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POLITICAL CORRECTNESS IN ENID BLYTON'S THE FAMOUS FIVE: RISKS AND DANGERS

Abstract: “Political correctness” is a movement that mainly aims at implementing overarching linguistic changes in favour of minority groups and historically marginalised people and has become an established phenomenon in several countries throughout the past years. Consequently, literary canons have been revised, and countless dated texts are scrutinised regarding their compatibility with politically correct language and principles. New editions of classics are often informed by contemporising narratives and omissions of offensive terms and expressions. Literature, however, is not where this movement stops. Political correctness reshapes societies and how people interact with each other, just not necessarily in the desired way. This paper is an attempt to shed light on the ramifications of political correctness that are possibly harmful and might, in fact, inhibit the originally desirable aims of the movement. Adverse effects might weigh especially heavy in conjunction with children, which is why this paper focuses on examples from the realm of youth literature, which were written by the English author Enid Blyton, who is both one of the most successful and controversial children’s book authors of all times.

Keywords: political correctness, cancel culture, dated narratives, children’s books, United Kingdom

Introduction

After I had to leave law school prematurely in 2019, I entered a world that had been unknown to me before. I commenced an undergraduate programme at a small faculty in Germany, where conservatism as I have known it from home and experienced it at the faculty of law seems to be a rare occurrence. Surrounded by creative and highly

“progressive” individuals, I have not only encountered hair more colourful than the shirts of the more unconventional law students, tattoos in all forms and sizes, piercings, and countless stickers on laptops for feminism, the queer community, Palestine or against racism, but also heard and read more inclusive language than my former faculty of law or my family could dream of.

In autumn 2024, I left for Wales to spend the winter term of that year in the south of the country. Never in my life have I seen more diversity and inclusivity campaigns than on the campus of my former Welsh host university, or lecturers whose staff IDs were attached to multicoloured lanyards reminding of a rainbow but, in fact, symbolising something else. Both in Wales and England I virtually saw more Pride flags than the flag of Wales, the St George’s Cross or the Union Jack on display in the public sphere.

Those rainbow colours suddenly disappeared for me when I moved to Romania for another term abroad. Pride flags and related “woke” symbols, which have been captured by “politically correct” movements in the West long since, are nothing the Romanian state would pride itself upon. In this country, one rather encounters religious symbols of all kinds and in various places. And yet, something seems to change among younger generations: many students at my current host university in Transylvania seem concerned with injustices of the past and inequalities of the present. They want to change something for the better and improve the lives of all people dwelling in Romania. In one of my English classes, we discussed a text whose plot is set in the first half of the nineteenth century and which contains the offensive term “nigger.” Although it was clear to me that other students referring to this term in class only quoted it as I do in my previous sentence, our lecturer insisted that we should not say the term aloud but say “the n-word” instead. This incident reminded me of fiery discussions at my home university in Germany.

Thanks to the FORTHEM alliance between Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz and “Lucian Blaga” University of Sibiu, it was straightforward for me to return to my former and current Romanian host university in Sibiu for a 3.5-month traineeship starting in November 2025. This academic mobility has not only given me the opportunity to explore Romania more but also to compose an academic paper treating any chosen interest of mine. Due to my observations above and my bachelor’s thesis about “youth-friendly,” “less scientific” and “less problematic” language aiming at the youth of the German Empire, which I had submitted shortly before the start of my traineeship, I decided to conduct some research on a related topic:

“political correctness” in dated children’s books of the twentieth century aiming at twenty-first-century children.

In this endeavour, I chose Enid Blyton’s *The Famous Five* series as an instructive example since I used to indulge in listening to the German audiobooks of the *Fünf Freunde* (literally “five friends”, respectively *The Famous Five* as the series’ original English title) series as a child. Twenty-two stories of the German audiobook series are translations of Blyton’s original stories. I am surprised to learn how controversial Blyton’s writing is by now. My research is less an analysis of the actual language contained in *The Famous Five* but more of an exploration of possible arguments against rendering Blyton’s narratives “politically correct” for the sake of young readers. The main incentive for focusing on the adverse dimension of “political correctness” is that I have frequently experienced how this phenomenon makes people self-conscious or remain silent to avoid a row. Given the originally positive aims of “political correctness,” I find it important to ask for possible adverse by-products that come with it, even if they are not intended. Since “political correctness” has gained considerable ground in several societies and progressively influences the way people speak and write, I deem it indispensable to take a closer look at an established phenomenon too complex and opaque to spread further unchecked. “Political correctness” seems to transform entire societies linguistically, which is why it is important to ask for the legitimacy of this phenomenon, i.e. whether it really aims to make societies more equal and less unjust.

Throughout this paper, the following question has guided my research: what risks and dangers might rendering Enid Blyton’s language in *The Famous Five* “politically correct” entail in the attempt of protecting young people of the present UK from possible harm and preparing them for their future lives? To find an answer to this question, I start by briefly touching upon the related phenomena of “political correctness” and “cancel culture” to give an idea of how to understand them in the context of my paper. Afterwards, I dive into the current debate revolving around Enid Blyton and her *The Famous Five* series in conjunction with “political correctness” and “cancel culture”. These elaborations then enable me to conceive an answer to my research question as given above.

Political Correctness

“Political correctness” (pc) both as a phenomenon and as a term originates from the USA although it is vital to discriminate between the different forms pc occupies in the different countries to which it

has spread.¹ The movement started from a good cause by encouraging people to show more kindness, respect and tolerance.² Its original focus was to raise awareness for minority interests, reduce discrimination and strengthen respect towards and achieve equality for minority groups.³ At educational institutions of the USA, literary canons were established to legitimise and support certain notions and a certain language use, respectively to expurgate notions and language that did not align with the former.⁴ The underlying assumption of these developments was that regulated language use could regulate thinking, outlooks and social stances.⁵

Wimmer lists four characteristics that he declares universally constitutive of pc: A normative language use is typical to establish rules beyond what has been common usage and would possibly be disputed.⁶ This normative character commands a changed use of language regarding clearly defined terms that are either to be abolished or to be adopted.⁷ Another trait is the regulating force which underlies the demanded change in language usage but, in fact, targets social behaviour that is to be changed.⁸ More precisely, this means that pc prohibits behaviour based on what is generally considered potentially offensive or harmful.⁹ Moreover, pc entails the exaggerated claim that its self-established norms are universally valid although they are derived from personal interests and outlooks.¹⁰ In so doing, collective social norms and those of other individuals are ignored in favour of personal sensitivities of a single or few social groups.¹¹ The claim of universal validity, however, lacks legitimacy due to its only foundation being the personal rejection of certain generalised

1. Rainer Wimmer, "'Political Correctness'—Ein Fall für die Sprachkritik," in *Evidenzen im Fluß: Demokratieverlust in Deutschland: Modell D—Geschlechter—Rassismus—PC*, eds. A. Disselnkötter Siegfried Jäger, Helmut Kellershohn, and Susanne Slobodzian (Duisburger Institut für Sprach- und Sozialforschung, 1997), 287.

2. Georgia McCartney, "13 Ways Political Correctness Is Killing Free Speech (and Common Sense)," *Bolde*, 4 February 2026, <https://www.bolde.com/xx-ways-political-correctness-is-killing-free-speech-and-common-sense/>.

3. Wimmer, "Political correctness," 295.

4. Kaffsack and Gumbrecht, quoted in Wimmer, "Political correctness," 288.

5. Wimmer, "Political correctness," 288.

6. Wimmer, "Political correctness," 288–289.

7. Wimmer, "Political correctness," 289.

8. Wimmer, "Political correctness," 289.

9. Wimmer, "Political correctness," 289.

10. Wimmer, "Political correctness," 290.

11. Wimmer, "Political correctness," 290.

outlooks or actions.¹² The fourth characteristic of pc is the exploitation of individual societal liberties provided and granted by the law, the latter of which creates a liberal legal landscape that enables the formation, spread, and strengthening of politically correct forces thanks to “safe spaces” granted to individuals.¹³ The predominant objective of pc is power-driven and aims at the utmost expansion of the influence wielded by one’s own personal interests and notions or those of a social group.¹⁴ Wimmer’s ideas mirror one amongst surely several possible ways of apprehending the nature of pc. Since this perspective illustrates why pc can spread successfully, even if only promoted by a small proportion of society, it serves as the foundation of understanding the concept in the context of this paper. After all, a merely ostensibly broad acceptance and approval of pc could already be seen as one of the risks entailed by the phenomenon.

