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BOOKMARK

James and the giant rewrite

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Years ago, when I was a small girl, I used to listen to “Chapter a Day” on Wisconsin Public Radio. When the host read aloud from “The Wind in the Willows,” I read along with my own copy of the book. I remember being deeply confused when we came to the line where Ratty calls Mole, “You silly ass!” and the guy on the radio read it as, “You silly fool!”

Wait, what?

My parents explained that “ass” was not a nice word and so “fool” was substituted, and I remember being outraged. Ass was what Kenneth Grahame wrote. Ass should be what the radio guy said.

Years later I learned the term for this kind of editing: to Bowd-

lerize. It’s named for Thomas Bowdler, an 18th-century physician who took it upon himself to expurgate the “offensive” parts of Shakespeare’s plays. (Instead of “Out, damned spot!” he chose “Out, crimson spot!” and changed Ophelia’s suicide to an accidental drowning.)

I bring this up now because people — everyone from Salman Rushdie to the prime minister of the United Kingdom — are outraged that sensitivity readers have altered the books of Roald Dahl and new, expurgated editions are coming out of “James and the Giant Peach,” “Charlie and the Chocolate Factory” and others.

Words like “fat” and “double-chinned” have been removed because they might be hurtful; “ordinary” women’s jobs changed from typing letters for businessmen to being “top scientists,” in order to avoid appearing sexist.

The goal, apparently, is to remove anything in the books that might offend, but my question is, why? Since when is the goal of literature to be absolutely bland?

This is not Dahl’s first rodeo. He himself changed the appearance of his Oompa Loompas several times over the years, only realizing after the fact that his original depiction of them (as pygmies from Africa) might be considered racist.

The owners of Dahl’s copyright have every legal right to change his words. Still, we should note that this is nothing new; we have been down this road many times over hundreds of years.

It’s been done to Shakespeare and to Dahl. It’s been done to

“Huckleberry Finn” and “Doctor Dolittle” and the novels of Enid Blyton (“‘Queer’ has become ‘odd’ and ‘gay’ is translated as ‘happy,’” the Daily Mail reported) and some of the books of Dr. Seuss.

It happened in Minnesota to F. Scott Fitzgerald not that long ago — in 1996, at a celebration for Fitzgerald’s 100th birthday in St. Paul, Garrison Keillor, Patricia Hampl and other luminaries read “The Great Gatsby” out loud, in its entirety. Well, almost its entirety — they chose to leave out certain racial epithets from what they read.

There was great outcry then, too, and furious arguments on all sides.

Is it right to remove the N-word from Gatsby at a public event? Is it right to remove “queer” from Enid Blyton and “fat” from Roald Dahl? Does doing so make the books better, or just safer?

Trickier questions might be: Whose standards do we use? Who gets to decide who might be offended? Who stops the sensitivity readers from changing not just words, but meaning?

I like to believe that readers are not fragile, that they can encounter disturbing language and put it in context. I don’t think everyone needs to be protected from everything.

This kind of meddling doesn’t make books better, but — drip by drip — it makes them less interesting to read.

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