

Find a Therapist (City or Postcode)

✓ Verified by Psychology Today



Vyvyan Evans Ph.D.  
Language in the Mind

## COGNITION

# The Psychology of Censorship: Changes to Roald Dahl's Words

When society changes, should literary classics from a bygone era be updated too?

Posted February 27, 2023

Reviewed by Michelle Quirk



## KEY POINTS

- Changes to works of celebrated children's author Roald Dahl to reflect modern views of language have provoked widespread condemnation.
- This raises issues surrounding censorship and how to best address culturally significant works when society changes.
- Rewriting works from a bygone era may potentially lead to canceling the past and preclude opportunities to learn for the future.

Some works of literature are concerned with the impact on society of censorship. An obvious example is George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, in which language itself is altered to prevent *thoughtcrime*. Another is Milan Kundera's *The Book*

The book is composed of various parts that explore censorship (a.k.a. “forgetting”) in life, society, and politics while living under communist rule in Eastern Europe.

But last week, the literary world was rocked by the news that the publisher Puffin (an imprint of Penguin Random House) had made hundreds of changes to the works of celebrated children’s author Roald Dahl to reflect modern views of language. This prompted international condemnation by many, with author Salman Rushdie branding the decision “absurd censorship,” and with even the UK Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, weighing in on the debate, stating: “we shouldn’t gobblefunk around with [Dahl’s] words.”



Salman Rushdie/Twitter

But some expert commentators were more equivocal. Most surprising perhaps was the reaction of the novelist Philip Pullman,

ostensibly an opponent of censorship. Pullman declared last week, on BBC Radio, that the publisher should simply stop publishing the books altogether, allowing them to go “out of print” rather than rewriting them. This appeared to be an implied endorsement of the perceived lack of “sensitivity” in Dahl’s books that makes them unsuitable for a modern audience—the ostensible justification used by Puffin to make the changes, with their explanation “words matter” in introducing the revised editions.

Needless to say, Roald Dahl ferociously guarded his words, and he largely refused to allow changes to be made to his works against his wishes during his lifetime. Some of his works contained racist language, and he did agree, under pressure, in 1974, for changes to be made to *Charlie and the*

was no caution. Readers including Ernest Hemingway and Winston Churchill ferociously prevented edits that they didn't approve of.

Ultimately, last week, after days of fierce debate across social media and in the press, Puffin performed an about-face, and announced they would continue to publish Dahl's original works, alongside the revised, "sensitized" books.

But this still begs the question, is the use of "sensitivity readers," now a common practice in the publishing industry, an act of censorship when applied to older works, and to an author long dead who can't object? Or is this simply something that renders works reflecting an earlier time more relevant for today's society?

## What was the fuss about?

It was first reported on February 17, 2023, that in the rewritten versions of Dahl's classics, Augustus Gloop in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is no longer "fat" but "enormous" and Oompa Loompas are gender neutral. Mrs. Twit is now just "beastly" rather than "ugly and beastly," and "a weird African language" is no longer "weird."

ARTICLE CONTINUES AFTER ADVERTISEMENT

words as fat, ugly, and crazy have been removed to reflect body positivity and to provide arguably more sensitive depictions of mental health. Moreover, gendered descriptions have also been changed, where "boys and girls" now becomes "children."

#### THE BASICS

Why Education Is Important

[Find a Child Therapist](#)

But in places, the rewriting is more extensive. For instance, in *Matilda*, the protagonist no longer reads the works of Rudyard Kipling but Jane Austen. And the rewriting of some passages includes changes to descriptions that Roald Dahl would not have recognized in his lifetime and would most certainly have refused to accept.

## So why the fuss?

The fuss actually boils down to the very statement with which Puffin introduces its rewritten editions: "words matter." And authors do not compose their words in a vacuum. Writing reflects the societies in which authors live and breathe, the same societies that they respond to and write about, and which provide the imaginative seeds that they turn into words, descriptions, characters, and books. While society moves on, Dahl's words are frozen in the time in which he lived. If we judge him, then we should judge the society he grew up in, too, the same society that led to our own.



INTL



INTL

And it was, in part, this that provoked the backlash against Puffin's decision, which the publisher could have reasonably anticipated. To, in effect, change substantial portions of a writer's works—more than deleting or changing the odd word—is to change the works themselves.