Pc is a form of morality, whose language serves as the transmitter of moral judgements¹⁵. One objective of pc is the transformation of gendered into gender-neutral language.¹⁶ Altogether, pc represents a naïve use of language as it reshapes terms in a way that they exclusively convey positive meanings, regardless of the replaced terms being known by those who are suddenly expected to use euphemistic substitutes.¹⁷ A prominent example is the so-called n-word, which is defined as “a polite way of referring to the very offensive word [‘nigger’]” by the online dictionary of the University of Cambridge,¹⁸ or as “used euphemistically to refer to the word [‘nigger’]” by the online dictionary of Merriam Webster.¹⁹ It has been argued that people who use the “n-word” feel morally superior to those who do not know or use it.²⁰ However, each time it is used, all those who know the original term automatically think of the “forbidden” term nonetheless,

12. Wimmer, “Political correctness,” 290.

13. Wimmer, “Political correctness,” 290.

14. Wimmer, “Political correctness,” 291.

15. Bert Stegemann, *Die Öffentlichkeit und ihre Feinde*, ebook (Klett-Cotta, 2021), chapter 3. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/umainz/detail.action?docID=7028601>.

16. Stegemann, *Die Öffentlichkeit*, chapter 3.

17. Stegemann, *Die Öffentlichkeit*, chapter 3.

18. Cambridge Dictionary, “The N-Word, Noun,” *Cambridge Dictionary: English Dictionary, Translations & Thesaurus*, Online Dictionary, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/n-word>.

19. Merriam Webster, “N-Word, Noun,” *Merriam Webster: America’s Most Trusted Dictionary*, Online Dictionary, , <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/N-word>.

20. Stegemann, *Die Öffentlichkeit*, chapter 3.

which rather means the preservation of the offensive term instead of its eradication.²¹

Moreover, pc tends to blend different spheres of responsibility regarding language usage, e.g. the difference between playwright, actor and portrayed character, or between an interviewer and the interviewed person.²² For instance, if someone interviews an openly racist person, the interviewer will be accused of being racist himself²³ by accusing him of having deliberately offered a platform for the racist to share his ideas because he knows and must therefore secretly approve of those racist notions.²⁴ That the interview is meant to be led in a non-partisan way and merely quotes the racist's statements, which are emphatically not the interviewer's own statements, is simply ignored because the inner logic of pc wants both the interviewer and the interviewed person condemned as racist.²⁵ Another example is theatres which have ceased to denounce the paradoxes of reality and, instead, started to preach what is "right" and "wrong" from a perceived position of moral superiority.²⁶ The result is the paradox that those who campaign for progress and tolerance are simultaneously the ones who silence themselves and others.²⁷ This development resembles former prohibitions that targeted art and were issued by state leaders because the mighty were anxious to maintain their positions of power.²⁸

Cancel Culture

Since pc has become a ubiquitous tool for silencing or "cancelling" people, this practical dimension of the underlying phenomenon also need be outlined in this paper as it may be deemed a "weapon" of pc to force people into compliance.²⁹ Consequently, it deprives people of their respective autonomy and stops societies from evolving as for this, honest and varied debates, even about uncomfortable matters, are indispensable.³⁰ The practice that has gained ground in this man-

21. Stegemann, *Die Öffentlichkeit*, chapter 3.

22. Stegemann, *Die Öffentlichkeit*, chapter 3.

23. This paper is written by resorting to the generic masculine form to refer to any existing sexes and asserted genders.

24. Stegemann, *Die Öffentlichkeit*, chapter 3.

25. Stegemann, *Die Öffentlichkeit*, chapter 3.

26. Stegemann, *Die Öffentlichkeit*, chapter 3.

27. Stegemann, *Die Öffentlichkeit*, chapter 3.

28. Stegemann, *Die Öffentlichkeit*, chapter 3.

29. McCartney, "13 Ways."

30. McCartney, "13 Ways."

ner can be pinned down as “cancel culture” (cc), which describes acts that pressurise the members of society by systematically excluding or boycotting individuals or organisations on account of alleged moral or political misconduct.³¹ The often-negative connotations attached to the concept become clear in the online dictionary of the University of Cambridge: “[the main argument against cancel culture is that it doesn’t enable people who have wronged society the opportunity to apologize and learn from their mistakes].”³²

Cc relies on taboos of which a restricted language use and the ostracising of those who break the related codes are typical.³³ Ostracism is convenient because it does not require any informed explanations if it is merely the consequence of violating a previously stipulated taboo.³⁴ Social ostracism is an archaic power tool to silence people and leads to the social death of those who are cancelled on behalf of pc.³⁵ Today the formerly statutory authority has been replaced by a morality that passes judgements, for the latter of which individual indignation is sufficient.³⁶ The consequence of this is culture war, i.e. by means of declaring one’s own identity as superior towards others’ identities, society becomes divided up in smaller, mutually hostile groups, each of which demands privileges for themselves but denies other groups any such rights.³⁷ In public debates, arguments are reduced to intentions, which, in turn, are labelled as either originating from “victims” or from “perpetrators.”³⁸ Moreover, facts, for instance, innate differences between the biological sexes, are denied and claimed to solely represent personal opinions that are meant to attack others.³⁹

This development runs counter to the foundations of a democratic society, whose members all ought to have the same universal rights, and establishes a new order of inequality that opens the gates to

31. Duden, “sonnengebräunt,” *Duden: Sprache sagt alles*. Cornelsen Verlag, Online Dictionary, <https://www.duden.de/rechtschreibung/sonnengebraeunt>.

32. Cambridge Dictionary, “Cancel Culture, Noun,” *Cambridge Dictionary: English Dictionary, Translations & Thesaurus*, Online Dictionary, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/cancel-culture>.

33. Stegemann, *Die Öffentlichkeit*, chapter 3.

34. Stegemann, *Die Öffentlichkeit*, chapter 3.

35. Stegemann, *Die Öffentlichkeit*, chapter 3.

36. Stegemann, *Die Öffentlichkeit*, chapter 3.

37. Stegemann, *Die Öffentlichkeit*, chapter 3.

38. Stegemann, *Die Öffentlichkeit*, chapter 3.

39. Stegemann, *Die Öffentlichkeit*, chapter 3.

mutual violence.⁴⁰ Stegemann condenses this as “the transformation of the public discourse which aims at restricting universal freedom to make some voices outweigh others.”⁴¹ Those who define the public discourse are in an advantageous position as they become the entities of legitimisation and delegitimisation by deploying a simple mechanism of denunciation: calling somebody out as “deficient” in whatever way one pleases to appear as the “exemplary” opposite of the ostracised.⁴² Cc is a naïve way to avoid conflicts, instead wishes “the evil” away, and pretends the latter did not exist; doing nothing but pretending to be morally superior towards those who name what may be uncomfortable and is ignored by pc, however, will not lead to any desired changes.⁴³ By now, the act of criticising alone is progressively likened to malevolent intentions while societies are forced into silence as people fear to become the next target of cc.⁴⁴

Enid Blyton – Successful but Controversial

One of the most eminent writers who have been targeted by pc and cc is Enid Blyton. One of her most popular works that have been bowdlerised accordingly is *The Famous Five* series. Before outlining how pc and cc have been imposed on Blyton and her legacy, the following is to give some general information about the author.

Enid Mary Blyton was born in the Victorian era on 11 August 1897 in England, where she grew up in Kent. Her father made a living for the family whereas her mother stayed at home to take care of the household, in which Blyton was expected to help, which she, who was rather devoted to arts and nature, detested.⁴⁵ Enid Blyton attended a girls' school and was later trained to become a teacher, before starting to teach at a preparatory school for boys in Kent in 1918. Her first book, *Child Whispers*, a collection of poems, was published in 1922, and Blyton became a full-time writer from 1924.

40. Stegemann, *Die Öffentlichkeit*, chapter 3.

41. Stegemann, *Die Öffentlichkeit*, chapter 3, my translation. In the original: “[den] Umbau der öffentlichen Gesprächskultur, der die universelle Freiheit einschränken will, um einzelnen Stimmen Gewicht und anderen weniger Gewicht zu verleihen.”

42. Stegemann, *Die Öffentlichkeit*, chapter 3.

43. Stegemann, *Die Öffentlichkeit*, chapter 3.

44. Stegemann, *Die Öffentlichkeit*, chapter 3.

45. See “About Enid Blyton,” Enid Blyton: At the Heart of Every Childhood, Web, 5 February 2026. <https://www.enidblyton.co.uk/landing-page/enid-blyton/enid-blyton-about-the-author/> and Elodie Barnes, “Enid Blyton, Prolific & Controversial Children's Book Author,” *Literary Ladies Guide: An Archive Dedicated to Classic Women Authors and Their Work*, October 24, 2023. <https://www.literaryladiesguide.com/author-biography/enid-blyton-controversial-childrens-book-author/>.

