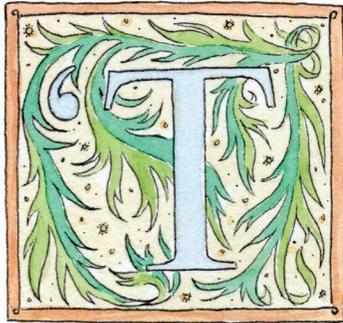


JAMES KIRCHICK

Censorship Is Not a Jewish Value



HERE IS A TRAIT in the Jewish character that does provoke animosity. . . . Even a stinker like Hitler didn't just pick on them for no reason."

It's the sort of remark you would expect to hear from the leader of a white-supremacist group. Alas, the above justification for the Shoah is attributable to one of the 20th century's most beloved literary figures. The antisemitism of Roald Dahl—author of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *Matilda*, *James and the Giant Peach*, and too many other classic children's books to count—has never been a secret. Dahl's mild defense of Hitler was not jotted down in a diary and unearthed by a shocked relative long after his death. It was uttered in an interview with the *New Statesman* magazine in 1983. This was the same year that, reviewing a book about the first Lebanon war, Dahl observed of Jews that "never before in the history

of man has a race of people switched so rapidly from being much-pitied victims to barbarous murderers,” compared Israeli leaders Menachem Begin and Ariel Sharon to “Mr. Hitler and Mr. Goering,” and prophesied that a “holocaust” against the Jewish state was “inevitable” because “brigand nations never survive forever.”

Dahl, who died in 1990, suffered little reputational cost for his public avowals of Jew-hatred. Thirty years after his death, however, the Dahl estate felt moved to address his noxious diatribes, quietly posting a statement on its website that apologized “for the lasting and understandable hurt caused by Roald Dahl’s antisemitic statements.” Without specifying just what those statements were, the Roald Dahl Story Company today expresses its “hope that, just as he did at his best, at his absolute worst, Roald Dahl can help remind us of the lasting impact of words.”

Put aside the possibility that this reckoning may have been occasioned not by a three-decade-deferred sense of shame, but by a desire to protect lucrative film and television projects, Netflix reportedly having paid the Story Company at least \$1 billion for the rights to 16 of Dahl’s books in 2018. Addressing antisemitism in its various manifestations—whether those emanating from the beer hall or the literary salon—is a salutary task, and one can appreciate the effort by the Dahl estate to reckon with the vile views of its namesake. But an apology from the descendants of a dead antisemite is worse than useless; it’s counterproductive. To apologize for something implies that one has done something wrong. It is not Dahl’s relatives who ranted about “powerful American Jewish bankers.” Their asking for forgiveness reinforces the idea that sin is a heritable trait, a poisonous idea that Jews, of all people, should be the loudest in opposing, given that it has justified nearly 2,000 years of murderous antisemitism.

Dahl’s offenses against the Jews, such as they were, cannot be detected within his vast literary output. The only conceivable trace of

antisemitism to be found in his books (and it's quite a stretch) might be his characterization of the eponymous villains in *The Witches*, who have large noses. Earlier this year, when Penguin Press announced that it would defer to its "sensitivity readers" and remove certain objectionable words and characterizations from Dahl's works, the allegedly semitic features of his harridans did not even make the cut. ("Fat," "ugly," "crazy," and "female," however, were deemed beyond the pale.) Following backlash from readers and writers alike ("Roald Dahl was no angel but this is absurd censorship," Salman Rushdie tweeted), Penguin backtracked, announcing that, while it would print the new, bowdlerized versions of Dahl, it would also continue to publish his books in their original form, thereby "offering readers the choice to decide how they experience Roald Dahl's magical, marvelous stories."

Unpleasant though it may be to discover that a favorite childhood author viewed Jewish people with the disgust that he reserved for descriptions of the baddies in his books, Dahl's antisemitism (like that of his contemporary Agatha Christie) was very much of its time. "The anti-Jewish flavor of the talk was not to be ignored or overlooked, or put down to heavy humor or generational prejudice," the late Christopher Hitchens remembered of an evening spent at Christie's home sometime in the 1960s. "It was vividly unpleasant and it was bottom-numbingly boring." When dealing with long-dead authors whose personal bigotry was at best incidental to their artistic creations, discerning readers should decide for themselves whether and to what extent they can separate the two. Personally, I can still remember devouring Dahl's and Christie's stories with fondness while also being alert, now as an adult, to the fact that they held despicable beliefs.

Living authors, whose bigotry is subtler, present a more challenging conundrum for the conscientious reader. Take Sally Rooney, the

internationally bestselling Irish novelist who prevented the translation of her latest novel, *Beautiful World, Where Are You*, into Hebrew. “I simply do not feel it would be right for me under the present circumstances to accept a new contract with an Israeli company that does not publicly distance itself from apartheid and support the UN-stipulated rights of the Palestinian people,” she said, explicitly aligning herself with the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement that seeks to abolish Israel as a Jewish democratic state.

