

IS IT OK TO REWRITE OLD BOOKS SO THEY'RE LESS OFFENSIVE?

Over the last few years, there has been heated debate over changes that have been made to previously published books, including those by famous writers like Roald Dahl and David Walliams. The changes have been made to remove content that people could now find offensive, for example, because the language is outdated, or the description of a character portrays a harmful **stereotype**. Some people think it's important to make these changes so that books, in particular children's books, reflect today's values of inclusion and diversity, while others argue that changing the author's words is rewriting history and it would be better to read the original book and appreciate

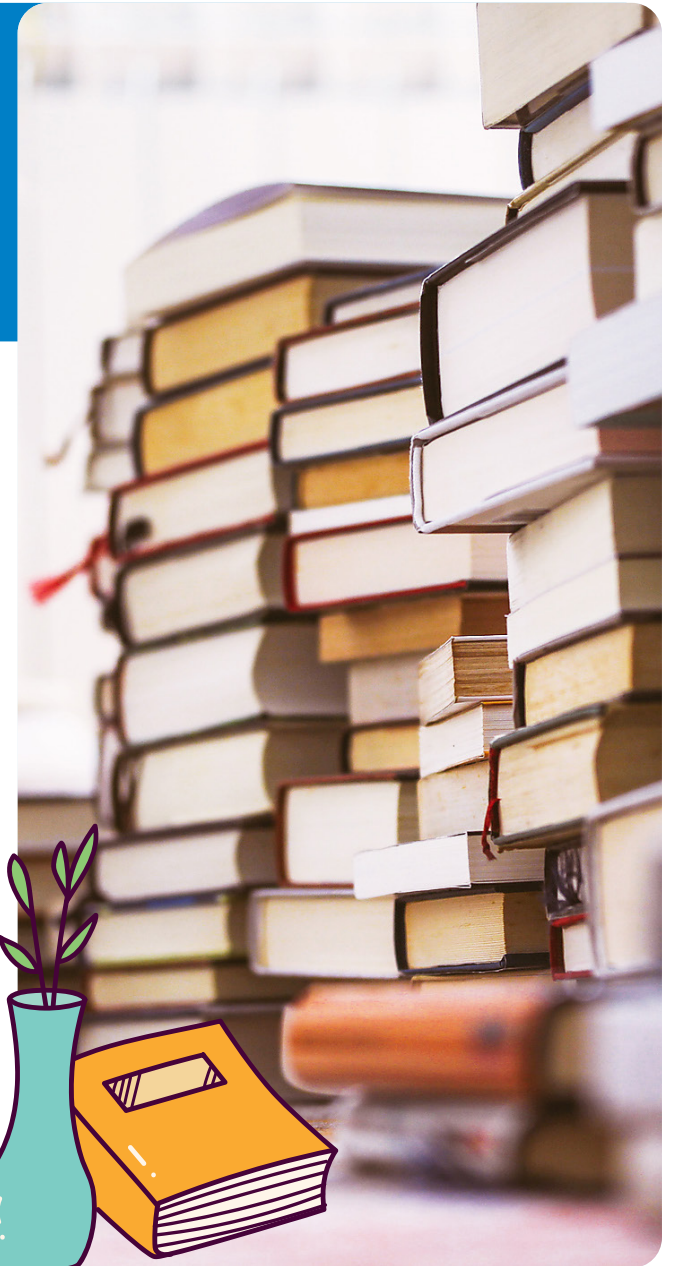
how far we've come. We weigh up both sides of the debate.

SENSITIVITY READERS

A sensitivity reader is someone who's employed by a publishing company to read through the **manuscript** of a book and advise on any content that could be considered offensive in some way. They help to ensure that sensitive topics, such as race, culture, gender, sexuality and disability are presented in an accurate and respectful way. Sometimes, a sensitivity reader is someone from the background that's described in the book, for instance, a **transgender** sensitivity reader might be employed to read through a book that features a transgender character. The sensitivity reader will offer comments and suggestions, but it's up to the author and the publisher to decide whether to include any of the changes in the final version. A sensitivity reader is usually employed to read through a book before it is published for the first time, but there are examples of publishers employing sensitivity readers to make suggestions about ways that old books could be updated to remove content that could now be seen as offensive.



All pics: Getty



WHICH BOOKS HAVE BEEN CHANGED?

In 2023, the publishing company, Puffin, hit the headlines when it employed sensitivity readers to update books by the author Roald Dahl, who died in 1990. As a result, changes were made to descriptions of certain characters. For example, the words 'fat' and 'ugly' were removed, which meant that in *The Twits*, the character of Mrs Twit was described as "beastly" rather than "ugly and beastly" and in *James and the Giant Peach*, Aunt Sponge was described as "a nasty old brute" rather than "terrifically fat". In *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, the Oompa Loompas were no longer described as "small men" but as "small people" and in *The Witches*, in a paragraph describing that witches are bald underneath their wigs, a new line was added saying: "There are plenty of other reasons why women might wear

wigs and there is certainly nothing wrong with that." Puffin stated that they made the changes so that Dahl's books "can continue to be enjoyed by all today". However, there was a backlash from some who argued that the books should remain in their original form. In response, Puffin said that both the original and edited versions of the books would be made available so that readers can choose the version they prefer.

