

References Some Consider Offensive Being Removed From Ian Fleming's 007 Novels and Roald Dahl's Children's Books

The Wired Word for the Week of March 12, 2023

In the News

Language deemed by some to be disturbing or offensive is being removed from some UK editions of children's books written by Roald Dahl as well as from the James Bond books penned by Ian Fleming.

Dahl, who died in 1990, wrote books for children that include *James and the Giant Peach*, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *Matilda*, *The Witches*, *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, *The BFG*, *The Twits*, *George's Marvelous Medicine* and *Danny, the Champion of the World*.

In those books, words like "fat" and "double-chinned" have been removed or been substituted with others considered more acceptable to the censor, and "ordinary" women's jobs changed from typing letters for businessmen to being "top scientists."

A spokesperson for The Roald Dahl Story Company, which owns the texts, said that the changes resulted from an overall review of Dahl's work in 2020 prior to the sale to Netflix, adding that "any changes made have been small and carefully considered," adding the company had worked with Puffin to review and revise the texts because it wanted to ensure that "Dahl's wonderful stories and characters continue to be enjoyed by all children today."

Pushback from cultural critics, free-expression advocates such as renowned writer Salman Rushdie and others such as British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak have caused Puffin UK, Dahl's British publisher, to compromise and release the original versions alongside the newly edited texts, giving readers a choice between the two. However, purchasers of the e-book format will automatically receive the revised versions.

The U.S. publisher of Dahl's books, Penguin Young Readers, said there are no plans for similar revisions in the United States, and his European publishers have said the same for their editions.

The James Bond 007 spy thrillers are being rewritten to accommodate 21st-century sensitivities, according Ian Fleming Publications Ltd, the owner of the stories. The decision was made to coincide with 70th anniversary celebrations this year of the 1953 Bond novel, *Casino Royale*. In preparation, Fleming Publications commissioned a review of the series by "sensitivity readers."

The new versions, set to be issued next month, will include this statement: "This book was written at a time when terms and attitudes which might be considered offensive by modern readers were commonplace. A number of updates have been made in this edition, while keeping as close as possible to the original text and the period in which it is set."

Some of the Bond stories have previously had some language toned down, with Fleming's approval prior to his death in 1964, and a spokesperson for Fleming Publication said the company was "following Ian's approach."

In a similar vein, Disneyland has removed the phrase "zip-a-dee-doo-dah" from the music of its in-park parades due to its origin in the 1946 film *Song of the South*, which has been criticized for its idealistic view of the post-war South and racial stereotypes. Disney is the owner of the phrase.

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Rewriting James Bond: Offensive References to Be Removed From Ian Fleming's 007 Novels.](#)

Euronews

[No Plans for Dahl Text Changes from U.S., European Publishers.](#) *Publisher's Weekly*

[Disneyland Removes 'Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah' From Parade Over Ties to Controversial 1946 Film.](#)

Fox News

The Big Questions

1. In published works, when, if ever, is it appropriate to update the language? What concerns might make this acceptable? What concerns might make this unacceptable? How should we factor in that not everyone agrees on what is offensive?
2. What advantages might there be to allowing books with language that doesn't meet the sensitivity standards of some today to remain available with their original wordings? What disadvantages might there be? When, if at all, does such a call for updating become "bullying"?
3. Bearing in mind that the church has for decades updated the language in hymns when publishing new hymnals, what guidance should the church give regarding popular works with "outdated" language? Or is hymn updating a special case that does not apply to popular works? What is the difference between *translating* archaic language to be better understood by today's users, and *altering* the language to match new perspectives?
4. What sort of guidance, if any, should children be given when picking books for themselves?
5. Each time a new translation of the Bible is released, some language in it is updated. What guidelines should determine what words should be changed from the previous version? In terms of living by scripture, what might be the advantage of using a version that reflects modern use of language?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Proverbs 15:23

*To make an apt answer is a joy to anyone,
and a word in season, how good it is!*

(No context needed.)

This proverb speaks of "a word in season," which essentially means "the right word at the right time" or "a timely word," and other Bible translations use those or similar phrases.

But "a word in season" invites us to think about whether words have a "season" -- a lifespan -- followed by a time when they are no longer "in season."

In daily usage, language changes almost constantly. For example, "share" used to mean to divide something, like a candy bar, with someone else so that you both have some. While it's sometimes still used that way, today "share" often means to pass information or a story to someone or to a group, or to send a document you've written to someone else. The word has expanded. And "awful" used to mean filled with dread or terror and later came to mean filled with reverential wonder. Now it means very bad and distressing ("an awful smell") or just a large amount ("an awful lot of food")! The older meanings are out of season.

Questions: Are there words that you'd like to see go out of season today? What might replace them? What are the advantages of a fluid language where words come into and go out of use?

Luke 2:7

(KJV) *And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.*

(NRSVue) *And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place in the guest room.*

(NIV) *... and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.*

(CEB) *She gave birth to her firstborn child, a son, wrapped him snugly, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the guestroom.*

(For context, read [Luke 2:1-7](#).)