Rooney’s act of self-imposed censorship is antithetical to literature, the ultimate aim of which, according to one of its finest practitioners, the late Martin Amis, is to achieve “the universal.” Books published hundreds or even thousands of years ago, books written in foreign languages, even books written by authors who held or hold political views or who behaved in ways we may find reprehensible—what makes such works meaningful is their ability to speak to us not as Americans, Irishmen, or Israelis, but as humans. Personally, one of the most rewarding aspects of being an author is having my work translated, as it broadens my audience and brings me into conversation with readers and writers from around the world. In addition to punishing those liberal, cosmopolitan Israelis most likely to be sympathetic to her criticisms of the Israeli state, Rooney’s insistence on denying Hebrew-speakers the opportunity to read her books is an attack on the very concept of literature itself.

Rather than offer this broad-minded critique, however, Rooney’s most vociferous critics in Israel shut down the conversation altogether. Goaded by an internet-driven campaign, the country’s two largest bookstore chains removed Rooney’s two previous books from their shelves. “Those who boycott us and incite against Israel are not worthy of selling books here and making money off us,” crowed the activist who led the effort to expurgate Rooney’s oeuvre. He was following the censorious lead of the Israeli government, which has repeatedly

banned critics (including Noam Chomsky and Representative Ilhan Omar) from stepping foot on its territory.

There is something fatalistic about these petulant, knee-jerk, retaliatory responses to antisemitism, which strike me as not only ethically wrong and strategically self-defeating, but deeply un-Jewish. The situation Jews face today dealing with antisemitism in literary circles brings to mind the last great era of organized cancellation in American history, the Hollywood blacklist, when movie studios (most of them, incidentally, founded and managed by Jews) bowed to political pressure and banned real and suspected Communists (many of them also Jews) from working in the motion-picture industry. It was a shameful period in American history, a time when powerful forces pressured individuals to violate their conscience and inform on their friends and colleagues.

The shame of the blacklist was not only that it exalted within American society what Victor Navasky, in his history of that period, *Naming Names*, called the “informer principle.” The tragedy was compounded by the way in which the blacklist made moral heroes out of those wholly unworthy of the honor, people who, had the tables been turned and they the ones holding power, would have enthusiastically endorsed a totalitarian political system in which boycotts of individuals with unpopular political views would have been the *least* of its depredations. Being a Communist in mid-century America was not like being a liberal in a hurry. It meant swearing fealty to a secret, conspiratorial organization devoted to the overthrow of democratic government and its replacement with a one-party dictatorship. Rarely in the scores of documentaries and books devoted to the blacklist is this uncomfortable truth acknowledged about its victims — that the very people who decried the violation of their own civil liberties slavishly backed the regime that created the Gulag. Had the blacklist targeted Nazi writers rather

than Communist ones, we would remember the era differently. An allegorical play likening that period to the Salem witch trials—*The Crucible*—would not be part of high school curricula across the land. If Dalton Trumbo had been a supporter of Hitler rather than Stalin, he would never have been portrayed by Bryan Cranston in a critically acclaimed, hagiographic biopic.

Blacklisting people with reprehensible views often ennoble them with a moral status they do not deserve. The era of the blacklist was one during which American society responded to an authoritarian threat with authoritarian tactics, such that self-proclaimed believers in liberal democracy behaved like the totalitarians they opposed. And however reprehensible the views and tactics of domestic American Communists, the societal reaction to them was wholly out of proportion to the threat they actually represented to the country. Despite the presence of a number of well-placed Soviet spies within the American government and the Manhattan Project, the Communist Party itself never represented a serious threat to the United States. As for Communists working in the entertainment industry, the evidence of pro-Communist propaganda in Hollywood movies was barely more visible than that of the supposedly antisemitic content in the novels of Roald Dahl.

The reign of the blacklist, and McCarthyism more generally, symbolized the inability of America's leaders to articulate two seemingly contradictory but actually complementary propositions at the same time: that Communism was an evil ideology *and* that those who swore by its tenets were entitled to the same constitutional protections as Americans holding mainstream political beliefs. Today, this inability to express two ideas simultaneously is one of the most baleful features of American intellectual life. To state just a few of the paired contentions that our leading lights seem incapable of acknowledging in the same breath: Donald Trump *and* wokeness constitute

mutually reinforcing threats to liberal democracy; unchecked illegal immigration threatens social cohesion *and* America must remain a welcoming place for immigrants; #MeToo was a long overdue corrective to the abuses of a patriarchal society *and* in some cases has gone too far.

Resisting the temptation to respond to words and ideas we hate with hatred of our own, whether in the form of a raised fist or through the ink of a red pen, is a burden of chosen-ness, of being a light unto the nations. However difficult, it is the right — and dare I say, the Jewish — thing to do. *