Author’s Words Do Matter- Even in the 21st Century Inclusive and Sensitized Child Fiction Arena

Roald Dahl Classic Suffers a Fate Worse than Banning- Sanitizing

As a lifelong reader and an advocate against censorship, I am always eager to share that need to protect cherished books from school and public removal. In my ongoing ELA and SS teaching, I feel that an aspect of inculcating students into constitutional citizenship requires that students be informed about censorship of award winning and critically respected works. Students need to research the grounds for banning by a particular school district or library and examine the arguments advanced at the very least. The “banned books” unit I routinely do each year, in partnership with ELA educator, Amanda Xavier, sadly every school year, has new student favorites, so that the attempts to “ban” them from district or student library shelves, are very real to the students. Up to just the past few days, I felt these book banning cases were the worst case published book legal challenges that could be shared with student readers.

Yet reading in a 2023 tabloid newspaper the Post and later in the entertainment news journal Variety, that 20th century iconic writer Roald Dahl’s actual words, mean spirited as were his hallmark, “had been cut and rewritten by Puffin publisher,” shocked my citizen reader core. Language related to weight, mental health, gender and race, had been cut and rewritten. I know as a reader the historical context of these topics in the1960’s and 1970’s with words like “fat, ugly, and men,” used. Variety pointed out that in the 1971 and in the 2005 film versions of the 1964 novel “Charlie and the Chocolate Factory,” phrases like “enormously fat,” distinctive Dahl parlance had been edited to “enormous”.

What I missed as a moviegoer, I as a reader and as a teacher/citizen do notice. Frankly, I am incensed that students picking the newly edited Puffin editions of Dahl’s still beloved children’s classics, will never really get the full extent of his mean spirited and nasty voice, which is so much of his ongoing appeal to students. Must all written words shared with students as current and lifelong reader’s in this first amendment protected society, be 21st century politically correct, even when so many of the authors they are reading, wrote those words before our 21st century and the verbal sensitivity and new terms it has introduced?

 Why not at the very least engage students in this discussion and make them aware of the ways in which these new editions have rewritten Mr. Dahl, after his death?

Here are some essential questions students can discuss and can respond to in writing or with posters or with their own graphic narratives.

1. If an author wrote during a time when words like “fat” and “ugly” were used and gender was routinely listed, should editors in the 21st century rewrite the author’s words so that these terms now deemed “offensive,” are cut? There is no single correct answer, what is your opinion and explain why you feel that way.
2. When you as a young reader read a book which has been written by author wrote fifty years or a hundred years ago, are you “offended” by that author’s insensitive to 21st century language? What is your reaction as a reader?
3. You as young readers, writers and artists, might have your ideas and images seen in the 22nd century, at a time when there may be new word sensitivity and social standards. Would you as a writer or an artist in the current 21st century want your precisely chosen words, ideas, images and expressions “removed” by 22nd century sensitivity experts.

Since there are admittedly no single correct answers, students can weigh in as current citizen readers. It will be interesting for them to react to how they feel about these words for which yes, they would be censored to at school; being removed from a famous last century author’s published work. As an educator who did not grow up in the 21st century, it will be interesting for me to hear how they react given the import 21st century has given to words Dahl so loved to use, now so politically insensitive.

Students can take their views on these issues to: an onsite bulletin board, podcast, debate about whether words(the author’s actual published ones) matter in the 21st century sensitized climate, or write-contact@roalddahl.com, kris.howard@gmail.com( the web designer for the Dahl Fans site) and letters@nypost.com.

Puffin’s latest editions of Dahl’s books have a notice at the bottom of the copyright page with the caution that “Words matter. . .” telling readers they “regularly review the language to ensure that it can continue to be enjoyed by all today.” Should we 21st readers support these rewrites for our “enjoyment”? Must Twain, Baldwin, Hawthorne, Jason Reynolds, Conrad, Malcolm X, and other writers “lit” out and anticipate 22nd century sensitivities lest their words also be “rewritten” or “removed”? There is no clear absolute answer, but as 21st century teachers promoting lifelong student readers, we must at least let them know about and weigh in on the discussion.

Resources:

<https://nypost.com/2023/02/18/childrens-author-roald-dahls-work-rewritten-by-sensitivity-experts/>

<https://view.email.variety.com/?qs=bd1bace172dbdfefa74dd379293f676a7b1dfc0ae3f37f96dd041ee9fe0a2cd483cbaa8212b9186f63cd7d622f5919389889e387afefede1862469275312639f24e0ac82f7513a0dcf8bc325faf5>

Roald Dahl Books Censored By Woke Publisher/National Review

<https://www.nationalreview.com/news/roald-dahl-goes-woke-famous-childrens-authors-books-heavily-altered-by-sensitivity-readers/>

Roald Dahl’s books have been edited to stop calling people fat so much- Los Angeles Times

<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2023-02-18/roald-dahl-sensitivity-edits>