In 1584, a professor of philology named Francisco Sánchez de las Brozas was turned in to the Spanish Inquisition by his students because he stated that the translation of Luke 2:7 had led artists to depict the birth of Jesus in a stable after the family had been rejected by innkeepers. The word *kataluma* is translated as "upper room" later in Luke's gospel to describe the place where the Last Supper took place. De las Brozas said what was really happening was that the upper room or guest room in the house of Joseph's family in Bethlehem, built to house extra members as the family grew, wasn't large enough for Mary, the midwives and other helpers for the process of giving birth, so she was moved downstairs to the larger family room on the main floor, where animals also spent the night, hence the manger.

This interpretation is common among many Bible scholars today, and the most recent versions of the Bible, including NRSVue, NIV, CEB and some others now reflect this. This changes the big picture, but who wants to change their nativity set?

Questions: Should the no-room-in-the-inn tradition keep the scripture from being updated if the guest-room interpretation is now considered correct? Why or why not?

Philippians 3:8

... I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ. (For context, read [Philippians 3:3-11](#).)

"Rubbish" in this verse is a sanitized version of the underlying Greek word *skubalon* which is more accurately rendered in English as s--t, to be blunt. The old KJV translates it as "dung" and the CEB renders it as "sewer trash." *Skubalon* is a vulgar word, but English Bible translators choose not to render it quite that way.

Questions: Are English Bibles justified in changing the literal word Paul used to something less earthy? Why or why not?

Proverbs 22:9

*Those who are generous are blessed,
for they share their bread with the poor.*
(No context needed.)

The choice to translate the Hebrew *t?ôb ?ayin* as "generous" is not literally correct but it gets the concept across. Literally it means "good eye." Just as the phrase "if looks could kill" comes from giving someone the "evil eye," so a "good eye" results in generosity. Remember, in the ancient world it was thought that our eyes shot out light that reflected back to us when it hit the objects all around us, allowing us to see them. Looking at someone with an evil eye harmed them. Looking at someone with a kind eye, a generous eye, blesses others.

Questions: Does the Bible communicate better with modern readers when translators substitute a word that conveys a concept that might not be clear from the literal term? Why or why not?

For an additional scripture text related to today's topic, see the discussion of 1 Corinthians 8:1-13, in the "Responding to the News" section below.

For Further Discussion

1. React to this, from TWW team member Bill Tammeus, who is a journalist: "[Regarding] changing language in published works: As someone who has written thousands of news stories, columns and blog posts plus several books, I sometimes wish I could go back into already published works of mine and change some words. Maybe after I'm gone I'll be granted the time to review all that and the power to make such changes."
2. Respond to this from [Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's blog](#): "I'm not a fan of messing with an author's original text, even when that text might be offensive to modern sensibilities. I would rather that those texts come with some explanation to put it into historical context, as Disney has done with its more problematic older movies. Peter Pan has some very dark moments: Peter proposes murdering a pirate and brags he's killed 'tons.' He also boasts about dismembering others. The Lost Boys get killed and sometimes, if there are too many, Peter "thins them out." That darkness is part of the power of the story. Though Disney may produce a kinder, gentler movie version,

the book remains untouched.

"I also take issue with [the claim of the Roald Dahl Story Company] that 'any changes were "small and carefully considered."' By small, they mean the number of words changed related to the total number of words in the text. But the examples of changes given in the article are not 'small' because they significantly alter the author's intent. Second, how 'carefully considered' the choices were is irrelevant. It's the act that is being judged, not how long it took you to do it. Casing a business for a long time before burglarizing it doesn't excuse the crime.

"I realize the justification is that the books were written for children and the publishers are pretending they are protecting the children. But Dahl, a notorious racist and antisemite, wrote dark books that were sometimes mean-spirited. Those are reasons to stay away from his books if you seriously wanted to protect children. But the real motivation for these changes is nothing more than money: how can they keep pushing Dahl's work but for today's sensibilities. The answer is, you don't. The work is the work and not for us to change just to scrape up a few more bucks off a famous name.

"I fully support producing books that cater to kids' needs and that reflect our commitment to cultural diversity and sensitivity. If that's our goal, then let's support books that do that and not ones that need to be altered. I just don't want to put words in another author's mouth without their permission.

"Mark Twain's use of the n-word and racial stereotypes in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* are offensive by today's standards, but I still don't want the book changed. Let's debate whether it is racist or anti-racist based on what Twain wrote, not change the text into what our current sensibilities want it to say. What art works would be safe once we start editing? A sports bra on Venus de Milo? Board shorts on Michelangelo's David? Let's do justice to our children by explaining works and their context rather than treating art like toilet seat bands that promise 'sanitized for your protection.'"