Nonetheless, she bore two daughters in 1931 and 1935 and was married twice. During the 1940s and into the early 1950s, Blyton published more than twenty books per year, among them the book series *The Famous Five*, *The Secret Seven*, and *Malory Towers*. From the late 1950s, she developed serious health issues and was diagnosed with dementia in the early 1960s until she eventually died at the age of seventy-one in November 1968.

Enid Blyton's legacy comprises about seven hundred books, two thousand short stories, poems, and plenty of magazine articles while she sold more than 500,000,000 copies during her lifetime.⁴⁶ The success she has achieved in her day and far beyond made her "the most commercially successful British children's author of the 20th [century]."⁴⁷ Enid Blyton is the fourth most translated author in the world, whose works were published in roughly ninety different languages.⁴⁸ Besides her prolific writing, she was committed to charity work, e.g. for disabled children or pet animals.⁴⁹ Many of her stories revolve around mysteries, schools and adventures and are often modelled on moral lessons, which, for instance, rewarded personal traits like bravery or loyalty. Blyton's juvenile characters are typically independent from and partially even defiant towards adults.⁵⁰ Her language is straightforward, which makes it particularly suitable for children who are learning how to read. In the twenty-first century, Enid Blyton is still one of the most famous children's book authors and her works continue to be popular.

However, her books have increasingly been "criticized for being elitist, sexist, racist, and xenophobic," which induced several librarians to remove them from the shelves; her books belong to those most often banned from public libraries.⁵¹ *The Oxford Companion to Children's Literature* informs that Blyton's writing was already denounced for racist and sexist views in the 1980s.⁵² The entry also mentions how public libraries at that time still provided Enid Blyton's

46. "About Enid Blyton" and Sian Cain, "Famous Five Go Back to Original Language after Update Flops." *The Guardian*, September 16, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/sep/16/famous-five-go-back-to-original-language-after-update-flops>.

47. Humphrey Carpenter and Mari Prichard, "Blyton, Enid (Mary) (1897-1968)," *The Oxford Companion to Children's Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1984), 68.

48. English Heritage, "Blue Plaques: Blyton, Enid (1897–1968)," *English Heritage*, <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/blue-plaques/enid-blyton/>.

49. See "About Enid Blyton."

50. Shabnam Dohutia, "Enid Blyton: British Author," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Enid-Blyton>.

51. Barnes, "Enid Blyton."

52. Carpenter and Prichard, *Blyton*, 70.

books on their shelves but, apparently, rather reluctantly as they “[encouraged] children to read something else.”⁵³ This implies that Blyton’s language and narratives stirred controversy even shortly after her death.

It seems likely that societal values and sensitivities might have changed over the decades, after Blyton had started to write professionally in the 1920s and published the first volumes of some of her most famous book series from the 1940s. The period between 1920 and 1980 alone was informed by post-war distress after the Great War, the rise and fall of fascism in Europe, and the Second World War with its aftermath. These tempestuous events, which must have raised questions of race, violence, or human dignity and integrity within societies, have been transformative to this day. Blyton, who kept writing during World War II and whose writing activity was as prolific as to be accused of hiring ghost writers to help her write her countless stories, must have worked virtually any minute of the day.⁵⁴ Since writing is a solitary activity, the war years, the enormous time she must have spent on writing, and later her great success might have put Blyton in an isolated position towards society, which could have left its mark on her notions and her narratives in writing. Her former agent George Greenfield wrote in his Blyton biography: “She was caught in a kind of time-warp, ignorant of modern slang and idioms” as, for instance, she was not aware that “to spend a penny” is an idiom for “to go to the lavatory.”⁵⁵ The psychologist Michael Woods remarked that Blyton did not seem to ever really have become an adult: “She was a child, she thought as a child and she wrote as a child.”⁵⁶

Political Correctness in Enid Blyton’s *The Famous Five* and Cancel Culture

Nowadays even classic editions of Blyton’s books seldom contain her original language but have been altered in places long since.⁵⁷ In 2023, news.com.au reported that Enid Blyton’s publisher had confirmed they would continue rewriting *The Famous Five* series, which was originally published between 1942 and 1963.⁵⁸ Precisely, this

53. Carpenter and Prichard, *Blyton*, 70.

54. See “About Enid Blyton” and Dohutia, “Enid Blyton.”

55. George Greenfield, *Enid Blyton* (Sutton Publishing, 1998), 53–54.

56. Woods quoted in Greenfield, *Enid Blyton*, 63.

57. Cain, “Famous Five.”

58. Frank Chung, “‘Ongoing Process’: Enid Blyton’s Famous Five Books Edited to Remove ‘Offensive’ Words,” *News.Com.Au*, March 14, 2023, <https://www.news.com.au>.

means that potentially offending terms have been removed from her books.⁵⁹ Earlier revisions sanitised *The Famous Five* of “phrases such as ‘shut up’ and innocent uses of words including ‘queer,’ ‘gay,’ and ‘brown’.”⁶⁰ The attribute “brown” as a reference to a person’s skin colour was replaced in Enid Blyton’s books because it might be deemed a racist term. Interestingly, the same term serves as a more sensitive alternative in one of Robert L. Stine’s books by replacing an expression that, in turn, was deemed insensitive by Stine’s publisher.⁶¹ This illustrates how difficult it is to define the concrete nature of “inappropriateness,” “offensiveness,” or “insensitivity” as these terms are vague and can be specified very individually. This paradoxical handling of the same term in similar contexts reveals some degree of arbitrariness in assessing what is politically correct, respectively what no longer aligns with modern⁶² sensitivities. In Blyton’s *The Famous Five*, the adjective “queer,” which bears no sexual reference in these stories at all, was replaced by different synonyms that, from a modern perspective, convey the term’s originally intended meaning more unequivocally as in “peculiar” or “weird”, e.g. “Isn’t she queer—not wanting to welcome us...” was rendered into “Isn’t she odd—not wanting to welcome us...”⁶³ For this paper, I read the 2017 republication *The Famous Five: Five on a Treasure Island*, which had originally been published as the first volume of the book series in 1942, but I could not find a single occurrence of “queer” in it.⁶⁴ Instead, the book is imbued with ample synonyms like “strange,” “odd,” “peculiar,” or “funny.” “A suntanned fisher-boy” replaced the original “a brown-faced fisher-boy.”⁶⁵ The original phrase “Shut up, George. Be sensible.” was altered to “George, be sensible.”; likewise, some instances of “don’t be an idiot” were omitted from *The Famous Five* series.⁶⁶

These revisions were harshly criticised by the Australian journalist Ben Fordham, who alluded to the fact that some of the omitted

au/entertainment/books-magazines/books/enid-blytons-famous-five-books-edited-to-remove-offensive-words/news-story/47a63bb79a5d870f19aed58b19469bb5 and Cain, “Famous Five.”

59. Chung, “Ongoing Process.”

60. Chung, “Ongoing Process.”

61. Chung, “Ongoing Process.”

62. Throughout this paper, the attribute “modern” is used to refer to a temporal dimension, not a moral one.

63. Chung, “Ongoing Process.”

64. Enid Blyton, *The Famous Five: Five on a Treasure Island* (Hodder Children’s Books, 2017), ebook.

65. Chung, “Ongoing Process.”

66. Chung, “Ongoing Process.”

expressions were part of children's colloquial speech and far from harmful.⁶⁷ Fordham called those who were responsible for these revisions "censors" and "woke warriors."⁶⁸ He demanded that those who deem narratives aligning with modern sensitivities important should write new books from scratch, instead of rewriting classics, which had been read for decades.⁶⁹ "Sensitivity readers" have been employed for revising Blyton's books to assess whether a text contains potentially harmful or offensive terms, a practice which Chung dubs "woke" editing. It is indeed questionable whether "sensitivity readers" are impartial editors who have equality in mind and represent society at large: although not calling themselves "sensitivity readers," the members of the non-profit organisation Inclusive Minds, who "[work] with the children's book world to support them in [authentic representation], primarily by connecting those in the industry with those who have lived experience of any or multiple facets of diversity," seem to predominantly represent minority or marginalised social groups.⁷⁰ Do they achieve the representation of a diverse society or rather the imbalanced opposite extreme of dated narratives? Do they approach language in a way that reflects reality or are they guided by an overly high sensitivity on account of their task that is "having to find" potentially insensitive and offending terms? These questions provide food for thought but cannot be further explored in this paper.

