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Don't rewrite books

First, they came for Roald Dahl. Anyone who thought the politically correct rewriting would stop at the irreverent author of such children's classics as "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory" and "Fantastic Mr. Fox" was, of course, sadly mistaken.

The news that hundreds of changes have been made in Dahl's classics is now followed by word that Ian Fleming, the creator of James Bond, is getting an emergency rewrite as well.

This is a very bad idea.

For a start, where does it end? There's no limiting principle that would prevent the editing of nearly every great writer in the Western canon. Homer is cauldron of toxic masculinity. Chaucer, who has been removed from curricula at various universities, would need extensive re-working — for the offense of relaying 14th-century attitudes toward women, if nothing else. As for Shakespeare, has anyone read "Othello"?

We get the word "bowdlerize" from Thomas Bowdler, who published a version of Shakespeare more appropriate for families in the early 19th century. He meant well, but his name has become synonymous with ham-fisted editing of texts for political or social reasons. The first Bowdler edition of the bard's works axed about 10% of the original, taking out blasphemous language and other unsettling material. The suicide of Ophelia, for instance, became an accidental drowning.

Even Bowdler, by the way, wasn't sure he was able to fix "Othello."

Then, there's the matter of the integrity of the record. Great authors use every word in a book for a reason. Changes in the language, even if done with care, change the meaning and the nature of the work. If Roald Dahl used colorful language



**RICH
LOWRY**
SYNDICATED COLUMNIST

to describe a character (and he quite often did) and it's stripped out for fear of offending people, say, with double chins, the character has been changed -- without the author's permission and counter to how he published his work.

This is no more defensible than someone deciding Monet's water lilies should be an ever-so slightly different shade of green, or that Tchaikovsky should have written his "1812 Overture" in D-sharp minor instead of E-flat major.

Any such suggestions would be considered cultural vandalism and the same should apply to the woke rewriting of literature.

Relatedly, the edits of enduring works are never, ever going to do anything other than make them worse — less colorful, pointed, and eloquent. If nothing else, this is a basic question of literary talent and flair.

To return to the example of Dahl, he's been edited by an outfit called

Inclusive Minds ("passionate about inclusion, diversity, equality and accessibility in children's literature"). To put it simply, Dahl was good at writing; Inclusive Minds is good at DEI. If any editor at Inclusive Minds had a fraction of Dahl's abilities, this remarkable person wouldn't be working at expurgating someone else's works but writing his or her own beloved children's books.

Finally, we call classics "timeless" because they are imbued with a quality of genius that transcends the fashions of their time and our own. Trying to constantly rewrite them to keep up with the latest trends, which may well seem idiotic in due course (fingers crossed), is a fool's errand.

It is also inherently sinister. There's a reason that everyone naturally recoils from Winston Smith's work in "1984" in the Records Department of the Ministry of Truth, changing old newspaper articles and photographs to update them in keeping with the dictates of the party. The falsity, the thoroughness, and the need for control, extending all the way to the past, are all disturbing hallmarks of totalitarian politics.

Now, it's not a party that is demanding the reworking of inconvenient texts, but a corrupted part of our culture that can't abide the idea that offensive, or potentially offensive, terms and descriptions exist in books that have demonstrated astonishing popularity and staying power. There's no doubt who the giants are here and who are the small-minded censors.

— Rich Lowry is editor of the *National Review*