In the same year, it was also announced that the James Bond book series by Ian Fleming was being reviewed by sensitivity readers to remove some racist language. As not all of the potentially offensive language was removed, a **disclaimer** was added to reprints, stating: "This book was written at a time when terms and attitudes which might be considered offensive by modern readers were commonplace."

by podcaster Georgie Ma for "normalising casual racism from an early age". HarperCollins said: "A new story will be written to replace 'Brian Wong' in future editions."



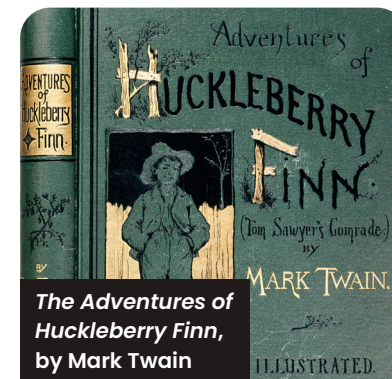
Children's author, David Walliams



First editions of Ian Fleming's James Bond books

In 2021, the publisher HarperCollins made the decision to remove an entire story from future editions of the David Walliams' book, *The World's Worst Children*. The story, which features a Chinese character named Brian Wong, had been criticised

In 2011 the US publisher, NewSouth books, announced plans to publish a new version of the 1884 novel *Huckleberry Finn*, removing offensive racial terms throughout the book. The publisher stated that this was because people were avoiding reading the classic book due to its racist language. However, those against the changes said the



The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, by Mark Twain

language is a key part of the book, as it reflects the views of society at the time. They also pointed out that the main character, Huck, starts out as racist, but comes to realise the error of his ways.



Would you prefer to read the original or edited versions of Roald Dahl's books?

The Doctor Dolittle books by Hugh Lofting, which were first published in the 1920s, were edited in the 1960s and 1970s to remove some language and plot elements that could be seen as offensive. Then, in 1986, a new edition of *The Story of Doctor Dolittle* was published with further changes that were requested by the author's son, who said: "In light of today's sensitivities, certain incidents were considered by some to be disrespectful to **ethnic minorities** and, therefore, perhaps inappropriate for today's young reader."

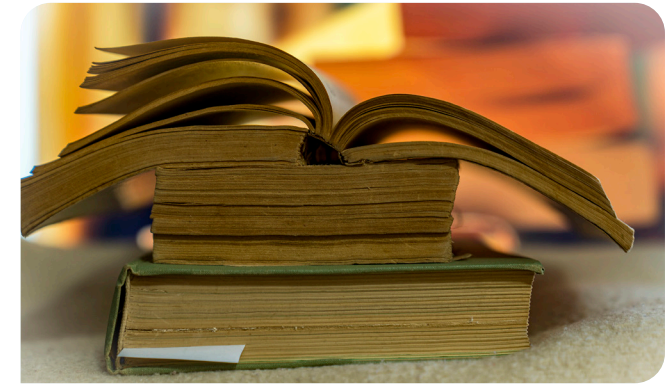


One of Hugh Lofting's Doctor Dolittle books

CHANGE WITH THE TIMES OR LEARN FROM THE PAST?

Those in favour of removing offensive language from old books say that the language we read in literature should reflect modern values of inclusivity and tolerance. It's argued that this helps to protect readers, especially young people, from harmful stereotypes and offensive language that could upset them or influence their behaviour. In the worst cases, it could lead to bullying and prejudice.

On the other hand, there's the argument that books written in the past reflect the attitudes and beliefs of the time, and that rewriting them would be like rewriting history. These books act as a window into the past, allowing us to understand how people viewed the world what their values were and to appreciate how far we've come. Reading and questioning books from the past in relation to today's values can also help young people to develop important **critical thinking** skills.



WHEN DOES EDITING BECOME CENSORSHIP?

There is an argument to say that rewriting old books to remove anything that could be considered offensive allows an author's work to reach a wider audience. If the authors of old books were alive today, they may well have welcomed changes that meant their books could continue to be enjoyed by future generations. Christopher Lofting, the son of the author Hugh Lofting, defended changes to *The Story of Doctor Dolittle*, saying: "My dad would have been appalled at the suggestion that any part of his work could give offence and would have been the first to make the changes himself."

Others would say that rewriting the author's original words changes the way they wanted to express themselves, which is a form of **censorship**. Also, it's difficult to know where the sensitivity editing should stop. The updates to the James Bond books were criticised because, although the racist language was removed, the **sexist** and **homophobic** language was not. In some cases, taking out everything that could potentially offend someone would make it a different book entirely.