In 2016, the publishing house Hachette conceded that text revisions applied to *The Famous Five* in 2010, which had aimed at twenty-first-century children, were not perceived well and, thus, dropped.⁷¹ The revisions in question included more gender-neutral language, e.g. "the character Anne [was] altered to enjoy teddies instead of dolls," and targeted possibly offensive terms as well as dated language, the latter of which had been considered less attractive to children nowadays: for instance, "pullover" became "jumper" and "mother" was turned into "mummy."⁷² The incentive for this was making dated narratives more accessible for and easier to understand by children of today.⁷³ Nonetheless, on their website, Hachette declares that the editing of Blyton's books to alter clearly offensive

67. Chung, "Ongoing Process."

68. Forham, quoted in Chung, "Ongoing Process."

69. Chung, "Ongoing Process."

70. Inclusive Minds, "About," *Inclusive Minds*, <https://www.inclusiveminds.com/about>.

71. Cain, "Famous Five."

72. Cain, "Famous Five."

73. Cain, "Famous Five."

and ambiguous terms that might be offensive would go on in the future “to keep Enid Blyton’s books and stories at the heart of every childhood, as they have been for generations” and “[enable] a very wide international audience of children to enjoy the books.”⁷⁴ However, Blyton’s publishers assured their aim to retain as much of the author’s original language as possible.⁷⁵ (Hodder and Stoughten).

Remarkably, Enid Blyton was already publicly scolded for some of her notions in her lifetime: in a column for *The Guardian* in 1966, Member of Parliament Lena Jeger called out the story about a Black doll who is hated for being Black and only loved once its face would have been washed white by rain.⁷⁶ (Jeger; Leighton-Dore; Sutherland part 3 Enid Blyton). Furthermore, one of Blyton’s manuscripts was rejected by Macmillan in 1960 because “there [was] a faint but unattractive touch of old-fashioned xenophobia in the author’s attitude ...; they [the thieves in the manuscript] are ‘foreign’ ... and this seems to be regarded as sufficient to explain their criminality.”⁷⁷ These two instances are significant as Blyton had long since been an acclaimed and successful author by the 1960s, when Jeger denounced the narratives in *The Little Black Doll* and Macmillan, who had published other works by Blyton before, rejected *The Mystery that Never Was*.⁷⁸ Blyton supporters might find plausible excuses for her writing and deny the applicability of modern values and standards to the past; yet, stories like *The Little Black Doll* do remain controversial as they clearly bear potential offence, no matter how plausible it might be that Blyton wrote something like that.

More recent criticism of her writing entails how English Heritage decided to justify its 1997 commemoration plaque for Blyton by exemplarily touching upon accusations of xenophobia and racism on their website to clarify that they are aware of the controversy about Enid Blyton.⁷⁹ However, the organisation’s stance towards the disputed author’s legacy becomes clear by their concluding paragraph:

74. Hodder and Stoughten, “About Enid Blyton,” <https://www.enidblyton.co.uk/landing-page/enid-blyton/enid-blyton-about-the-author/>.

75. Hodder and Stoughten, “About Enid Blyton.”

76. Lena Jeger, “In Large Print,” *The Guardian*, May 24, 1966, 18, <https://theguardian.newspapers.com/newspage/259521070/>.

77. Chris Hastings, “Publisher Rejected Blyton Tale for Being ‘Xenophobic,’” *The Telegraph*, November 20, 2005, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1503430/Publisher-rejected-Blyton-tale-for-being-xenophobic.html>.

78. Hastings, “Publisher Rejected.”

79. See Blyton, *The Famous Five*, Sutherland part 3 and English Heritage, “Blue Plaques.”

"While criticisms of Blyton cannot be entirely dismissed, her work has encouraged generations of children to read. It continues—sometimes in revised form—to sell in considerable quantities. According to UNESCO, she remains the fourth most translated author in the world, after Agatha Christie, Jules Verne and Shakespeare."⁸⁰ In 2018, The Royal Mint denied Blyton a commemorative coin after two-year considerations and explained their decision by hinting at Blyton's controversial legacy.⁸¹ Under the Freedom of Information Act, the following statement by the committee could be revealed: "She [Blyton] is known to have been a racist, sexist, homophobe and not a very well-regarded writer."⁸² What is remarkable is not so much this "secret" statement by members of The Royal Mint, but that taking a "yes/ no" decision took two years and seems to have mostly been fuelled by the fear of public backlash if the answer to the question of minting a commemorative coin for Enid Blyton had been "yes."⁸³ Kehinde Andrews's argument that controversial historical figures like Blyton should not be commemorated as people whose contemporary notions we (indirectly) still value today is worth a good thought.⁸⁴ Regardless, there is a difference between well-informed and sensible arguments like those by Andrews and those that purely degrade someone by reducing a person and everything he stands for to simplifying attributes like "racist," "fascist," "homophobic" or the like.

Regarding the latter phenomenon, the character George from *The Famous Five* series, whose actual name is Georgina, offers a revealing example in conjunction with accusations of sexism in Blyton's books: Barrett, a blogger of *The Mary Sue*, states,

80. English Heritage, "Blue Plaques."

81. See Blyton, *The Famous Five*, Sutherland part 3 and English Heritage, "Blue Plaques."

82. Chris Hastings, "Royal Mint Blocks Enid Blyton Commemorative Coin because Bosses Think She Is a 'Racist, Sexist and a Homophobe' and Fear Backlash", *The Daily Mail*, August 25, 2019, <https://www.dailymail.com/news/article-7391487/Royal-Mint-blocks-Enid-Blyton-commemorative-coin-bosses-brand-racist-anti-gay.html>.

83. Hastings, "Royal Mint" and Jacob Stolworthy, "Enid Blyton 50p Coin Stopped by Royal Mint over Author's 'Racist and Homophobic' Views". *The Independent*, August 27, 2019. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/news/enid-blyton-coin-50p-royal-mint-racist-sexist-homophobic-famous-five-secret-seven-good-morning-britain-gmb-a9080176.html>.

84. Good Morning Britain, "Were Royal Mint Right to Refuse the Enid Blyton Coin?," YouTube, Good Morning Britain. 2019, Video. Web. 6 February 2026. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UY46sS3SyVs>, at 2:55–6:36.

Interestingly, much more is made of George's gender in the original [Famous Five] books by Enid Blyton. Blyton was not a progressive in any sense of the word – her books are full of racism and sexism – but it really seems like she accidentally stumbled onto something interesting with George. The books are absolutely packed full of implications that George may be trans.⁸⁵

This statement denies any possibility that Blyton might deliberately have created a “progressive” character. Instead, it reduces the author's multi-faceted legacy into one of racism and sexism, which leaves George as nothing more than an “interesting accident,” although Barrett does concede how unusual the character of George was in terms of gender for Blyton and the British society back then.⁸⁶ As a side note, The Mary Sue refer to their blog as being run by “an inclusive, feminist community of people” and their website's request for enabling or declining notifications is accompanied by a Pride flag.⁸⁷ Dixon describes George as “a very bad case of that castration complex, or penis-envy.”⁸⁸ Cadogan and Craig assert that George being “tomboyish” implies the “deficiency” that she could never be as “good” as a boy and claim that Blyton portrayed “girls who ‘pretend to be boys’ ... [as] pretentious and silly.”⁸⁹ The common ground these critics share is that they assume Blyton's narratives to convey an allegedly common notion of girls in that it must be more desirable to be boys, but since they are confined to being girls, they will always be “deficient” identities. Did it not appear to Dixon, Cadogan or Craig that George might as well be a tool for proving that girls could do and be anything they like, including what has been considered “typically male”?

Based on his own empirical work, Rudd seems to reflect this thought: “For many adult women who read Blyton, George was a character who made them not only aware of gender inequalities, but also of the possibility that things might be otherwise.”⁹⁰ He even suggests George to be an anti-sexist depiction that contrasts with patriarchal structures embodied by boys and men in Blyton's books

85. Sarah Barrett, “BBC's New ‘Famous Five’ Doesn't Present George as a Trans Boy, but Maybe It Should Have Done,” *The Mary Sue*, January 4, 2024, <https://www.themarysue.com/bbcs-famous-five-controversy-explained/>.

86. Barrett, “BBC's New ‘Famous Five’.”

87. The Mary Sue, “About Us,” *The Mary Sue*, <https://www.themarysue.com/about/>.

88. Dixon, quoted in David Rudd, “Five Have a Gender-Ful Time: Blyton, Sexism, and the Infamous Five,” *Children's Literature in Education* 26, no. 3 (1995): 186.

