# David Olusoga urges confronting racist language in classics instead of censoring



Historian David Olusoga has expressed a strong stance against the removal of racist or offensive language from classic literature and television, suggesting that young people should instead learn to "toughen up" when confronted with such terms. Speaking at the Hay Festival, he recognised the sensitivities surrounding trigger warnings but maintained that it is vital to confront the language of the past to understand its profound negative impacts.

Olusoga's remarks come amid ongoing debates about how best to handle the legacy of classic works, particularly in light of recent attempts to revise literature for contemporary audiences. His participation in a documentary regarding the BBC's "Black and White Minstrel Show," a controversial programme featuring white performers in blackface, underscores his commitment to critically examining the portrayal of race and culture within historical media contexts.

The contemporary landscape of literature has seen significant changes, with notable examples including the rewriting of Roald Dahl’s children’s books by Puffin Books, which has prompted widespread critique. The publisher recently announced revisions intended to make the stories more palatable for modern readers, sparking backlash from prominent figures, such as author Salman Rushdie, who labelled the changes as a form of censorship. In the revisions, words like "fat" have been completely omitted, and characters have been described in ways that critics argue dilute Dahl's original narratives.

Olusoga, who aligns with the views of other literary figures, including Anthony Horowitz, believes that removing such language can obscure understanding. Horowitz has made it clear he does not support modernising classics, stating that he retained the original essence of Ian Fleming’s James Bond series in his adaptations. He asserted that Bond exists in a specific historical context, and his behaviours and language should reflect that period without alteration, emphasising the importance of authenticity over contemporary sensibilities.

Moreover, discussions regarding the removal of specific terms from works by authors such as Agatha Christie and Ian Fleming have gained traction, with several instances of racial references falling under scrutiny and being changed after reviews by sensitivity readers. Notably, Christie’s novels have seen similar edits, reflecting a broader trend in the publishing industry.

The push for sensitivity in modern publishing, while well-intentioned, raises challenging questions about the preservation of literary integrity. Critics of these revisions argue that such changes compromise the truth of the narratives and detract from the rich complexity of characters and settings that were reflective of their times.

Olusoga contends that the focus should be on confronting challenging language and fostering resilience rather than sanitising literature to avoid discomfort. He illustrates this by contrasting the experiences of previous generations who faced direct hostility—"our ancestors had those words shouted at them," he articulates, highlighting the disparity between past confrontations and today's aversion to uncomfortable truths.

As debates over censorship and adaptation continue, the broader discourse poses significant questions about cultural memory, literary integrity, and the responsibilities of both publishers and readers. The tension between preserving the original contexts of works while ensuring they resonate with contemporary audiences remains a pivotal issue in literature today.

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* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14749407/David-Olusoga-racist-offensive-language-not-removed-classic-books-toughen-up.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14749407/David-Olusoga-racist-offensive-language-not-removed-classic-books-toughen-up.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[4]](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/feb/20/roald-dahl-books-rewrites-criticism-language-altered)
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1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14749407/David-Olusoga-racist-offensive-language-not-removed-classic-books-toughen-up.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/feb/20/roald-dahl-books-rewrites-criticism-language-altered> - In February 2023, Puffin Books announced revisions to Roald Dahl's classic children's books to make them more acceptable to modern readers. Critics, including author Salman Rushdie, accused the publisher of censorship, arguing that altering the original texts undermines the integrity of Dahl's work. The publisher stated that the changes were 'small and carefully considered' and aimed to ensure the stories could continue to be enjoyed by all children today. The controversy highlights the tension between preserving literary classics and adapting them for contemporary sensibilities.
3. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/feb/20/roald-dahl-books-editing-philip-pullman> - In February 2023, Puffin Books announced revisions to Roald Dahl's classic children's books to make them more acceptable to modern readers. Critics, including author Salman Rushdie, accused the publisher of censorship, arguing that altering the original texts undermines the integrity of Dahl's work. The publisher stated that the changes were 'small and carefully considered' and aimed to ensure the stories could continue to be enjoyed by all children today. The controversy highlights the tension between preserving literary classics and adapting them for contemporary sensibilities.
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