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Storytelling and gender

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‘Offensiveness’ and children’s books: censoring ‘slut’ from a Roald Dahl classic





A collection of Roald Dahl books. Wee Sen Goh/Flickr

I'm fixated on scanning Aldi's general merchandise offerings in its weekly catalogue. From big-screen TVs to tortilla warmers, Aldi will place almost any consumer good haphazardly in the middle of its grocery aisles.

Last week, the supermarket's decision to stock Roald Dahl's *Revolting Rhymes* drew the book to the attention of at least one shopper who was perturbed by its use of the word "slut". Aldi responded to a Facebook complaint by removing the title from sale.

The book of six poems, which parody fairy tales, was first published in 1982. Like most of the Dahl canon, it has remained in-print and popular with child readers ever since.

In the poem that prompted the complaint, the Prince says to Cinderella: "Who is this dirty slut? Off with her nut." The book delights in gruesomeness (decapitated heads roll across the floor, and cannibalism features), violence (Red Riding Hood packs heat), and irreverent humour.

As the title warns, the book inserts all things "revolting" into stories that we've come to associate with happy endings, for an audience whom we believe to be innocent and vulnerable.

Though Aldi acted to prevent potential parental backlash, the reaction to the removal of Dahl's book has been overwhelmingly negative. Over 90% of respondents in a Fairfax media poll believe Aldi acted wrongly, and there have even been calls for a boycott of the supermarket.

Many parents are concerned by inappropriate products being marketed toward minors, as when youth-oriented jewellery outlet Diva was criticised for selling a Playboy range of jewellery in 2011. However, adults also don't like the cultural touchstones of their own childhoods being tampered with.

When original 1970s episodes of *Sesame Street* were released on DVD in 2007, they were sold with an adults-only warning label indicating that they "may not suit the needs of today's pre-school child". Adults who had been raised on a Cookie Monster who did not know the meaning of a "sometimes" food were offended that their childhood viewing could be considered harmful.

1940s children's magazines containing stories by Enid Blyton. www.vintagecobweb.com/Flickr

Enid Blyton books, most of which were originally published between 1930 and 1960, have been subject to frequent revisions.

Golliwog characters were removed from editions of the *Noddy* series in the 1980s. References to the titular character and Big Ears sleeping in the same bed have also been expurgated. In the mid-1990s, the *Faraway Tree* books saw the spank-happy schoolteacher Dame Slap sanitised into Dame Snap,

and characters Dick and Fanny can no longer prompt sniggering fits as Rick and Frannie.

As with the complaints about the use of “slut” in Dahl’s rhyme, many people mocked the notion that Blyton’s simply written and ubiquitous childhood books could suddenly be regarded as offensive or inappropriate.

Indeed, when it comes to children’s books, almost any form of content could be considered unsuitable to somebody, somewhere in the world.

Dahl’s *James and the Giant Peach*, for example, appears on the American Library’s Association’s list of the 100 Most Frequently Challenged Books of 1990-2000. The novel is at number 56 on the list and reported complaints, to school boards in particular, are as numerous as they are bizarre. *James and the Giant Peach* has been challenged because of its depiction of magic, use of the word “ass”, references to tobacco and alcohol, and for alleged promotion of communism.

As we view children’s books as having an educative role, it makes sense that we want them to be in accord with the values of our time and place. In the present moment, we are particularly attuned to screening out racism and sexism that was the historical norm in periods in which authors like Blyton and Dahl wrote.

The first edition of Dahl’s *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964) depicted the Oompa-Loompas as black pygmies from Africa who work for a meagre wage of cacao beans while happily chanting.

Subsequent criticism and debate in the 1970s lead Dahl to sympathise with those who found the characterisation offensive. In the second edition of 1973, the Oompa-Loompas were rewritten as dwarves with “rosy-white” skin from Loompaland. (The orange-skinned, green-haired monstrosities of the film came in between in 1971.)

Dahl’s response suggests that it is not unreasonable to change small aspects of creative works in light of shifting social norms. However, we also have to be mindful that the concepts of offence and unsuitability for children potentially have no bounds.

If millions of parents have read a deliberately grotesque and provocative book like *Revolting Rhymes* with their children over the course of three decades, should the offence of a handful of adults limit the sale of the book, or even prompt the removal of the word “slut”? Or is it time that a word that is typically used to demean women no longer passes as acceptable in a poem for children?

Whether or not we believe that we should reclaim “slut” from its negative connotations, and regardless of any concern as to whether children will understand the word to mean slovenly or sexually promiscuous, it is troubling when isolated claims of offence have the power to remove a book from sale from any retailer.

Children's & Young Adults' Fiction Books. Roald Dahl Books Classics for Children. Skip to page navigation. Filter (2). Roald Dahl Books Classics for Children. All. Auction. 2 brand new from £5.49. Format: Paperback Author: Roald Dahl. Charlie and the Chocolate Factory (Puffin Modern Classics) by Dahl, Roald Book. £3.51. Top Rated Plus. Matilda (Puffin Modern Classics), Dahl, Roald, Very Good Book. £2.95. Charlie and the Chocolate (Puffin Modern Classics), Dahl, Roald, Very Good Book. £2.29. Fantastic Mr Fox (Puffin Modern Classics), Dahl, Roald, Very Good Book. £2.29. George's Marvellous Medicine (Young Puffin Modern Classics), Dahl, Roald, Very G. Children's Literature Roald Dahl Roald Dahl was an extraordinary man. He lived an amazing yet triadic life. This life influence and inspired him to be the terrific author that he was. He suffered from a bad case of homesickness. He remembers having to deal with a mean headmistress type of woman. At age thirteen, Dahl began at Rempton School. He was involved with a few athletic activities but he still appeared to be unhappy. 5 pages, 2286 words. The Term Paper on Summarise the main development of a child from the age range 0-2 years, 3-5 years and 5-8 years. various songs. 3 - 5 years When a child turns 3 years some start pre-school nursery where their intellectual development increases so may change depending on what is going on in their life. The Minpins was Roald Dahl's last children's book. Like many of his other stories, it was partially inspired by the countryside around where he lived. The wood at the top of the field behind Roald's house was even known as the Minpin forest. The sweet scents of rural life infuse this collection of Roald Dahl's country stories, but there is always something unexpected lurking in the undergrowth Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life brings together seven of Roald Dahl's short stories set in and around the Buckinghamshire countryside where Roald lived. The collection was first published in 1989, but all of the stories were originally written in the late 1940s. They are based on Roald's experiences with his friend Claud, a man who lived in the nearby town of Amersham.