89. Cadogan and Craig, quoted in Rudd, “Five Have a Gender-ful Time,” 186.

90. Rudd, “Five Have a Gender-ful Time,” 195.

as George's independence and empowerment are constantly challenged by males throughout the book series.⁹¹ Anne as a stereotypical depiction of a girl is needed to contrast with George's "war" on gender roles.⁹² Besides, there are passages in which Anne herself challenges traditional "maleness" by insisting on "female" equivalence.⁹³ Rudd explains how Blyton's narratives show that equality between the sexes is nothing given but need be fought for; as opposed to politically correct narratives that often illustrate harmonious equality between diverse people, which, however, does not exist.⁹⁴ Protecting children from something in literature that they encounter in their real lives does not seem sensible to Rudd as expurgating persisting inequalities in literature by making them politically correct means "to undermine children's own capacities."⁹⁵ Rudd closes with his idea of considering *The Famous Five* series to explore instead of merely perpetuate sexism.⁹⁶ From my own reading of the first volume, George is clearly portrayed as a heroine, who shows how being "different" from "most people" can be an asset, as mirrored by the other four children's curiosity towards and admiration for George.⁹⁷

Enid Blyton herself mostly assigned favourable characteristics to those of her characters which can be considered "androgynous."⁹⁸ This impression is reinforced by the fact that George is inspired by Blyton as a girl and young woman herself, which is why it seems unlikely that it was her intention to portray George in an unfavourable way.⁹⁹ On the contrary, Blyton stated that George was her favourite character "because she was a very strong personality ... and because she was a kind, good, generous, brave child, whom I thought would be a splendid character for any child's book."¹⁰⁰ As a child, Enid Blyton used to make up stories before going to sleep, many of which featured

91. Rudd, "Five Have a Gender-ful Time," 187–191.

92. Rudd, "Five Have a Gender-ful Time," 193.

93. Rudd, "Five Have a Gender-ful Time," 193.

94. Rudd, "Five Have a Gender-ful Time," 193–194.

95. Rudd, "Five Have a Gender-ful Time," 194.

96. Rudd, "Five Have a Gender-ful Time," 194.

97. Blyton, *The Famous Five*.

98. Rudd, "Five Have a Gender-ful Time," 186, 188.

99. Rudd, "Five Have a Gender-ful Time," 187 and Carpenter and Prichard, *Five*, 181.

100. Enid Blyton, "Enid Blyton Explains why George Kirrin Is Her Favourite Character," *Independent*, August 27, 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/news/enid-blyton-coin-50p-royal-mint-racist-sexist-homophobic-famous-five-secret-seven-good-morning-britain-gmb-a9080176.html>.

herself as the heroine.¹⁰¹ Moreover, she wished to be addressed by Richard, or “cabin boy” and later occupied a traditionally male position in the world of publishing.¹⁰² If one were benevolent towards Blyton, George could be read as a projection of the author’s own experiences as a girl and young woman onto a fictitious character on the one hand and on the other, as an attempt to normalise “femininity” beyond the traditional image of what a girl or woman should be like. The question that remains is whether such a reading aligns with the attitudes of pc and cc, which seem rather uncompromising towards all those to whom simplifying catchphrases can (posthumously) be applied all too conveniently.

Protecting Children from Possible Harm?

The following elaborations are an attempt to identify possible risks and dangers which might coincide with the attempt of using pc in children’s books to protect children from possible harm. In 2010, the Parliament of the United Kingdom enacted the Equality Act 2010, which is to “legally [protect] people from discrimination in the workplace and in wider society.”¹⁰³ Some of the protected characteristics are gender reassignment, “race including colour, nationality, ethnic or national origin,” religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation.¹⁰⁴ These traits are, for instance, protected in the sphere of work, education, or consumption while the act expands to the protection of those who are close to someone with a protected characteristic, those who would have reported discrimination on someone else’s behalf, and those who supported another one’s claim.¹⁰⁵

The Equality Act 2010 allows a fairly broad application range, which creates a high risk of people involuntarily violating this law. Moreover, any person who feels discriminated against can “make a claim in a court or tribunal” under the Equality Act 2010.¹⁰⁶ Thanks to this legislation, people can easily take legal steps in case of discrimination, which should be a strong incentive for various agents to avoid

101. Greenfield, Enid Blyton, 58.

102. Rudd, “Five Have a Gender-ful Time,” 187.

103. Equality and Human Rights Commission and Government Equalities Office, “Equality Act 2010: Guidance,” GOV.UK, last updated June, 16, 2015, <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/equality-act-2010-guidance>.

104. GOV.UK, “Types of Discrimination (‘Protected Characteristics’),” GOV.UK, <https://www.gov.uk/discrimination-your-rights>.

105. GOV.UK, “Types of Discrimination.”

106. GOV.UK, “What You Can Do,” GOV.UK, <https://www.gov.uk/discrimination-your-rights/what-you-can-do>.

discrimination in the first place. This might also be part of the explanation why large publishing houses bowdlerise new editions of dated children's books: those who minimise the risk of (indirectly or inadvertently) offending people will be less likely confronted with charges under the Equality Act 2010. Whether someone could press charges on account of feeling discriminated against by dated narratives like Enid Blyton's, however, is questionable. What is even more questionable, is whether dated narratives do qualify as discriminatory in the first place as discrimination needs an existing target and cannot be applied to an indefinite or hypothetical future population. The British society of today, however, is not the society of Blyton's day but used to be such a future population from the author's perspective. Moreover, if Enid Blyton is accused of having discriminated against Black people by using an attribute like "brown" to refer to a White person's tanned skin, I wonder why this reference should be offensive to anyone in the first place: fair skin becoming darker or "brownish" due to the impact of sunlight is not racist or the intentional appropriation of marginalised ethnicities' skin colours, but a natural process. In German we call the result of this *sonnengebräunt*, which literally means "fair skin made brown due to being exposed to sunlight."¹⁰⁷ Using the term "brown" in this context has nothing to do with coloured or marginalised people at all and should therefore not be mistaken as discrimination against them. This example of a purely descriptive use of a colour attribute that could be misused to discriminate against people of colour but carries no reference to marginalised people in the given context at all, illustrates how pc may lead to overinterpretation and overreaction. Children should be instructed and taught about dated narratives, either by paratext, which is more convenient for parents, or by parents themselves to avoid any possible offence on the children's part. Nowadays, it seems, it is most convenient for parents to just leave their children to the addicting effect of smartphones and the like, on which children can access an abundance of politically incorrect content. Altogether, the Equality Act 2010 cannot prevent discrimination, but it ensures that there are legal consequences, which might reduce instances of discrimination in the first place.

Certain studies revealed that people who are stigmatised and marginalised on account of their respective sexual orientation or gender identity are likely to suffer from increased stress levels and related health issues.¹⁰⁸ The lack of social safety, i.e. not living in a reliable

107. Duden, "sonnengebräunt," *Duden: Sprache sagt alles*. Cornelsen Verlag, <https://www.duden.de/rechtschreibung/sonnengebraeunt>.

108. Lisa M. Diamond and Jenna Alley, "Rethinking Minority Stress: A Social Safety

and safe social environment, might additionally have a significant adverse impact on members of these minority groups.¹⁰⁹ Health issues are likely to be the consequence of insufficient social safety when members of sexual or gender minorities become or feel like outcasts of broader society and navigate the latter with increased caution and alertness, which might induce them to conceal their real identities and try “to fit heterosexual and binary gender roles.”¹¹⁰ A 2018 study revealed that the way gender is represented in children’s literature has a significant impact on how children conceptualise gender and gender roles for themselves, which means stereotypical depictions of gender might affect children adversely.¹¹¹ Literature can provide safe spaces for children to understand themselves and others as they are interested in literature that reflects their own identities.¹¹² Diversity in literature may foster children’s empathy towards others instead of implying there was something wrong with people who deviate from a declared norm or average.¹¹³ Books that include minority themes may catalyse processes of self-development and help confidently define one’s own identity, which is particularly important for children and young adults.¹¹⁴ Diverse literature is likely to promote a sense of belonging on the part of minority readers instead of inducing feelings of alienation from a society in which they do not seem to fit¹¹⁵

Perspective on the Health Effects of Stigma in Sexually-Diverse and Gender-Diverse Populations,” *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews*, no. 138 (2022): 104720.

