

Sensitivity Rewrites: The Cultural Purging of “Books for Children” Author Roald Dahl

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Theme: [History](#)

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Censorship is never innocent, made worse for its strained good intentions. For those responsible for setting and policing such policies, the inner judge comes out, stomping on assumed meanings, interpreting and removing things to ensure the masses are not corrupted. Children’s stories and tales have not been exempted from this train of revision, expurgation and adjustment.

In modifying the language of children’s texts, a number of agents come into play: concerned parents, worried authorities, and the considerations that reflect the temper and mores of the time. Publishers, keen to ensure a wider readership, feel pressure to alter the original text to stay modern and trendy.

In 1853, Charles Dickens took the illustrator and former friend George Cruickshank to task in an essay [“Frauds on the Fairies”](#) for meddling with fairy tales through incorporating a temperance message. “We have lately observed with pain the intrusion of a Whole Hog of unwieldy dimensions into the fairy flower-garden.” It was vital, Dickens warned, to respect fairy tales, most notably in the utilitarian age Britain found itself in.

The latest victim of this lack of respect, albeit one posthumously affected, is Roald Dahl, whose books for children have drawn unwanted attention from a wretched consultancy in conjunction with veteran publisher Puffin Books. Evidently not feeling anyone capable within their ranks, Puffin Books decided to retain Inclusive Minds, which [claims](#) to “offer a range of services to help people engaged in all aspects of children’s literature build a new,

more inclusive world.”

This all took place in step with the announcement in September last year that the streaming company Netflix had bought the Roald Dahl Story Company for the princely sum of £500 million. The contract is [reportedly](#) the biggest content deal of its kind, a fact no doubt helped by the company’s observation that Dahl’s books have sold more than 300 million globally and been translated into 63 languages. “Netflix and The Roald Dahl Story Company,” the company [announced](#), “share a deep love of storytelling and a growing global fan base. Together, we have an extraordinary opportunity to write multiple new chapters of these beloved stories, delighting children and adults around the world for generations to come.’

With the mantra of inclusivity heavy at Puffin Books, in addition to the “growing global fan base”, the publishing outfit faced a fundamental problem. Any position on being inclusive reaches a tipping point where it must exclude. And at Inclusive Minds, there are “Inclusion Ambassadors” who constitute a network of advisors with a nose for sensitivity and a mind for removing the uncomfortable. “The network,” Inclusive Minds goes on to say, “offers book creators a chance to connect with ‘experts by experiences’ at the very earliest stage in the book creation process.”

With the razors ready to modernise (read purge) any of Dahl’s texts, a number of words came in for the chop. A focus was placed upon gender, race, mental health and weight. “Enormously fat” was adjusted to being merely “enormous”, in reference to the gluttonous character of Augustus Gloop in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Oompa-Loompas were transformed into “small people”, with words such as “titchy” and “tiny” excised.

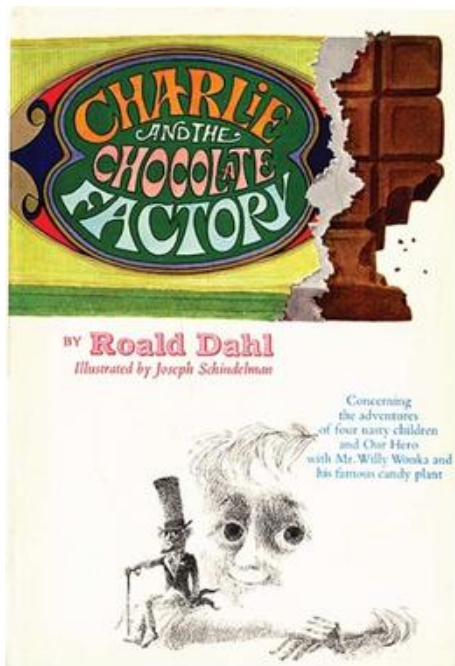
In “Witches”, an “old hag” became the less offensive “old crow”. Other patently silly changes included removing “black” in “Fantastic Mr. Fox” in favour of “murderous, brutal-looking” tractors. The three sons, for some reason, become three daughters, while the Cloud-Men in “James and the Giant Peach” become Cloud People.

Many of these changes are not cosmetic, constituting a direct alternation of the author’s meanings and intentions. Matilda’s reading of Rudyard Kipling, for instance, is considered inappropriate to the sensitivity police. Far better to make her read Jane Austen instead of that bard of British imperialism.

These changes prompted novelist Salman Rushdie, himself all too familiar with the mortal dangers of censorship, to [suggest](#) that Puffin Books and the Dahl estate reel in shame. It was sporting of him to do so, given Dahl’s own lack of sympathy for Rushdie’s treatment at the hands of murderous Islamic fanatics for the publication of *The Satanic Verses*.

Brendan O’Neill, [writing](#) in *The Spectator*, was adamant that Dahl had been culturally vandalised, being “well and truly Ministry of Truthed.” The fun in the texts had been redacted, confined to “the memory hole.”

PEN America chief executive Suzanne Nossel [was also](#) “alarmed at news of ‘hundreds of changes’ to venerated works by [Dahl] in a purported effort to scrub the books of that which might offend someone.” Those wishing to “cheer specific edits to Dahl’s work should consider how the power to rewrite books might be used in the hands of those who do not share their values and sensibilities.”



During his life, Dahl was also the subject of attention from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) for language used in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. The 1964 text originally described the Oompa-Loompas as African “pygmies”. In sympathy with the NAACP, Dahl rewrote the text for the second US edition, turning the Oompa-Loompas into white dwarves with origins in fictional Loompaland.

Ironically enough, Dahl’s agent [convinced](#) the author to change Charlie’s identity, who was originally intended to be a black boy. The reason was crude but simple: making Charlie white would be more appealing to readers.

Amidst the protests against the latest rewrites and cuts, Penguin Random House, which owns Puffin Books, [announced](#) that it would publish the “classic” versions alongside the new editions, enabling readers “to choose which version of Dahl’s stories they prefer.” That’s just what the children need.

Puffin Books should have already heeded the lessons of previous failed efforts to run rewritten texts for contemporary audiences. Efforts in 2010 to subject the Famous Five series of Enid Blyton to “sensitive text revisions” failed. These included alterations of “awful swotter” to “bookworm”, and “tinker” with “traveller”. The publisher Hachette [had to concede](#) in 2016 that the project had not worked.

This latest affair prompted a [suggestion](#) from Philip Pullman on Radio 4 on February 20. Let the passage of time judge the works, rather than the officials of the age. Eventually, they may go out of print, leaving room for other authors and their stories to enchant a new readership. In Dahl’s case, that time is a considerable way off. A salient lesson, then, to avoid overly paid and ill-informed consultancies and respect children’s stories.

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