

Publisher agrees to an uncensored edition of Roald Dahl's books, but not before PEN America exposes its own hypocrisy

Sandy English
2 March 2023

Last week, various media reports indicated that publisher Puffin Books, an imprint of conglomerate Penguin Random House, had made hundreds of changes in the texts of children's books by author and scriptwriter Roald Dahl (1916-1990). The affected books included *James and the Giant Peach* (1961), *Fantastic Mr Fox* (1970), *The Twits* (1980), *The Witches* (1983), *Matilda* (1988) and other well-known and much-loved works.

After an outcry from readers and prominent writers, including novelists Salman Rushdie and Joyce Carol Oates, Puffin announced last weekend that while it would follow through on its censorship, it would also publish an unexpurgated edition of the books later this year.

As part of its plan to put out a new edition of Dahl's works, Puffin Books hired a firm, Inclusive Minds, complete with "Inclusion Ambassadors." (One cannot make this kind of thing up.) With the help of the latter, Puffin, for example, replaced gendered terms in Dahl's books with what it viewed as ungendered ones. In *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, for example, the Oompa Loompas were originally "small men," but Puffin changed that to "small people." The "Cloud-Men" in *James and the Giant Peach* have been transformed into "Cloud-People." In *Matilda*, the phrase "mothers and fathers" is changed to "people" and "heroine" replaced with "hero."

The censors also went to absurd extremes to change what they regard, apparently, as unacceptable racial terms, innocuous as some of them might be. In *James and the Giant Peach*, "his face white with horror" becomes "his face agog with horror."

And so on, to the extent of hundreds of such changes.

In the currently polluted cultural atmosphere, it is not surprising that thousands of people on Twitter and other social media platforms—most of them not right-wing ideologues, but simply fans of Roald Dahl's work—called out this narrow-minded act of censorship. Rushdie commented on Twitter, "Roald Dahl was no angel but this is absurd censorship. Puffin Books and the Dahl estate should be ashamed." Joyce Carol Oates tweeted that "if Dahl is so egregious as to require such wholesale whitewashing (sic) why republish him at all."

While Dahl in his lifetime worked with editors to modernize the language in his works, eliminating certain racial stereotypes, for example, and was accused of anti-Semitism, nothing like this level of censorship, or even this *kind* of censorship, has been attempted

in the modern era. Harriet and Thomas Bowdler, thanks to their publishing *The Family Shakespeare* (1807), an expurgated edition of the playwright's works, gave birth to the generally insulting verb "to bowdlerize."

Openly right-wing attacks on literature, by religious bigots, ultra-nationalists, fascists and others, proliferate in the US and elsewhere.

The Dahl case is part of a growing wave of attacks on literature by the proponents of upper middle class identity politics. Authors' works are now often scrutinized by "sensitivity readers" hired by publishers to weed out terms or phrases that might potentially be objectionable on grounds of race, gender or sexual orientation. This is a form of self-censorship, with damaging implications.

As has been the case in the #MeToo witch-hunt, careers have been destroyed—and works even pulped—on the basis of unsubstantiated allegations and gossip. Infamously, in 2021, this happened to Blake Bailey and his authorized biography of novelist Philip Roth.

Publishers, concerned only with social approval and profits, are now on the alert for books written by a person of the "wrong" ethnic background or gender, that might be attacked by racialists, feminists or anyone else from the identity politics industry. This holds especially true when a book publisher plans to back a book with an expensive publicity campaign. Macmillan faced this sort of situation in 2020 with Jeanine Cummins's novel *American Dirt*. The author of the best-selling work about Mexican immigrants came under attack for not being "an actual Latino," but "white," and for therefore having produced an "inauthentic" book.

These forces are active in all corners of the book world. The partisans of #DisruptTexts seek to exclude or reduce the emphasis on the works of Shakespeare and other authors such as F. Scott Fitzgerald (*The Great Gatsby*), Arthur Miller (*The Crucible*) and Harper Lee (*To Kill a Mockingbird*) from university and high school classrooms.

Not all by far of the objections to the censorship of Dahl's work were made in good faith. Media outlets such as Britain's right-wing *Daily Telegraph* trumpeted the case to pursue their own reactionary agendas, against the supposed "woke" left.

