerability of the user as described in Taylor's writing on information needs and Kuhlthau's model of the information-seeking process: The user may easily get lost somewhere in the process,

either because of ignorant librarians or because of systems that do not respond in satisfactory ways.

Although this is fiction, and not a very realistic story either, considering Matilda's special gifts, it is a story of literature promotion that succeeds in achieving its objectives both when it comes to developing reading skills and in empowering the user. The reason for picking exactly this story is its interesting example of how important a visit to the library may turn out to be in someone's life. It is a story about a child's information seeking, and the pitfalls connected to this process, and even more important, it is about the power of libraries and reading to change individual lives.

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