Written works, once signed off by an author and published, travel out into the world on their own, of course. Some works are revised, abridged, and translated. And each revision or translation changes the works in some way. *Cloud Atlas* by David Mitchell, for example, has two authorized editions, a US and UK edition, which differ quite markedly because of the author's engagement with two different editors. Some, like the Wordsworth narrative poem *The Prelude*, has two editions by dint of being published by the poet at two different points in life, following years of revision, the so-called 1805 and 1850 editions.

ARTICLE CONTINUES AFTER ADVERTISEMENT

Other works, such as the Bible, or the works of Shakespeare, that have become cultural and literary cornerstones over centuries, have been edited, revised, bowdlerized, and trans-

...were only in fragments, which means only part of the relevant words have passed down to us.

But the difference with the works of Roald Dahl is that, unlike Shakespeare, his works remain under copyright. Hence, the original decision by Puffin to simply rewrite the books and allow the originals to lapse was controversial to say the least. And there is no waning in popularity for Dahl to support the proposal of Philip Pullman to just unpublish them.

After all, Roald Dahl has sold more than 300 million copies, and his work has been translated into 63 languages, while there have been numerous adaptations of his work for both the big and small screens. He is the author of characters such as Matilda, the BFG, Fantastic Mr. Fox, Willy Wonka, and the Twits. His characters are part of our cultural legacy. And, as just one example, Roald Dahl was the sixth most borrowed author on the British Library Public Lending Rights children's list of 2020/2021.

## **Canceling the past damages the future.**

Ultimately, any decision to rewrite a body of popular and culturally significant work that is copyrighted, without retaining the original versions in print, does amount to cultural vandalism and is an absurd act of censorship, as aptly stated by Salman Rushdie.

Censorship of this kind affects us all, as stories give life to our mental lives. To rewrite is, in effect, to cancel the past. And, without the past, we have no opportunity to learn, and we lack purchase for the future. This is always the error of censorship—to cancel aspects of culture, ultimately, has an adverse impact on material life, as in the case of Mao Zedong's

ARTICLE CONTINUES AFTER ADVERTISEMENT

It is right and fitting that the original works of Roald Dahl continue to remain in print. And readers are now free to choose which versions—original or sensitized—they consume.



ADVERTISEMENT

## About the Author

---



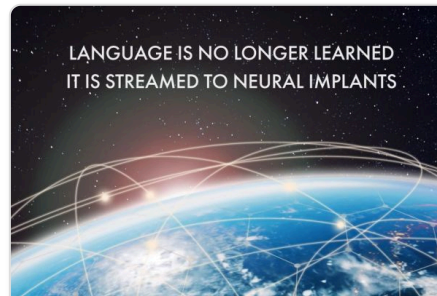
**Vyvyan Evans, Ph.D.**, is a language and communication consultant. He received his Ph.D. from Georgetown University.



TRANSGENDER 6 MIN READ

## Why Biological Sex Is Not the Same as Gender

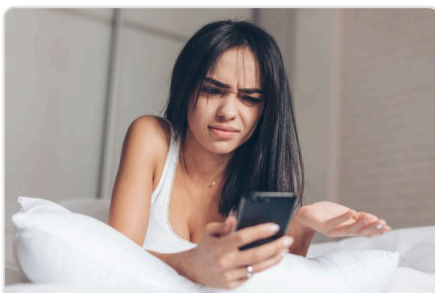
Biological sex is not binary, but runs on a spectrum.



COGNITION 5 MIN READ

## Are Artificially-Enhanced Minds the Future of Communication?

With the advent of neural implant technology, the prospect of tech-enhanced humans within our lifetime is a real possibility.



COGNITION 5 MIN READ

## What's the Problem With Using the Thumbs-Up Emoji?

Gen Z-ers tend to perceive some of the most common "positive" emojis as old-fashioned or even hostile.

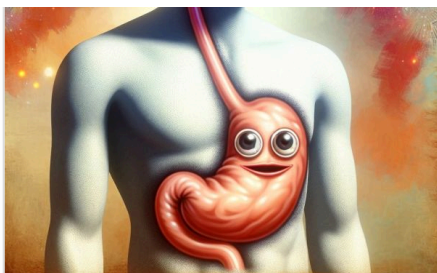


PARAPSYCHOLOGY 6 MIN READ

## Could Digital Telepathy Render Language Obsolete?

It has been predicted that new brain technology will lead to "digital telepathy," making language obsolete.