A spokesman for UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, whose commitment to democratic rights runs so deep he wants to ban strikes, commented, "When it comes to our rich and varied literary

heritage, the Prime Minister agrees with the BFG [Big Friendly Giant, a Dahl character] that we shouldn't gobblefunk around with words." For her part, Camilla, Queen Consort, contributed to the British monarchy's centuries-long commitment to freedom of speech by telling a group of authors to resist "those who may wish to curb the freedom of your expression or impose limits on your imagination."

More insidious, however, is the commentary by PEN America CEO Suzanne Nossel, whose remarks have been widely promoted in the media. In response to the news of the "sensitivity" censorship of Dahl's works, she wrote a long tweet that read, in part, "At @PENAmerica we are alarmed at news of 'hundreds of changes' to venerated works by @roald_dahl in a purported effort to scrub the books of that which might offend someone."

Nossel continued, "So much of literature could be construed as offensive to someone—based on race, gender, religion, age, socio-economic status or myriad other factors. Such portrayals are vital topics for discussion and debate, leading to new insights."

These banal and scripted remarks need to be placed in their proper context.

Nossel is a particularly noxious advocate of "human rights imperialism," with a lengthy and filthy history behind her. From 1999 to 2001, Nossel was Deputy to the Ambassador for UN Management and Reform at the US Mission to the UN under Richard Holbrooke, a longtime diplomat-gangster steeped, as the WSWS pointed out in an obituary, "in the commission and cover-up of bloody crimes" from Vietnam to the Balkans to Afghanistan.

In the Obama administration, Nossel served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for International Organization Affairs under Hillary Clinton. At the State Department, Nossel helped initiate "groundbreaking human rights resolutions" on Iran, Syria, Libya and other targets of American policy at the UN Human Rights Council. In other words, her specialty was expounding on "democratic" and "women's rights," as part of creating the proper political climate for bombings, invasions and other military operations.

At PEN America, where she has held leading positions since 2013, Nossel has played an atrocious role over the past year in promoting cultural-militarist propaganda in the US-NATO proxy war in Ukraine.

Nowhere on PEN America or Nossel's twitter feed will one find the slightest objection to the destruction of statues of the great Russian poet Alexander Pushkin throughout Ukraine by nationalists and fascists. PEN America has nothing to say about the pulping of tens of thousands of Russian works or the tens of thousands more that have been removed from Ukrainian libraires by order of the Ukrainian parliament.

PEN America, in fact, has been little more than the cultural arm of anti-Russian chauvinism in the US. It has held several functions in support of the war in Ukraine such as its "Voices of Ukraine: Readings in Support of Ukraine," held in Manhattan last year.

PEN America's Twitter feed is filled with comments such as, "Russian forces in #Ukraine have looted tens of thousands of pieces, including avant-garde oil paintings and Scythian gold. Experts say it is the biggest art heist since the Nazis in World War II, intended to strip Ukraine of its cultural heritage." The tweet

compares the Putin regime's actions to the vandalism in the ancient city of Palmyra in Syria by ISIS in 2016 (though *not* the looting of the Iraq Museum under the auspices of the US military in 2003) and the bombing of Guernica in 1937 by the Luftwaffe during the Spanish Civil War.

In December, Nossel and other PEN America representatives traveled to Ukraine, where they met with Tetyana Teren, the Executive Director of PEN Ukraine. Teren is the former head of the government-run Ukrainian Book Institute, which calls, along with PEN Ukraine, Lviv International Book Forum, and the Book Arsenal in Kiev, for a total international ban on Russian literature.

After Nossel returned from Ukraine, PEN America published a lengthy report entitled "Ukrainian Culture under Attack: Erasure of Ukrainian Culture in Russia's War against Ukraine," in which the purpose of Russia's invasion is portrayed as the deliberate destruction of Ukrainian culture. While the Russian military has no doubt breached international conventions in destroying cultural centers, the article is a piece of US-NATO war propaganda, designed to demonize everything Russian. The report quotes one Ukrainian museum official as saying, "Destroying our culture is the purpose of everything the Russians are doing. Culture and language strengthen our nation."

These are conceptions that are not simply right wing, but are a direct product of the fascist current in Ukrainian politics. They flow from the ideas promoted by figures such as Nazi collaborator Stepan Bandera in the 1930s and 40s.

The outcry over the "correcting" of Dahl's work succeeded in preserving at least one version of the original works. It also did a service to contemporary culture by exposing Nossel and PEN America as pro-militarist hypocrites and propagandists who have no right to lecture anyone about artistic freedom.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)