

Topic: Heroes and Villains in literature



Oliver Twist:  
Bill Sikes threatens  
Oliver.

FOULEST FIENDS

There are so many wonderfully ghastly villains from literary history — where do we stop?

1. **Lord Voldemort.** If there was a gold medal for best villain it would surely go to “he who must not be named”. Like any good villain Voldemort sought eternal life and world domination.

2. **Witches.** With so many wonderfully wicked witches they are grouped together:

- **The White Witch** from *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is beautiful and evil, a great combination for a villain. Jadis, the self-proclaimed Queen of Narnia, reigned over the eternal winter she created, killing anyone who stood in her way.
- **The Wicked Witch of the West** in *The Wizard of Oz* was the villainous leader of the Winkie Country. She sought revenge on Dorothy and her dog after they accidentally killed her sister.
- **The Grand High Witch** from Roald Dahl’s *The Witches* would have to be the most horrifyingly ugly witch, wreaking havoc on the world by getting rid of all children in the most adventurous ways.

3. **Cruella de Vil.** For any animal lover Cruella de Vil from *The Hundred and One Dalmatians* was the ultimate villain. This London heiress not only terrorised her poor husband but also drowned kittens and kidnapped puppies.

4. **Bill Sikes.** Anyone who beats children and dogs has got to be bad. Bill Sikes from *Oliver Twist* was also a robber and murderer.

5. **Sauron.** The unsleeping eye of Sauron from *The Lord of the Rings* scoured Middle Earth searching for the Ring taken from him in battle. This villain stopped at nothing to retrieve the Ring and power over Middle Earth.

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The Evil  
White Witch



Cruella  
de Vil

AROUND  
THE WORLD

- Some of the most grotesque and fearsome villains have come from Japanese folklore. The yokai are supernatural monsters that can also be found today in many manga stories. One of the more popular of the yokai is the Kappa or water goblin, an aquatic monster resembling a duck, frog and turtle.

- A young slave girl called Morgiana is the true hero found in the Arabic story of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves. Morgiana foils the efforts of all 40 of the thieves who try to kill Ali Baba.



Harry Potter: Hermione, Ron and Harry.

# A GOOD HERO NEEDS A GOOD VILLAIN

Everyone loves a good villain but without them there would be no heroes. In Children’s Book Week, **Heather Zubek** goes in search of the most memorable characters in children’s literature.

SO THE STORY GOES

There are fictional characters we just love to love and those we love to hate. The more dastardly the villain, the braver the hero. Heroes have to find the strength and skill to outwit the onslaught of their arch enemies. Without our heroes and villains, there wouldn’t be a story. Peter Pan would just be another lost boy, Lord Voldemort would just be a grumpy old wizard and Batman’s cape would still be in his wardrobe.

GOOD V EVIL

- The term “hero” comes from an Ancient Greek word meaning “protector” or “defender” so it comes as no surprise that our first literary heroes existed within Greek mythology. These heroes and heroines faced danger with courage and self-sacrifice all in the name of the greater good. The most recognised Greek hero, Hercules, performed amazing feats of strength and power against the most horrific monsters, including his stepmother Hera. Many of these ancient stories of heroes served as moral examples, making these characters role models.
- Interestingly, the term “villain” comes from the Old French term “vilein” meaning “farmhand” which in its day meant someone who was not chivalrous in nature. In early times villains were often the Black, Red or Green Knights who battled the heroes of King Arthur’s realm.
- Later on, stories of “good verses evil” found their way into the minds of children. The Pilgrim’s Progress, written during the 17th century, follows the hero Christian as he travels to the Celestial City fighting villains and demons.
- During the 1700s heroes began to face adventure as well as villains. The reluctant heroes in Robinson Crusoe and Gulliver’s Travels find themselves fighting villains such as cannibals and giant wasps as they struggle for survival.
- During the 1800s stories became more political, with any threat to the British Empire viewed as villainous. In the 1900s comic-book writers created the superhero and supervillain, with Superman at times fighting the nazis.

Gulliver’s Travels: Jack Black as Gulliver in the movie.



Superman: Christopher Reeve played the leading  
role in the first Superman film in 1978.

