Do You Prefer Your Children’s Book Characters Obedient or Contrary?

When I turned 9 years old, my brother and I ran away from home and headed to New York City, specifically the Metropolitan Museum of Art. We lived off vending machine snacks purchased from the coins visitors generously left for us in the museum’s fountains, and we amused ourselves by joining oblivious tour groups, playing hide-and-seek in the Modern and Contemporary Art Wing, and avoiding detection every night by memorizing the schedules of the guards. Or so I imagined. In reality, I was lounging in my twin bed, my parents in the next room, reading From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler by E. L. Konigsburg. These minutes spent absorbed in the story were likely the highlight of my day. After seven tedious hours at school, I craved the excitement of the novel, the danger, the rebelliousness, and the contrast to my monotonous life. As an elementary schooler, books like Konigsburg’s were what got me excited about reading. I lived vicariously through characters that were similar enough to me in personality but had so much more fun. I loved heroes and heroines who were not afraid to stand up to authority, who I could empathize with when they made mistakes, and who tried to change the world. After years of experience with the genre, I maintain now that books are best when they feature complex, flawed, and contrary characters because they have fun, make mistakes, and learn important lessons along the way.

Considering how much fun they have, it is no surprise that all of the most famous and cherished children’s book characters are noted troublemakers. Matilda, Harriet the Spy, and Harry Potter spring to mind. However, while there is ample evidence that disobedient characters make memorable characters, there remains the question of why this is so. Perhaps it is simply because their personality traits lead them to exciting and original adventures that make for pleasurable reading. I would never have sat in my room on a Monday night reading any book about
a character whose life was as ordinary and as unromantic as mine, especially if there was something good on TV. Even the book with the most ingenious and original setting would be ruined by a mundane main character. Acknowledging the importance of including exciting characters to create an enticing book forces one to consider the average reader of a children’s book or, really, the average child. Specifically, one should consider the stark contrast between the rambunctious and troublesome characters and the far more complaisant child. It is obvious in the children’s books, which themselves often contain plenty of average children as secondary characters. Harry Potter’s Hogwarts is full of students who live average lives (ignoring the fact that they have magical abilities), rarely get into trouble, and consider themselves powerless in the fight against the evil dark lord. One child in a thousand is as resourceful and adventurous as Harry Potter, yet children’s books are written disproportionately about children like him. It must be human nature that readers enjoy the tales of people braver, cleverer, and more apt to cause trouble than themselves.

While literary characters are often cherished for their unique and marvelous adventures, a flawed human personality is required to give them the depth and relatability to allow readers to empathize. Johnny Tremain, main character in the eponymous children’s novel, had patterns of arrogant, inconsiderate, and reckless behavior. He certainly wasn’t a “perfect” hero, making countless mistakes and wrong judgements that lost him friends and almost led to the collapse of the American Revolution! However, it was these flaws and his very human reactions to events in the book that made him such a popular character. We, the readers could not only criticize but empathize, a feature which brought the book to life for us because we made connections to our own troubled and imperfect existences. While readers need characters they can relate to, there must be something funny, exhilarating, or other-worldly about the people and the plot that
distinguishes the book from the average person’s diary. In order to achieve literary success, authors must find the perfect balance in a relatable main character who faces interesting and original challenges.

Children who are able to empathize with a character will have a much easier time learning those important life lessons, which many argue is the main goal of children’s literature. Showing children the consequences of making certain mistakes is often much more effective than simply telling them not to do something although not as effective than trial and error. Still, it is important that children’s literature show that mistakes are perfectly normal rather than perpetuate the idea that children should seek to self-optimize in the pursuit of “perfect.” Ideally, parents will have conversations with their young readers about the themes, characters, and plots of the novels they are reading. For example, after reading The Witches and The BFG, both by Roald Dahl, my parents and I discussed the importance of never talking to strangers, be they deceptively respectable looking ladies, eighteen-foot-tall, child-gobbling men, or anyone with a white van. Those lessons were so memorable to me because they were subtly woven into the plots of my favorite books and into the adventures of my favorite heroes.

Despite their popularity, some adults argue that children’s books with mischievous or troublesome main characters should be banned because they are a bad influence on children. In some cases this may be advisable. For example books containing vulgar profanities or dark subject matter should not be read by young children. Nevertheless, adults should realize that books with contrary characters do not have a bad influence on children. Children read these books to imagine different worlds, full of adventure and excitement, not to find inspiration on
how to best cause trouble. It is demeaning and unrealistic to assume that children do not see the flaws in the characters or that they will be inspired to imitate their mischief.

Other concerned educators assert that children should only read books about angelic, Mary-Sue type characters so that they may have good role models. This is not an effective way to teach a child a lesson. Firstly, no child wants to read a book with perfect characters because the plot is bound to be uninteresting and the hero dull. Secondly, a child will only avoid doing something if they have experienced the undesirable consequences, not because some author implied that they shouldn’t. Giving a child a perfect role model would only give them unreasonable expectations, leading them to disappointment when they ultimately fail.

All evidence points to the fact that contrary characters are the best. They have adventures and face challenges that get children excited about reading. They make mistakes and have flaws that children find relatable and can learn from. They inspire conversations between readers and parents and force the children to think and judge for themselves. Authors must recognize that children need and love those sorts of books and create characters accordingly. If they want to keep young girls up at night, they must write the page-turning plots that children desire.