# David Olusoga urges young readers to confront offensive language in classic literature



Historian David Olusoga has sparked a significant debate on the necessity of confronting difficult language and themes in classic literature, asserting that young people should learn to 'toughen up' rather than shield themselves from potentially offensive content. Speaking at the Hay Festival, Olusoga, who has often highlighted the complexities of history and its uncomfortable truths, articulated his belief that sanitising literature diminishes the opportunity for genuine understanding. His own experience with historical narratives, including his recent documentary on the BBC's long-defunct "Black and White Minstrel Show," illustrates his commitment to presenting history authentically, even when it includes oppressive language and practices.

Olusoga’s perspective aligns with a broader discourse about the editing of classic texts in response to contemporary sensibilities. Notably, the recent revisions made to Roald Dahl's beloved children's books have ignited fierce criticism. The publisher Puffin Books undertook significant edits to make these texts more palatable for modern audiences, excising terms like 'fat' from descriptions and altering gendered language associated with characters. As a result, Augustus Gloop became merely 'enormous' instead of 'fat,' prompting backlash from figures such as Salman Rushdie, who labelled the changes as 'absurd censorship.' Critics argue that such revisions compromise the integrity of Dahl's work, removing the distinctive richness and charm that have endeared his stories to generations.

The implications of these revisions extend to discussions of authorship and the moral obligations of contemporary publishers. Olusoga's advocacy for confronting problematic aspects of history is mirrored by those who contend that modern adaptations must respect the original context and intent of the authors. Ian Fleming’s James Bond series serves as an example, with recent reissues attempting to maintain the original era's spirit, despite some edits. The sentiment here resonates with Olusoga's argument that understanding the past involves grappling with its unpleasant realities rather than artificially altering them to fit a current narrative.

Moreover, the editing of children's literature prompts critical questions about the kind of messages we wish to impart to younger generations. While Olusoga expresses tolerance for those in favour of removing offensive language, he underscores the educational value of confronting such language directly, arguing that grappling with these issues is crucial for societal growth and the understanding of historical injustices. This approach suggests an educational strategy that prioritises critical thinking over censorship, enabling young readers to develop resilience.

In advocating for a more rigorous engagement with history and literature, Olusoga has become a representative voice in an ongoing conversation about the legacy of cultural productions that contained offensive language and themes. His insistence on confronting such issues presents a counter-narrative to the growing trend toward sanitisation in literature, challenging readers—and society at large—to not shy away from the uncomfortable parts of our past. Instead, he promotes a culture that values honesty and authenticity in the pursuit of historical comprehension, positing that the discomfort seen in offensive language is a small price to pay for a more profound understanding of how far society has come—and how far it still has to go.

## Reference Map:

* 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), [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/9e6b91b4-2a8d-493a-9bdf-ed0e17a36c8d)
* Paragraph 2 – [[3]](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/feb/20/roald-dahl-books-rewrites-criticism-language-altered), [[4]](https://www.npr.org/2023/02/21/1158347261/roald-dahl-books-changed-offensive-words), [[5]](https://www.apnews.com/article/91c9bb1a7a10392abeef6feec3159e8b)
* Paragraph 3 – [[6]](https://www.time.com/5937507/roald-dahl-anti-semitism/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/9e6b91b4-2a8d-493a-9bdf-ed0e17a36c8d), [[7]](https://www.ft.com/content/9e6b91b4-2a8d-493a-9bdf-ed0e17a36c8d)
* Paragraph 5 – [[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), [[6]](https://www.time.com/5937507/roald-dahl-anti-semitism/)

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## Bibliography

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.ft.com/content/9e6b91b4-2a8d-493a-9bdf-ed0e17a36c8d> - Historian David Olusoga discusses his commitment to presenting history authentically, even when it includes uncomfortable truths. He believes in confronting the harsh realities of the past rather than sanitising them, emphasising the importance of understanding history's complexities without oversimplification. Olusoga also addresses contemporary issues, acknowledging that while history can inform, it doesn't necessarily prevent the repetition of past mistakes. He advocates for making history accessible and honest, contributing to a more profound understanding of the past without distorting it for political purposes.
3. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/feb/20/roald-dahl-books-rewrites-criticism-language-altered> - Recent revisions to Roald Dahl's classic children's books have sparked criticism, with some passages updated to align with modern sensibilities. Changes include altering descriptions of characters' appearances and removing language deemed offensive. Critics, including author Salman Rushdie, have labelled these modifications as 'absurd censorship,' arguing that they compromise the integrity of Dahl's original works. The publisher, Puffin Books, stated that the revisions aim to ensure Dahl's stories remain enjoyable for contemporary readers while maintaining the essence of the original texts.
4. <https://www.npr.org/2023/02/21/1158347261/roald-dahl-books-changed-offensive-words> - New editions of Roald Dahl's books have been edited to remove words deemed offensive, sparking controversy. The revisions, conducted by Puffin Books, aim to make Dahl's works more inclusive for modern readers. Changes include removing the word 'fat' from descriptions of characters and altering language that could be considered offensive. While the publisher asserts that the changes are 'small and carefully considered,' critics argue that they amount to censorship and compromise the original integrity of Dahl's stories.
5. <https://www.apnews.com/article/91c9bb1a7a10392abeef6feec3159e8b> - Critics are condemning changes made by British publisher Puffin Books to Roald Dahl's children's books to align with modern sensibilities. Puffin Books altered language around weight, mental health, gender, and race in famous titles like 'Charlie and the Chocolate Factory' and 'Matilda.' These revisions, aimed at making the books more inclusive, were first reported by Britain's Daily Telegraph. Notable figures such as Salman Rushdie voiced their disappointment, labeling the modifications as censorship. The Roald Dahl Story Company and Inclusive Minds, which collaborated on the changes, stated that the goal was to keep Dahl’s stories enjoyable for contemporary children.
6. <https://www.time.com/5937507/roald-dahl-anti-semitism/> - Roald Dahl, known for beloved children's books like 'Matilda,' 'James and the Giant Peach,' and 'The BFG,' has had his legacy scrutinised posthumously due to his anti-Semitic, misogynistic, and racist remarks. Dahl admitted to being anti-Semitic in a 1990 interview and made various offensive statements throughout his life. Despite his books' popularity, his controversial views have led to recent efforts, such as those by Puffin Books, to edit offensive language in new editions of his works. The Roald Dahl Story Company and his family have issued apologies for his prejudiced comments, attempting to distance his personal beliefs from the values in his stories. This ongoing controversy has led to discussions on whether an author's personal views should impact the appreciation of their work.
7. <https://www.ft.com/content/9e6b91b4-2a8d-493a-9bdf-ed0e17a36c8d> - Historian David Olusoga discusses his commitment to presenting history authentically, even when it includes uncomfortable truths. He believes in confronting the harsh realities of the past rather than sanitising them, emphasising the importance of understanding history's complexities without oversimplification. Olusoga also addresses contemporary issues, acknowledging that while history can inform, it doesn't necessarily prevent the repetition of past mistakes. He advocates for making history accessible and honest, contributing to a more profound understanding of the past without distorting it for political purposes.