109. Diamond and Alley, “Rethinking Minority Stress.”

110. Diamond and Alley, “Rethinking Minority Stress” and Samuel J. Skidmore, G. Tyler Lefevor, Kiet D. Huynh, and Connor O. Berg, ‘Development and Initial Validation of Scales for Coming Out Vigilance and Positive Coming Out Responses,’ *Sexuality & Culture* 28, no. 2 (2024): 772.

111. Tilda Gladwell, “‘Problematic’ Children’s Books: Is Cancel Culture the Solution?” *Shout Out UK: The Home of Political Literacy and Youth Voice*, <https://www.shout-outuk.org/2024/04/09/problematic-childrens-books-is-cancel-culture-the-solution/>.

112. Katie Dancey-Downs, “Reform UK’s ‘Children’s Book Bans’ Could Open the Floodgates for Censorship,” *Byline Times: What the Paper’s Don’t Say*, July 8, 2025, <https://bylinetimes.com/2025/07/08/reform-uks-childrens-book-bans-could-open-the-floodgates-for-censorship/>; Katie Dancey-Downs, “Banned: School Librarians Shushed over LGBT+ Books,” *Index on Censorship: A Voice for the Persecuted*, August, 19, 2024, <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2024/08/banned-school-librarians-shushed-over-lgbt-books/>; Halim and Lindner & Martin and Halverson, quoted in Andrew Villarreal, “The Impact of Censoring LGBTQ+ Themes in Children’s Literature: Perspectives from LGBTQ+ Parents”, MA diss. (California State University, 2025), 42.

113. Dancey-Downs, “Reform UK’s ‘Children’s Book Bans.’”

114. Villarreal, “The Impact,” 42–43.

115. Villarreal, “The Impact,” 42–43.

Regardless, bowdlerising dated literature to render it more diverse is not the only way to achieve this as new, more diverse books and narratives have just been added to what was already published over the last centuries.

The positive impact such literature might have on children should, however, not be exaggerated as “transformative.” It is a widespread assumption about books and children that reading can have both positive and negative effects upon readers by “[changing] the reader’s attitudes, feelings, beliefs, or self-concept.”¹¹⁶ A 1965 study examined the effects of reading on White children in terms of attitudes towards ethnicity and revealed that reading only amplified pretested “low prejudice” or “high prejudice” in White children towards children of non-White ethnicities.¹¹⁷ Lancaster states that “[r]eading ‘operates as a booster to one’s attitude rather than as a change agent.’”¹¹⁸ Lancaster’s study pursued assumptions about reading that seem to resemble “would-be censors and their understanding of print media’s effects on human behavior.”¹¹⁹ These assumptions could be disproved by more recent research: uninstructed reading barely changes people’s attitudes since they ‘are far more influenced by family, peers, home, schools, and socialization’.”¹²⁰ Moreover, readers’ responses to a text do not depend on content but on individual circumstances that influence readers, i.e. readers react to the same text differently because their reactions depend on their personal views.¹²¹ Roßbach points out that

It is decidedly not true that a person automatically changes while reading a book—even less so an entire society. A communist will not automatically turn into a Nazi if he reads *Mein Kampf*, unlike the mighty of the German Democratic Republic apparently feared; neither will he automatically become a capitalist while reading *Donald Duck* and seeing Dagobert bathe in money.¹²²

116. Christine A. Jenkins, “Censorship: Books Challenges, Challenging Books, and Young Readers,” in *Handbook of Research on Children’s and Young Adult Literature*, eds. Shelby Wolf, Karen Coats, Patricia Enciso, Christine Jenkins (Routledge, 2011), 451.

117. Jenkins, “Censorship,” 451.

118. Lancaster quoted in Jenkins, “Censorship,” 451.

119. Jenkins, “Censorship,” 451.

120. Jenkins quoted in Jenkins, “Censorship,” 451.

121. Jenkins, “Censorship,” 451.

122. Nikola Roßbach, *Dokumentation der Preisverleihung ‘Das politische Buch 2019’: Rede der Preisträgerin* (Berlin, May 10, 2019), my translation, <https://collections.fes.de/publikationen/content/zoom/928211>: In the original: “Es ist eben nicht so, dass

On the contrary, people tend to stay true to values and notions they believe in or that are “normal” to them.¹²³ Young readers should have the freedom to choose the right books for themselves as “it is not the book that is an active agent, but the reader.”¹²⁴ Lancaster asserts there cannot be a universal reader response to a text inferred from a certain individual reader response because “each reader brings her or his own unique perspective to the reading that is informed, but not dictated, by the reader’s personality, gender, education, age, reading ability, and other characteristics.”¹²⁵ Jenkins seems eventually convinced that “the social, cultural, and economic factors that affect readers are in constant flux ... There is one ... fairly static and unchanging [element], and that is the book ... [which] is a mirror. It reflects the worries, the fears, the anger, and the concerns, of each individual who looks into it. We look at a book, but what we see is ourselves.”¹²⁶

It is not only that reading does not automatically change a person but also that altered language use does not necessarily mean that people’s notions would have changed as well: “Hughes perhaps rightfully remarks that for millions of White Americans, the Blacks have remained ‘niggers,’” no matter how politically correct White people may linguistically have referred to Black people by 1997.¹²⁷ Pc misses the fact that language alone cannot change a society’s collective values or outlooks as it is societies that form language, not vice versa.¹²⁸ First, a society’s values or outlooks need be changed *intrinsically*, i.e. because the majority wants to change, and then, its members would willingly adapt their language accordingly to reflect and reinforce the underlying cultural changes.¹²⁹ It is questionable how successful societal change can be if merely *extrinsically* imposed on people as is often the case with pc. Since pc ostensibly neutralises language, which does not automatically affect ways of thinking, it seems obsolete because

sich ein Mensch automatisch verändert, wenn er ein Buch liest – erst recht nicht eine ganze Gesellschaft. Ein Kommunist wird nicht automatisch zum Nazi, wenn er [Mein Kampf] liest, wie es die Mächtigen in der DDR offenbar befürchteten. Und er wird auch nicht automatisch zum Kapitalisten, wenn er [Donald Duck] liest und Dagobert in Gold baden sieht.”

123. Roßbach, *Dokumentation*, 21.

124. Jenkins, “Censorship,” 452.

125. Lancaster quoted in Jenkins, “Censorship,” 452.

126. Jenkins, “Censorship,” 453.

127. Hughes quoted in Wimmer, “Political correctness,” 288.

128. Wimmer, “Political correctness,” 295.

129. Wimmer, “Political correctness,” 295.

it changes nothing but language alone.¹³⁰ Hence, each normative linguistic innovation must be scrutinised regarding its societal benefit and its potential to change something for the better¹³¹

Instead of automatically turning fallible readers into politically correct beings, pc hampers honest conversations about sensitive topics although social change and problem solving depend on openly discussing and negotiating uncomfortable topics.¹³² Due to pc, people would rather remain silent to not risk being ostracised, and focus on “correct” speech, which, in the end, veils real offence and harm by distracting people from pressing societal issues.¹³³ This development can neither be emotionally healthy for children to grow up in nor teach them sensible ways of interacting with other people or solving social conflicts.

Above all else, one might be pondering whether it really is dated or potentially offensive language in dated books that threatens children’s integrity nowadays, or whether this might rather distract from more urgent problems. New ideologies that subtly establish themselves as “mainstream,” long-term consequences of the Covid pandemic, (cyber)bullying, or harmful images of what young people should be like if they want to be “normal,” “accepted,” “beautiful,” “successful” etc. might cause ample issues young people have to grapple with and which might be greater threats compared with Blyton books containing her original language. These considerations become more pressing when thinking about how the cultural value of books is declining and the power and influence of books seems to fade progressively.¹³⁴ In 2023, only fifty per cent of the US population read books.¹³⁵ US teenagers spend considerably more time with their phones than reading books.¹³⁶ In 2025, only roughly nineteen per cent of those between eight and eighteen years read daily in the UK; thirty-three per cent of them enjoyed reading in their spare time.¹³⁷ In Canada, even universities place less emphasis on reading books and writing essays; more students would not have read a single book

130. Wimmer, “Political correctness,” 296.

131. Wimmer, “Political correctness,” 297.

132. McCartney, “13 Ways.”

133. McCartney, “13 Ways.”

134. Ira Wells, *On Book Banning: Or, how the New Censorship Consensus Trivializes Art and Undermines Democracy*, ebook (Windsor: Biblioasis, 2025), Introduction.