3. Consider this, from TWW team member Frank Ramirez: "If a living author chooses to rewrite a book based on evolving awareness of issues, that's one thing, but I do not like the idea of changing what a dead author wrote. Instead, this provides a chance for us to deal with the prejudices of an author without excusing them, or expecting them to act like a 21st-century author. Hillaire Belloc was definitely an anti-Semite and a racist, but I love his *Book of Beasts for Bad Little Boys*, and still recite the poem "B stands for Bear" from that book with great delight.

"I prefer what Dr. Suess' estate did in taking six selected books off the market because they weren't able to redeem the illustrations or attitudes. They are available for those fans who want to read them, but they are no longer presented to children.

"Which brings up the Bible and hymns. The Jewish Publication Society issued a revised edition of their 1962 translation of the Torah which had a very thoughtful introduction. Where the text allowed, humans and God were translated in a gender neutral fashion. When the text demanded the use of male and/or female, they did so, for both humans and God. ... Eugene Peterson's *The Message* used gender neutral language for humans in a gentle, not obvious way, so people didn't object because they didn't realize what he'd done.

"Because hymn texts are constantly being rewritten, and have a life of their own once they leave the pen of their composer, I have less problem with updating hymns, especially because this is part of our human-generated praise for God. Decades ago one of the older members of a church gave me a list of hymns from *The Service Hymnal* he thought we needed to

sing. Some of these were missionary hymns that referred to folks across the sea in uncomplimentary fashion. Some hymns cannot be rehabilitated. But as long as no copyright is involved I think it's legitimate to change hymns to suit a better understanding of what we're trying to express in our praise."

For an opposing view of changing the words of hymns see [7 Reasons to Stop Changing Words to Beloved Hymns](#).

4. Do you think the Declaration of Independence should be changed because it describes Indigenous people on this land as "merciless Indian savages"? If not, should any printed version of it add a footnote placing that demeaning term in historical context?

5. This explanation of *The Message* Bible gives a helpful understanding of different approaches to how the scriptures are updated in new versions:

"*The Message* exhibits what we call 'contemporary equivalence.' It stands between two approaches to translation: paraphrase and 'dynamic equivalence.' Paraphrases of ancient works tend to be created by individuals, rather than translation committees; they often work not from the original languages but from contemporary translations, with a goal of making sometimes arcane content and often complex sentence structures more understandable to modern readers. Dynamic equivalence translation is often done by committee and works from the original languages with a goal of matching the tone and intent of the original writers. Where, for example, ancient idioms have fallen out of contemporary understanding, dynamic equivalence translations will offer parallel idioms that are more decipherable to modern readers.

"[While] Eugene Peterson is the sole translator of *The Message*, two teams of biblical scholars (in Old and New Testaments, respectively) carefully vetted his translation. In that respect, it bears similarity to a paraphrase. But his philosophical approach to creating *The Message* is more in line with dynamic equivalence, working from the original languages to yield a vivid, contemporary, and highly readable Bible that is faithful to the original texts. It has produced what we call 'contemporary equivalence.'" (From messagebible.com/faq)

6. How do you feel about the practice in several modern Bible translations to avoid using pronouns for God and instead render the Deity as a genderless entity? Is God genderless, inclusive of every gender, or beyond the constraints of gender, as in John 4:24 "God is spirit"? Are we anthropomorphizing God when we use different pronouns to refer to the Deity? Or is God greater than any of our languages can depict?

Responding to the News

In 1 Corinthians 8:13, the apostle Paul wrote, "Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall." (For context, read [1 Corinthians 8:1-13](#).)

In Corinth in Paul's time, many people worshiped idols. Those worship practices involved the sacrifice of animals, but generally, the bodies of the animals were then sent to the meat markets where the meat was sold to the public. This raised a question for some Christians in the Corinthian church: Are Christians free to eat meat from animals slaughtered in worship of other

gods? Other Christians thought the question was ridiculous. They argued that since the other gods really didn't exist, no real meaning was attached to the meat, especially if you didn't believe in those gods.

Paul agreed in principle with the latter group. He said, "We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do" (v. 8). But, said Paul, the matter is not quite that simple. Many of the church members were converts who had previously worshiped one or more of these other gods. "Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled" (v. 7). Therefore, Paul concluded, for the sake of helping those who are weaker in the faith, the stronger members should avoid eating meat offered to idols. "[T]ake care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak," Paul advised (v. 9). In fact, Paul went so far as to say that when they, in their strength, do something that hurts a weaker Christian's faith, they sin against God.

Paul's reasoning here gives us a model that can be applied to how we handle language today. While we may or may not agree with changing the vocabulary of published works where the author is no longer alive to approve the changes, we can nonetheless seek to be aware of the impact of our language -- whether spoken or written -- on others and avoid terms that they are likely to find insulting.

Prayer

Give us your wisdom, O Lord, in how we handle language in print, not only in the corpus of literature we share in the culture, but also in our dealings with hymns and scripture, and in our conversations with others. In Jesus' name. Amen.