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Finding a Good Read: Villains

A regular column to help you find a good read even if you can't get to the library yet.

What makes a good (bad?) villain? It seems they come in different shapes and sizes. Some are sadistic and physically violent, others are cold killing machines. Charles Dickens's novels are full of brilliant villains. Two of his most famous – or infamous – ones are in *Oliver Twist*, his novel about an orphaned boy, sucked into the criminal underworld of London in the early 1800s. One of the most violent characters in the book is the vicious robber and murderer Bill Sikes, who stalks through the novel shadowed by his menacing dog Bull's Eye. His boss is Fagin, the gangmaster who gathers in homeless boys and trains them up as pickpockets. Fagin has been a controversial figure since the novel was published because for many readers he's an anti-semitic stereotype, introduced as 'a very old, shrivelled Jew, whose villainous-looking and repulsive face is obscured by a quantity of matted red hair.'

One of the most memorable villains in recent times is Hannibal Lector in Thomas Harris's *The Silence of the Lambs*. He's a cannibal serial killer with a taste for haute cuisine who likes to sautee his victims' brains or serve their livers with 'fava beans and fine chianti'. But he's also a brilliant psychological manipulator which is what makes him so frightening AND exciting. When FBI agent Clarice Starling visits him in jail to get help on a case she's working on, they become involved in a dangerous cat and mouse game of power and control.

Some critics say that the problem with all the best fictional villains is that as readers we may peek too far inside their minds, get sucked in and start to lose our moral bearings. This could be the danger of the central character in Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr Ripley*. Tom Ripley is a ruthless murderer and yet it's very tempting to root for him – he's intelligent, charming and very daring.

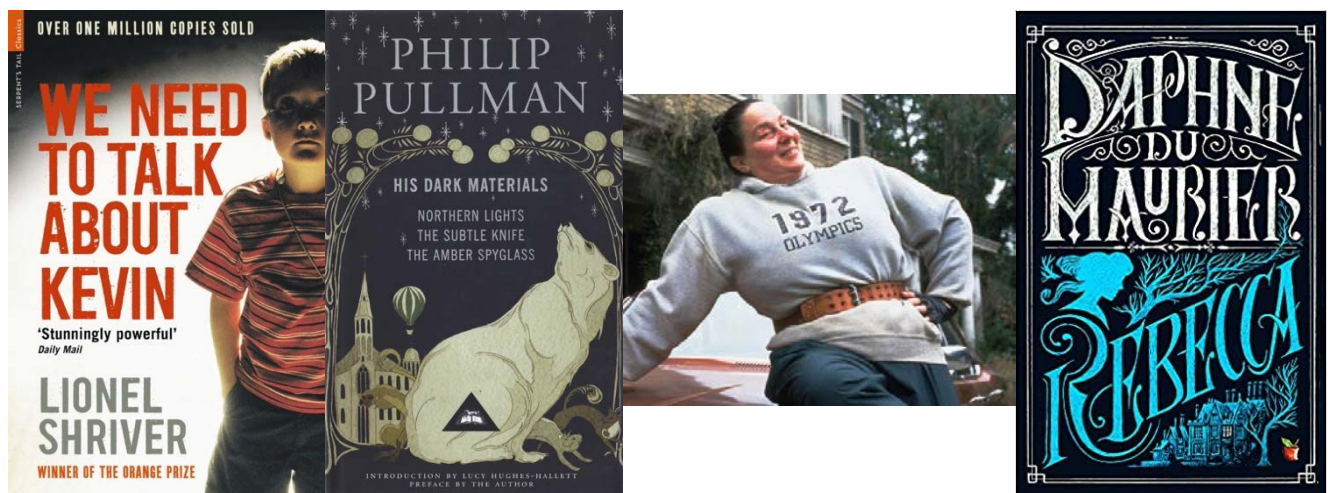


Heroes and villains: good/bad, white hat/black hat, absolute opposites – yes? In fact the most interesting hero/villain pairs are much more complicated than that and are often more like mirror images than opposites. Examples include Sherlock Holmes and Professor Moriarty, Peter Pan and Captain Hook and perhaps most famous of all, Batman and the Joker who need each other to exist and define themselves.

Perhaps the most frightening villains are those who are not separate characters, but aspects of ourselves. This is what RL Stevenson explores in *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and My Hyde*, the story of an upright and respected man who tries to conquer his violent urges with a special potion he creates. But the drug transforms him into a vicious psychopath.

What motivates the villain? What makes someone turn away from all sense of moral responsibility, of right and wrong? Uncertainty around this can be powerful and unsettling. The central character of Lionel Shriver's ***We Need to Talk About Kevin*** is a teenager who locks a group of children into the local school gymnasium and shoots them. The question that the novel circles around is what could possibly have made him do it? In a very different way, it's the question raised in Shakespeare's *Othello* about the scheming Iago whose machinations lead to the tragedy of the play. Is there a possible explanation for who Iago or is it what one critic describes as 'motiveless malignity'?

What about women as villains? Try Nurse Ratched in Ken Kesey's iconic ***One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest***. She's the vicious and sadistic asylum nurse who terrorises the patients with threats of drugging and lobotomy. As the patient narrator observes: 'She's got that bag full of a thousand parts she aims to use in her duties today – wheels and gears, cogs polished to a hard glitter, tiny pills that gleam like porcelain, needles, forceps, rolls of copper wire'.



Philip Pullman's ***Dark Materials*** trilogy features the terrifying Mrs Coulter, ruthless antagonist to the young heroine Lyra. As one reader puts it, 'she brilliantly fuses the fairytale archetypes of stepmother, fairy godmother and wicked witch in one character'. And the result is chilling.

Some of Roald Dahl's most memorable villains are female. They are startling and vivid but for some readers there's an underlying misogyny that makes for uneasy reading. Examples include the witches and most (in)famous of all, the hideous headteacher Miss Trunchbull, who hates children and terrorises them with the terrible 'chokey'.

Can animals or even objects be villains? What about the shark in *Jaws* or the whale in *Moby-Dick*? There are certainly some great haunted houses that seem determined to terrorise and destroy their inhabitants. Think of the Overlook Hotel in *The Shining* or Hill House in Shirley Jackson's novel or Manderley in Daphne du Maurier's ***Rebecca***. And there are lots of others.

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