135. Wells, Introduction.

136. Wells, Introduction.

137. National Literacy Trust, “Research: Children and Young People’s Reading in 2025,” *National Literacy Trust: Change Your Story*, June 3, 2025, <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/children-and-young-peoples-reading-in-2025/>.

before commencing their academic courses.¹³⁸ Wells argues that “the internet—which is volatile and ephemeral ... has replaced libraries as key infrastructure for liberal democracies,” and technologies and social media have replaced books as children’s centre of attention.¹³⁹ This is why it seems paradoxical and irrelevant to care so much about which titles are provided to children in libraries or whether children’s books are purged from potentially offensive or insensitive content.¹⁴⁰ What might come full circle here is what Lancaster explored and which I touched upon above: the debate about pc in children’s books might mostly reflect power struggles as well-known from censorship applied to children’s books in the past.¹⁴¹ After all, most children of the Western world nowadays have unrestricted access to the internet with all its benefits but also its manipulative and harmful potential.

The ubiquity and power of pictures and videos in the digital age, as particularly prominent on social media, bears the risk of societies making a retrograde step, contributing to a decline of competences such as reading, writing and maths, and leaving people less able to learn or get informed via complex language.¹⁴² The overall eroding linguistic proficiency of modern societies makes the latter more susceptible for the devastating effects of manipulative catchphrases and other forms of linguistic simplifications, a phenomenon that shares common ground with pre-literate ages and totalitarian regimes.¹⁴³ Linguistic proficiency could be challenged and refined by dealing with dated language, e.g. by thinking and learning about terms that used to be common in the past but are nowadays dated or controversial. The contemporising force of pc runs counter to this potential inherent in dated books.

Pc in children’s books cannot protect children from harm, but this practice could be a way to render exclusive narratives of the past more diverse, which might turn them into comforting spaces for young readers with stigmatised traits or from marginalised social backgrounds. Since diverse and inclusive books continue to be written from scratch today, children who long for their own identities to be represented in literature could read these books instead. Of course, one might argue that a homosexual child of homophobic parents is unlikely to be allowed to read queer literature. The fact is,

138. Wells, Introduction.

139. Wells, Introduction.

140. Wells, Introduction.

141. Roßbach, *Dokumentation*, 21, Jenkins, “Censorship,” 451.

142. Heiner Geißler, *Intoleranz: Vom Unglück unserer Zeit*, 2nd ed. (Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 2002), 232.

143. Geißler, *Intoleranz*, 232–233.

this literature does exist and should be somehow accessible even to disadvantaged children nonetheless, thanks to eBooks, open-source editions on the internet, libraries, teachers, or friends and close relatives. Besides, homophobic parents would most likely neither want their children to read a politically correct version of *The Famous Five* by Blyton, in which one of the children is openly queer, which would shift an actual adventure story into a narrative that partially thematises sexuality. Here as above, it becomes evident that it is not books themselves that are the underlying issue of any debate on pc. The merit and necessity of pc in dated children's books to protect children from harm remains a riddle to me since it is people who do harm.

Equipping Children for Their Future Lives?

The UK's Department for Education (DfE), which is "responsible for children's services and education," issues guidance for the national school curriculum in England.¹⁴⁴ The national curriculum "introduces pupils to the best that has been thought and said, and helps engender an appreciation of human creativity and achievement."¹⁴⁵ It is the responsibility of teachers to help pupils develop and expand their English language skills as a tool to approach and understand the rest of the curriculum.¹⁴⁶ Literature is seen as a key element in teaching pupils the English language: "The overarching aim for English in the national curriculum is to promote high standards of language and literacy by equipping pupils with a strong command of the spoken and written language, and to develop their love of literature through widespread reading for enjoyment."¹⁴⁷

Regarding primary education, pupils should be encouraged to read a wide range of genres and read for the pleasure of it "to develop their knowledge of themselves and the world they live in as regular broad reading enriches pupils' vocabulary because they encounter unfamiliar terms and expressions."¹⁴⁸ Moreover, the DfE underscores the importance that pupils across all stages of school read a wide

144. See Department for Education, "What," and Department for Education, "Framework."

145. Department for Education, "Framework."

146. Department for Education, "Framework."

147. Department for Education, "Statutory Guidance: National Curriculum in England: English Programmes of Study". GOV.UK, updated July 16, 2014. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-english-programmes-of-study/national-curriculum-in-england-english-programmes-of-study>.

148. Department for Education, "Programmes."

range of books from different traditions, cultures, historical periods, of different genres, and by different authors.¹⁴⁹ Children should learn to “read and appreciate the depth and power of the English literary heritage.”¹⁵⁰ The problem with all these aims of teaching (dated) literature today is that teachers are obliged to observe the Equality Act 2010 regarding their pupils. However, this act is vague enough for teachers to run a high risk of accidentally discriminating against someone.¹⁵¹ This might be a gateway for teachers to welcome pc in the classroom, not only as a means of protecting themselves from potential accusations of discrimination against minority pupils, but also as an attempt to foster “more inclusive and respectful” learning environments. At the same time, this development may curtail the instructive potential of dated narratives in challenging children to develop and refine their linguistic and cognitive skills.

Reading imaginative literature can help children to find out what a society is like and who they are.¹⁵² Literature allows for self-enlargement, i.e. seeing more than just one’s own little world.¹⁵³ Bloom states that “[Books] bring us light from outside our cave, without which we would be blind.”¹⁵⁴ Dancey-Downs emphasises that the school curriculum must instruct children to understand and respect diversity, i.e. views, beliefs and opinions that differ from their own.¹⁵⁵ For this end, it is integral for democratic communities that their members “wrestle with their interpretations of literature with other readers’ to refine traits like empathy, imagination, reason or emotion.”¹⁵⁶ Furthermore, it is vital for democracies that people establish and preserve their own justified stances while accepting and respecting those of others, yet “remaining open to questioning their [own] beliefs.”¹⁵⁷ Literature, enquiry through literature, and the reflection of unfamiliar realities conveyed by literature can be a fruitful simulation of social discourse.¹⁵⁸

If approached in an educational manner, i.e. accompanied by a teacher’s instructions and explanations, literature can influence “ways

149. Department for Education, “Programmes.”

150. Department for Education, “Programmes.”

151. Department for Education, “Framework.”

152. Wells, Introduction.

153. Wells, Introduction.

154. Bloom quoted in Wells, Introduction.

155. Dancey-Downs, *Banned*.

156. Rosenblatt quoted in Kathz G. Short, “Reading Literature in Elementary Classrooms,” in *Handbook of Research on Children’s and Young Adult Literature*, 51.

157. Rosenblatt quoted in Short, “Reading Literature,” 51.

158. Short, “Reading Literature,” 51.

of thinking and knowing' as children may apply their insights from annotated and discussed literature to their own lives."¹⁵⁹ Contrary to uninstructed reading per se, the varied study of literature from diverse contexts under the supervision and instruction of teachers in educational settings can have a substantial effect upon children and their notions. This is why schools seem to occupy a key role in teaching children how to deal with dated language and narratives as they encounter in Enid Blyton's *The Famous Five*. Equipping children with proper education, knowledge and skills should make pc obsolete. Regardless, education and knowledge are indefinite variables, which is why instruction in the sense elaborated above could very well be hijacked by pc, for instance, for teachers to respect the Equality Act 2010 requirements. This scenario may risk encouraging children to label certain texts as simply the products of "racist" or "white supremacist" authors that ought to be rejected, rather than approaching historically situated works in a more nuanced, contextualised, and critically balanced manner.

This risk reflects the problem of reading dated texts from a modern perspective. Revising dated stories for children imposes modern notions of what is appropriate to say or write, which, might hamper children's ability to form an understanding of dated language within its respective historical context.¹⁶⁰ Enid Blyton's publisher Hachette argues that Blyton's racial attitudes as expressed in some of her works are to be denounced and offensive or harmful terms to be omitted from her writing, but children should be enabled to understand that her books "were written and set in the past."¹⁶¹ Denouncing and making children understand that books were "written and set in the past" is one thing, but simultaneously omitting significant signs from texts that mark them products of the past seems paradoxical, respectively the former merely an excuse for the latter. Hachette publicly announced they did not continue to modernise Blyton's dated language as "old-fashioned terms such as 'bathing-suit' and references to pre-decimal currency ... [were] part of their [Blyton's books] charm and ... enjoyed by readers of all ages': any modernisations of Blyton's language as applied by the publishers in 2010 have been or are to be changed back to their original equivalents."¹⁶² In other words: children should be taught that people used to say "bathing suit" and the

159. Short, "Reading Literature," 50.

160. Kunle Olulode, "Airbrushing Racism: Why Racist Words Shouldn't Be Edited from History," *Index on Censorship* 44, no. 4 (2015): 34.

