

# As Classic Novels Get Revised for Today's Readers, a Debate About Where to Draw the Line

The New York Times

N4

**Agatha Christie. Roald Dahl. Ian Fleming. Classics are being reworked to remove offensive language. But some readers wonder, when does posthumous editing go too far?**

By Alexandra Alter and Elizabeth A. Harris, *The New York Times*, April 3, 2023



§1 The estates\* of several **revered** literary figures are altering portions of well-known works to conform to current sensibilities, **stirring** a heated debate among readers and the literary world over whether, and how, classics should be updated.

§2 In Agatha Christie's novels, terms like "Oriental," "Gypsy" and "native" have been taken out, and revised versions of Ian Fleming's "James Bond" books will be **scrubbed** of racist and sexist phrases. Classics by Roald Dahl have been **stripped** of adjectives like "fat" and "ugly" along with references to characters' gender and skin color.

§3 While some changes have been made to books published in decades past, often with little fanfare, many of the current attempts to remove offensive language are systematic and have drawn intense public scrutiny. The effort has left publishers and literary estates **grappling with** how to preserve an author's original intent while ensuring that their work continues to resonate — and sell.

§4 Finding the right balance is a delicate act: part business decision, part artful **conjuring** of the worldview of an author from another era in order to adapt it to the present.

§5 "My great-grandmother would not have wanted to offend anyone," said James Prichard, Christie's great-grandson, and the chairman and chief executive of Agatha Christie Ltd. "I don't believe we need to leave what I would term offensive language in our books, because frankly all I care about is that people can enjoy Agatha Christie stories forever."

§6 The financial and cultural stakes of the exercise are enormous. Authors like Dahl, Christie and Fleming have, together, sold billions of copies of books, and their novels have generated lucrative film franchises. In 2021, Netflix bought the Roald Dahl Story Company for a reported \$1 billion. Leaving the works unchanged, with offensive and sometimes **blatantly** racist phrases throughout, could alienate new audiences and damage an author's reputation and legacy.

§7 But altering a text carries its own risks. Critics say editing books posthumously is an **affront** to authors' creative autonomy and can amount to censorship, and that even a well intentioned effort to **weed out bigotry** can open the door to more pervasive changes.

§8 "You want to think about the precedent that you're setting, and what would happen if someone of a different predisposition or

ideology were to pick up the pen and start crossing things out,” said Suzanne Nossel, the chief executive of PEN America [*a nonprofit organization that works to defend and promote freedom through the advancement of literature, journalism and human rights*].

§9 Changes could also remake the literary and historical record by deleting evidence of an author’s racial and cultural prejudices, and eroding literature’s ability to reflect the place and time in which it was created. “Sometimes the historical value is intimately intertwined with why something is offensive,” Nossel said.

§10 Then there’s the chance that readers who cherish the original works will revolt. Fans of Dahl were outraged in February by the news that his British publisher had changed hundreds of words in his children’s books. Initially reported by *The Telegraph*, a British newspaper, the changes were made after Dahl’s estate began a review of the author’s work in 2020, and hired the consultancy *Inclusive Minds*, which aims to promote “inclusion and accessibility in children’s literature,” to evaluate the books.

§11 The backlash was immediate. Salman Rushdie\*\* called the edits “absurd censorship” and tweeted that “the Dahl estate should be ashamed.” [...] The outcry was so intense that Dahl’s publisher, Puffin, announced it would keep unaltered texts in print for readers who prefer the originals.

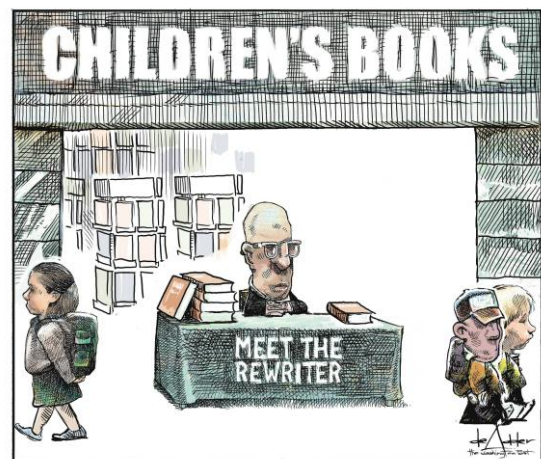
§12 “It’s not unusual to review the language used alongside updating other

details including a book’s cover and page layout,” Rick Behari, a spokesman for the Roald Dahl Story Company, said in a statement issued in February, adding that they sought to preserve “the irreverence and sharp-edged spirit of the original text.”

§13 The question of how to handle offensive language — particularly racist terms and images — in classic texts has long been an issue in children’s literature. About a decade ago, an edition of *Huckleberry Finn* replaced a racial epithet with the word “slave,” over concerns that such an offensive word was causing schools to stop assigning the novel. In more extreme cases, titles have been taken out of circulation. In 2007, *Tintin in the Congo*, by Hergé, was removed from the children’s section in libraries and bookstores over concerns about racism; the book is no longer widely available in the United States.

#### Adapted and abridged

Alexandra Alter writes about publishing and the literary world. Before joining *The Times* in 2014, she covered books and culture for *The Wall Street Journal*.  
Elizabeth A. Harris writes about books and publishing for *The Times*.



\* Estates: the literary estate of a deceased author consists mainly of the copyright and other intellectual property rights of published works, including film, translation rights, original manuscripts of published work, unpublished or partially completed work, and papers of intrinsic literary interest such as correspondence or personal diaries and records. In this context, it describes by extension the trust or legal entity in charge of managing the author’s works after his or her death.

\*\* Salman Rushdie: an internationally acclaimed Anglo-American novelist of Indian origin. His fourth novel, *The Satanic Verses* (1988) made him the subject of several death threats and assassination attempts, including a fatwa calling for his death issued by Ayatollah Khomeini, the then supreme leader of Iran. He survived a knife attack last year in 2022