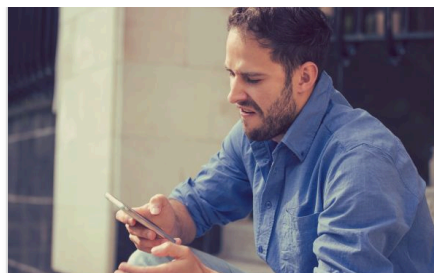


COGNITION

3 MIN READ

## Are Neurons Required for Cognition and Memory?

Neuroscientists have long believed that cognition and memory are the exclusive province of neurons.



COGNITION

2 MIN READ

## Why You Shouldn't Try to Resolve a Conflict Over Text

Texting can facilitate breakdowns in communication.

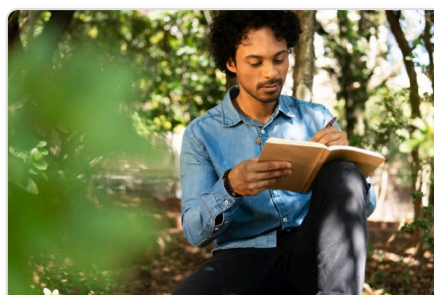


COGNITION

13 MIN READ

## 10 Problems With Consciousness

These major problems must be considered when tackling the concept.



COGNITION

3 MIN READ

## Why Writing by Hand Is Better for Your Brain

Writing by hand instead of typing deepens content processing and supports emotional health.

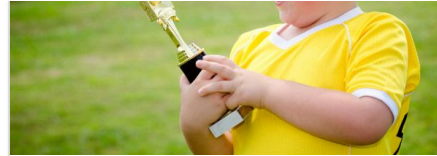


COGNITION

5 MIN READ

## Fully Immersed Symbolic Thinking

Symbols and symbolic thinking are either poorly or never defined in archaeological literature.



COGNITION

4 MIN READ

## The Power of Participation Trophies

Participation trophies have been a part of kids sports for generations, but backlash has been fierce since the 1990s.

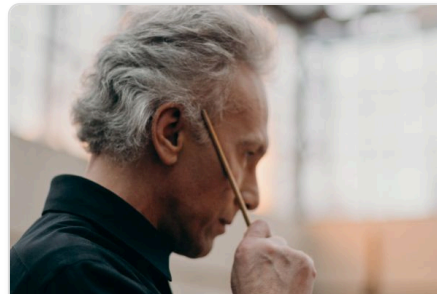


COGNITION

7 MIN READ

## Living With Someone Who Constantly Complains

People who complain a lot are struggling with obsessive thoughts that lead them to ruminate, and will have difficulty giving up the habit.



COGNITION

4 MIN READ

## Should You Take Creatine to Boost Your Brain?

Creatine is a compound found naturally in our bodies, producing better athletic performance and brain health.

### Find a Therapist

Get the help you need from a therapist near you—a FREE service from Psychology Today.



**Countries:**

Australia

Austria

Belgium

Canada

Denmark

Hong Kong

Ireland

New Zealand

Singapore

South Africa

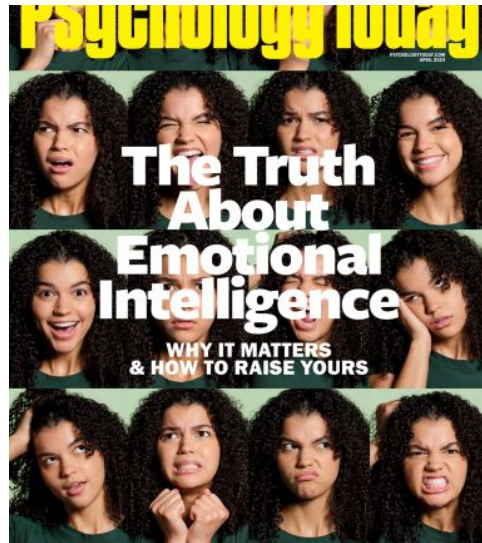
Sweden

Switzerland

United Kingdom

United States

**Are you a Therapist? [Get Listed Today](#)**



[Subscribe Today](#)

[About](#)

[Editorial Process](#)

[Privacy](#)

[Terms](#)

[Accessibility](#)

[Do Not Sell Or Share My Personal Information](#)

 [International](#)

Psychology Today © 2024 Sussex Publishers, LLC