



# Amazon altering the content of purchased ebooks

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**Amazon** allows publishers who publish e-books through their store to alter their existing works, and push such updates to the copies of e-books in user libraries, without explicit user permission, or user notification. This may be simply to correct minor errors, but in some cases can constitute substantial changes in wording, for example to make a work more politically correct. The highest profile example of this was the **editing of Roald Dahl's books** for British users in 2023, aimed at removing language deemed offensive or outdated.

## Post-purchase e-book edits [[edit](#) | [edit source](#)]

In February 2023, Puffin were found to be automatically updating Roald Dahl e-books previously purchased by UK users on Amazon with new "sanitized" versions that contained hundreds of changes to the original text. Users who had purchased the e-books before the changes were implemented found their copies automatically replaced with the edited versions, without being given a choice or notification beyond the updates themselves.<sup>[1]</sup>

In 2023, The Telegraph reported that **hundreds of changes** were made to Roald Dahl's classic children's books, including *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *Matilda*, and *The Witches*.<sup>[2]</sup> These edits were performed by the publisher Puffin in collaboration with a group called **Inclusive Minds**, with the stated goal of ensuring the books "*can continue to be enjoyed by all today.*"

Whilst users are able to disable automatic e-book updates for previously purchased e-books in their libraries, such updates are enabled by Amazon by default.

### Examples of specific edits [[edit](#) | [edit source](#)]

The changes included numerous alterations to the original text, such as:

- Replacing "fat" with "enormous" in describing Augustus Gloop
- Removing Miss Trunchbull's "great horsey face" description to just "face"
- Modifying character occupations (e.g., changing a woman "working as a cashier" to "working as a top scientist")
- Removing references to certain authors (e.g., replacing Joseph Conrad with Jane Austen in *Matilda*)<sup>[2]</sup>
- Gender-neutral language – "Cloud-Men" in *James and the Giant Peach* were renamed "Cloud-People".
- Removal of references to physical appearance – The "fat little brown mouse" in *The Witches* became simply "little brown mouse".
- Sanitization of language – *The Witches* originally stated: "You must be mad, woman!" This was rephrased to "You must be out of your mind!"

Clarissa Aykroyd, a children's publishing professional, described the automatic updates as feeling "Orwellian," saying she assumed users would be given the option on whether to download the original version or the newly sanitized versions given how significant the changes were. The forced updates led her to become "weary of ebooks."<sup>[1]</sup>

## Public response [[edit](#) | [edit source](#)]

Critics of the practice have pointed to how such changes would not have aligned with the original author's wishes. As stated by Matthew Dennison, a biographer of the late author,

When it came to children's books, Dennison says Dahl didn't care what adults thought as long as his target readers were happy. "'I don't give a b----r what grown-ups think,' was a characteristic statement," Dennison says. "And I'm almost certain that he would have recognised that alterations to his novels prompted by the political climate were driven by adults rather than children, and this always inspired derision, if not contempt, in Dahl. "He never, for example, had any truck with librarians who criticised his books as too frightening, lacking moral role models, negative in their portrayal of women, etc," he continues. "Dahl wrote stories intended to kindle in children a lifelong love of reading and to remind them of the childhood wonderlands of magic and enchantment, aims in which he succeeded triumphantly. Adult anxieties about political niceties didn't register in this outlook. This said, although Dahl could be unabashed in offending adults, he took pains never to alienate or make unhappy his child readers." <sup>[2]</sup>

Spelling out what Dahl said above: "I don't give a bugger"<sup>[3]</sup>

## Company response [[edit](#) | [edit source](#)]

After backlash, Puffin announced it would publish the classic collection of 17 Dahl texts alongside the edited versions. Puffin acknowledged "very real questions around how stories can be kept relevant for new generations" while giving readers "the choice to decide how they experience Roald Dahl's magical, marvelous stories."<sup>[1]</sup>

## Debate over modern censorship [[edit](#) | [edit source](#)]

The changes to Dahl's books sparked wider debate over whether these changes were necessary updates or excessive censorship, as well as whether Amazon should enable this behavior by default. Critics argue that altering the original language distorts an author's intent, undermines a user's 'ownership' of their e-books, and removes historical context.

## References [[edit](#) | [edit source](#)]

- ↑ 1.0 1.1 1.2 Ben Ellery; James Beal (25 February 2023). "Roald Dahl ebooks 'force censored versions on readers' despite backlash" (article). Times Media.
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This page was last edited on 12 August 2025, at 05:15.

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