TOP HEROES

It is almost impossible to reduce the number of wonderful literary heroes to just five but we will have to try:

1. **Harry Potter.** We have to include the boy wizard given his popularity with young readers. As a baby his parents were murdered, and then he had to suffer living with the dreadful Dursleys. As a teenager our hero fought villains ranging from the slimy Basilisk to the greatest villain of all, “he who must not be named”.
2. **Huckleberry Finn.** Like Harry Potter, Huck didn’t have the greatest of upbringings. His father was an alcoholic and at times he was imprisoned in a cabin in the woods. Huck enjoyed many adventures especially with Jim, a slave, who wins his freedom with Huck’s help.
3. **Matilda Wormwood.** Six-year-old Matilda, from the book of the same name, had an amazing intellect that irritated her awful headmaster and her parents, who just wanted her to watch television. Our heroine found a way to seek revenge through her telekinetic powers.

4. **Artemis Fowl.** At first a mastermind criminal but Artemis Fowl saw the error in his villainous ways and became a hero who worked with the fairies to defeat the bad guys and save the world.

5. **Pippi Longstocking.** Who wouldn’t want to live with a pet monkey and horse? This rebellious Swedish girl was naughty but nice because she had a great sense of fair play and fought for the weak and oppressed.

PEOPLE’S CHOICE

ED! asked around to uncover the favourite heroes and villains of some literary people of Perth.  
**Margaret Allen, State Librarian of WA:**  
My best recollection of a hero in children’s literature would have to be Storm Boy, not only for the story of how the boy rescues and nurses three pelican chicks and releases them, but for the conflict between his bond with the pelican named Mr Percival and its fate, with the need for him to attend school. Also as a child we holidayed in the Coorong area, where the story was based.

**James Foley, author and illustrator of In the Lion and illustrator for The Last Viking:**

Todd and Viola from *The Walking Chaos* make excellent heroes. They are just kids but have to make grown-up, life-and-death decisions. The villain Mayor Prentiss (in this story) is so manipulative; he is truly evil (but with shades of good in there too).



Margaret Allen



Norman  
Jorgensen



Meg McKinlay



James Foley

**Norman Jorgensen, author of The Last Viking, Jack’s Island and many others:**  
One of my great heroes is Atticus Finch, the honourable and decent father from Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Although not strictly a children’s book, with its themes of racism and intolerance, *Mockingbird* is told from the point of view of Scout, his young daughter, and is often about the adventures of the children in their Deep South town (in the US). I am a huge fan of pirate stories, so there are two contenders for my worst villain in literature. Although he looks the part of a dashing hero, Captain Hook from J. M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan* is not a nice man at all. His forcing of Peter and the Lost Boys to walk the plank into the waiting jaws of the ticking crocodile is the stuff of nightmares. The other villain I love, who most likely wins the worst villain crown, is Long John Silver, the one-legged, parrot-wearing, anti-hero from *Treasure Island*.

**Meg McKinlay, author of No Bears, Surface Tension and many other great children’s books:**  
My favourite hero is Harriet M. Welsch, from Louise Fitzhugh’s *Harriet the Spy*. Because she’s curious and clever, complex and flawed, she’s sensitive and vulnerable but always stubbornly, unflinchingly herself. My favourite villain would have to be The Other Mother, from Neil Gaiman’s *Coraline*. There’s something truly terrifying about her that goes beyond the stereotypical “bad” or “scary” of many villains.

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A CERTAIN  
POWER

What makes literary heroes such as Harry Potter or Superman so compelling? Usually storybook heroes have a certain power or skill that others lack. Sherlock Holmes had great powers of deduction and Superman enjoyed X-ray vision and super strength. All heroes don’t need super powers but they do need characteristics setting them apart even if it’s just believing in themselves when no one else does.

Good heroes also have flaws that make them more interesting. Superman has his Kryptonite and Ironman has arrogance.

Most villains have certain characteristics in common. One of them is power. Many villains have, or have the desire for, absolute power. This power could be in the form of wealth such as in Cruella de Vil or magic as in Lord Voldemort. Lord Voldemort is seen as the ultimate villain given his attempts at justifying his immoral ways saying that what he is doing is for the greater good.

The most evil of villains also have high intelligence. The sinister Moriarty from Sherlock Holmes plots to outwit our detective hero using highly inventive twists and traps. Just as heroes have their flaws so do villains. The most memorable villains are wounded in some way. They may suffer physical scars such as Captain Hook from *Peter Pan* or emotional ones like *The Grinch*. This suggests that a true villain is not born but created. A truly formidable villain is one that is seemingly unstoppable. They have a determination and drive to achieve their goal; whatever it is, making the hero of the story even more heroic.