BOWDLERISM

The practice of rewriting literature dates back a long way. In the early 19th century, an English doctor named Thomas Bowdler published a version of the works of **William Shakespeare** that removed anything that could be considered offensive, such as swear words, in order to make Shakespeare's plays more appropriate for family reading. His changes divided opinion at the time. Although some people appreciated them, others thought he was wrong to interfere with classic works of literature. Since then, the term "Bowdlerism" has been used to mean editing a work of literature to make it more acceptable to readers.



DISCLAIMERS INSTEAD?

One alternative to rewriting old books is adding a disclaimer. In 2020, **Disney** decided to add a disclaimer at the beginning of some of its old films, warning viewers that they contain harmful stereotypes. The disclaimer reads: "This program includes negative depictions and/or mistreatment of people or cultures. These stereotypes were wrong then and are wrong now. Rather than remove this content, we want to acknowledge its harmful impact, learn from it and spark conversation to create a more inclusive future together."

Some people think that, instead of rewriting old books to remove offensive language, a disclaimer should be added so that readers know what to expect and can choose not to read it if they prefer. If a book stops selling well, the publisher may decide to stop printing new copies, which means it goes 'out of print' and is no longer available to buy. The author Philip Pullman says: "If Roald Dahl books offend us, let them go out of print. Read all of these other wonderful authors who are writing today, who don't get much of a look-in because of Dahl."



OPINIONS

Author of young adult fiction, Charlie Higson, points out the benefits of rewriting old books: "Times change and sensitivities change and, thankfully, we now accept that some things in older books can be very upsetting to some modern readers and a more diverse readership."

Journalist and author, Amanda Craig, disagrees, saying: "Regarding a historic text, even if it is offensive, and a number of children's books are offensive, I think we still have to let it stand because otherwise you are lying about the past, and I'm against censorship of the past."



YES, IT IS OK TO REWRITE OLD BOOKS SO THEY'RE LESS OFFENSIVE...



1. It's important that the language used in old books is updated to ensure that it reflects modern values of inclusivity and tolerance. The changes can usually be done without altering the storyline too much.
2. Young readers, in particular, need to be protected from offensive language and harmful stereotypes which could upset them or influence their behaviour. Updating problematic language can also help to reduce the risk of bullying and prejudice.
3. Rewriting old books allows an author's work to reach a wider, more diverse audience, ensuring that it remains in print for longer and that future generations can enjoy it too.

NO, IT IS NOT OK TO REWRITE OLD BOOKS SO THEY'RE LESS OFFENSIVE...



1. Old books are a window into the past and they reflect the attitudes of the time. It's better to learn from these books and appreciate how far we've come than to try to rewrite history. This can help young people to develop important critical thinking skills.
2. Rewriting an author's words is a form of censorship and it's difficult to know where the sensitivity editing should stop. If everything is taken out that could possibly offend someone, it could make it an entirely different book.
3. It would be better for books to have disclaimers warning readers about any content that might be offensive, then people can choose to not to read them. The book may go out of print, but there are plenty of other books to enjoy.

GLOSSARY

stereotype – a general belief or assumption that all members of a particular group behave or act the same, even though these beliefs are oversimplified and inaccurate

manuscript – the original, unpublished version of a book or other piece of work. Traditionally, manuscripts were handwritten, but they are now usually typed

transgender – a person whose gender identity is different from the sex (male or female) they were assigned at birth. They may identify as male, female, both or neither

disclaimer – a statement that explains something or warns people about potentially offensive content, so that they know what to expect

ethnic minority – a group of people from a different culture, race or background from most of the people in the country where they live. They may speak a different language or celebrate different customs

William Shakespeare – an English playwright who lived from 1564 until 1616. He wrote many famous plays, including *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Often called one of the greatest writers in the English language, his work is still studied and performed all over the world today

critical thinking – the ability to consider information carefully, ask questions and make your own decisions

censorship – the practice of controlling or limiting people's access to information, ideas or media that is considered offensive, harmful or unacceptable

sexist – prejudiced treatment or discrimination based on someone's sex or gender

homophobic – dislike and discrimination towards gay people or the LGBTQ+ community

Disney – a large media and entertainment company known for its animated movies, theme parks and media networks. It is famous for characters like Mickey Mouse and movies like *The Lion King* and *Frozen*. The company was created by Walt Disney in 1923 in Los Angeles, USA. Its full name is the Walt Disney Company

QUESTIONS

1. Who is your favourite author?
2. Have you ever read a book that contains language that you found offensive?
3. Do you agree with the changes that have been made to Roald Dahl's books?
4. Would you prefer to read the original or updated version of an old book?
5. If you were an author, would you like to have advice from a sensitivity reader?
6. Have you ever seen a Disney film that has a disclaimer at the beginning?
7. Do you think books that might cause offense should come with a disclaimer?
8. Do you agree that reading offensive language can lead to bullying and prejudice?
9. Do you think that it would be better for some old books to go out of print rather than be rewritten?
10. If you ran a publishing company, would you have old books updated to make them less offensive?

