

Changes to Roald Dahl's classic children's books spark censorship spat

Dahl, who died in 1990 at age 76, was the creator of characters such as Matilda, the BFG, Fantastic Mr. Fox, Willy Wonka and the Twits. His books have sold more than 300 million copies and have been translated into 63 languages, while there have been numerous adaptations of his work4b- Changes to Roald Dahl's classic children's books spark censorship spat

Dahl, who died in 1990 at age 76, was the creator of characters such as Matilda, the BFG and, Willy Wonka. His books have sold more than 300 million copies and have been translated into 63 languages, while there have been numerous adaptations of his work for both the big and small screens. However, the author has long been regarded as controversial and in 2020 his estate officially apologized for antisemitic comments made during his lifetime.

It has now emerged that current editions of his books, published by Puffin, feature the following wording at the bottom of the copyright page: "Words matter. The wonderful words of Roald Dahl can transport you to different worlds and introduce you to the most marvelous characters. This book was written many years ago and so we regularly review the language to ensure that it can continue to be enjoyed by all today." These revisions have been worked on by "sensitivity readers" from an organization called Inclusive Minds, which describes itself as "a collective for people who are passionate about inclusion, diversity, equality and accessibility in children's literature, and are committed to changing the face of children's books."

In a lengthy report published on Saturday, British newspaper The Daily Telegraph revealed that it had found hundreds of changes across the author's many children's books. Close analysis by its journalists revealed that language relating to gender, race, weight, mental health and violence had been cut or rewritten. This included removing words such as "fat" and "ugly," as well as descriptions using the colors black and white. Journalists working on the piece found 59 changes in "The Witches" alone."

Booker prizewinner Salman Rushdie took to Twitter Saturday to voice his opposition to the move by Puffin, in conjunction with the late author's estate. "Roald Dahl was no angel but this is absurd censorship. Puffin Books and the Dahl estate should be ashamed,". Rushdie, 75, is no stranger to the debate around censorship. Following the release of his 1988 novel "The Satanic Verses," the then-Iranian leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini issued a fatwa calling for the his death. The Indian-born author lost the sight in one eye after being attacked at a lecture in New York last year.

Even British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has now waded into the Dahl controversy, speaking out against the move to update the books. When asked at a press briefing on Monday whether it is right to censor children's books, Sunak's spokesperson replied: "When it comes to our rich and varied literary heritage, the Prime Minister agrees with the BFG that you shouldn't 'gobblefunk around with words.'" The spokesperson added "We've always defended the right to free speech and expression."

In a statement sent to CNN, the author's estate, the Roald Dahl Story Company, explained that the current review with Puffin, and in partnership with Inclusive Minds, began in 2020 -- the year before Dahl's works were acquired by Netflix. It said: "We want to ensure that Roald Dahl's wonderful stories and characters continue to be enjoyed by all children today. When publishing new print runs of books written years ago, it's not unusual to review the language used alongside updating other details including a book's cover and page layout. Our guiding principle throughout has been to maintain the storylines, characters, and the irreverence and sharp-edged spirit of the original text. Any changes made have been small and carefully considered."

Suzanne Nossel, CEO of PEN America, a network of writers protecting freedom of expression, responded angrily to news of the revisions on social media. In a thread of 13 tweets, she said the organization was "alarmed" by the changes. She wrote: "If we start down the path of trying to correct for perceived slights instead of allowing readers to receive and react to books as written, we risk distorting the work of great authors and clouding the essential lens that literature offers on society."

Philip Pullman, the acclaimed author of the "His Dark Materials" fantasy series, took a somewhat different approach to the news. While he did not express support for the changes, he told BBC Radio 4's "Today" show that Dahl's books should be left to "fade away." He highlighted the fact that whatever changes might be made today, millions of older editions are circulating in schools, libraries, second-hand stores and elsewhere. He said: "All those words are still there. Are you going to round up all the books and cross them out with a big black pen?" Pullman acknowledged that language changes over time and said children should be encouraged to pick up alternative authors. Of Dahl's books, he said: "Let them fade away -- read better writers."