161. Hodder and Stoughten, "About Enid Blyton."

162. Chung, "Ongoing Process" and Hodder and Stoughten, "About Enid Blyton."

like and that these terms signal that a text was written and its plot set in the past whereas dated terms that are potentially offensive to modern readers are better to be hidden away, almost as if they had never even been used at all. I think the shortcomings of this approach are obvious and need no further elaboration at this point. One might, however, hear a faint resounding of the past that is erased might be forgotten and, thus, damned to rhyme in the present or future.

Grant argues modernising historical books, films or series distorts historical facts as becomes clear in the modern production of a historical drama, in which “a Sussex monastery during the Dissolution ... has roughly the ethnic diversity of 21st-century Lewisham.” She continues that producers “of modern costume dramas demonstrate little interest in that rich, lost world on its own terms, only in its use as a cipher for the preoccupations of our own day ... which implies that these characters can only ever be interesting if they ... think and act exactly like people of today.”¹⁶³ Might it be understood as a form of cultural superiority if people of the twenty-first century feel entitled to contemporise dated texts to make them sound familiar or align with their own sensitivities? Does this practice lack respect towards the past, its agents, and artefacts? Declaring one’s own values, outlooks and language “more appropriate” than equivalents from the past might be rooted in the false assumption that the progression of time can be equated with an ongoing self-optimisation of humankind. Unfortunately, this rather tempts to retreat to one’s own narrow world instead of broadening one’s horizon regarding the unfamiliar, at times even uncomfortable. Consequently, one might simply dismiss the past and miss the chance to track how things might have changed since then.¹⁶⁴

Pc denounces expressing opinions that do not align with its principles as an indicator of those who are not to be tolerated, which, in turn, betrays a stance that is deeply intolerant towards everything beyond politically correct narratives.¹⁶⁵ This creates a strong incentive for people to conform because the alternative is social isolation.¹⁶⁶ This development endangers the formation of valuable soft skills like critical thinking, the ability to debate, the formation of independent ideas, listening to other perspectives and respecting them, or being accepting

163. Madeline Grant, “Leave Our Period Dramas Alone!” *The Spectator* 7, <https://spectator.com/article/leave-our-period-dramas-alone/>.

164. Olulode, “Airbrushing Racism.”

165. McCartney, “13 Ways.”

166. McCartney, “13 Ways.”

and considerate with those who disagree.¹⁶⁷ It forces people to be mainly concerned with learning accepted narratives, reproducing them and avoiding conflicts, which renders people self-conscious, insecure and numb instead of attentive, expressive, talkative, or creative.¹⁶⁸ McCartney argues that pc teaches people to consider themselves victims, which makes it necessary to cover them with bubble wrap and prevents them from building indispensable resilience. Instead of learning how to navigate a world that can be harsh on them, people expect the world to adjust to their sensitivities as “personal feelings become the ultimate authority on what’s acceptable.”¹⁶⁹

Jean-Jacques Rousseau may be considered an advocate for children’s freedom to learn without being patronised by adults. Rousseau emphasised the importance of unguided physical activity for the development of children’s intelligence.¹⁷⁰ It was crucial to let children move about freely, instead of being guided all the time, so that they had to make their own decisions that challenged their intelligence.¹⁷¹ No matter the dated character of Rousseau’s writing, his ideas might be applied to the present discourse and stir some thought in light of recent developments: Power denounces young British parents’ practices of bringing up children, who “have been less willing to let their children live independently” by, for instance, not allowing them to play outside unsupervised under the mean age of eleven. He states that “[t]he truth about childhood in modern Britain is that it is by historical standards a prison, not because of the internet, but because of parents.”¹⁷²

Rousseau compared an unfree peasant, who routinely only did what had been asked of him, with what he called *einen Wilden* (a “savage”), who was free and had to take each decision by means of his own mental faculties.¹⁷³ Constant routines, obedience and habits were rather harmful towards reason and intelligence.¹⁷⁴ According to Rousseau, too many rules and prohibitions opposed the development of a self-determined and confident child.¹⁷⁵ If parents kept their chil-

167. McCartney, “13 Ways.”

168. McCartney, “13 Ways.”

169. McCartney, “13 Ways.”

170. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Emile oder Über die Erziehung,” in *Pädagogik und Ethik*, eds Kurt Beutler and Detlef Horster (Philipp Reclam, 1996), 21.

171. Rousseau, “Emile,” 21.

172. John Power, “No, the Internet Is Not Bad for Your Child,” *The Spectator*, <https://spectator.com/article/no-the-internet-is-not-bad-for-your-child/>.

173. Rousseau, “Emile,” 21–22.

174. Rousseau, “Emile,” 22.

175. Rousseau, “Emile,” 22.

dren from exploring their own respective agency, they would merely adapt to their parents' agencies.¹⁷⁶ Consequently, children would not learn to listen to their intuition but merely to comply with rules: 'Wenn er niemals sieht, wozu seine Vernunft ihm dienen kann, wird er schließlich meinen, sie sei zu nichts zu gebrauchen'¹⁷⁷ (If he [the child] never learns how his reason may serve him, he will end up thinking it were good for nothing).

Instead of encouraging a child to explore various dated and contemporary narratives freely, pc implies that controversial opinions could just be erased by ostracism, omission or boycott, which is a threat to democratic values.¹⁷⁸ The outcome is likely to be less tolerance, less diversity, less debate, less unity, less community—in a nutshell, a society that is not merely a threat to children but also equips them with the opposite of what their well-being needs to thrive in the future.

Conclusion

Pc started as a movement with laudable objectives, which were to make societies more just, their members more equal, and representation both more diverse and inclusive. Its underlying force is an absolute morality that targets language use in a normative way, wants behaviour to be changed, declares universal validity of its self-established norms, and relies on the exploitation of societal liberties to spread successfully. The language use pc approves of seems overall euphemistic, which challenges its praiseworthy origins. Cc enforces pc by ostracising people who do not align with the norms of the latter. As a result, certain people are systematically excluded from society. Cc thrives on taboos and moral superiority, which puts different groups of society up against each other. This threatens democratic foundations and distracts societies from solving those issues pc and cc merely naïvely wish away.

Enid Mary Blyton, who was born in the late Victorian era in England, left a legacy of thousands of stories, sold more than half a billion copies during her lifetime, and is still one of the most successful authors of all times. From the 1980s, opposition towards her narratives started to form as they were called out for being sexist or racist. Consequently, *The Famous Five* books have perpetually been revised to rid them of potentially offensive terms. Remarkably, Blyton was already criticised for xenophobic and racist language and plots in her lifetime.

176. Rousseau, "Emile," 22.

177. Rousseau, "Emile," 23.

178. Wells, Introduction.

The Equality Act 2010 aims to sanction various types of discrimination but cannot prevent instances of discrimination. Instead, it might induce people to reduce the risk of discrimination by, for instance, resorting to pc. Diverse literature can provide a haven for gender or sexual minorities but since suitable books have been written from scratch, pc in dated books should not be a prerequisite for diverse narratives. Studies revealed how uninstructed reading does not automatically change children's views for the better or worse: books do not shape societies but societies shape books. Simultaneously, the power of books is declining as children in Western societies read less, which might make them more susceptible to simplifications that undermine complex realities. Regardless, the DfE of the UK emphasises the importance of forming and refining children's linguistic skills via a broad and diverse range of literature from various periods to confidently navigate the world they live in. After all, instructed reading can help children develop critical social and cognitive skills. Schools can play a crucial role in this endeavour if they do not uncritically fall for the mechanisms of pc.

Simply reading and interpreting dated texts from a modern perspective prevents children from grasping the full complexity of past societies. Modernising books in accordance with politically correct principles might express a perceived moral superiority. The latter, however, seems disrespectful towards past stages of human civilisation, which did not yet profit from the knowledge we can access now. Also, pc is intolerant towards deviating notions and forces people into compliance via ostracism, which makes it difficult for children to develop invaluable social skills they need to navigate a society that brims with conflicting viewpoints. Instead, they perceive themselves as victims, who are in constant need of being protected from harsh reality. Jean-Jacques Rousseau pointed out that only those who were not restricted by an abundance of rules and prohibitions would truly learn how to make full use of their intellect.

Altogether, I deem my elaborations sufficient to warn of the risks and dangers of uncritical usage of pc: rendering Enid Blyton's language in *The Famous Five* politically correct does neither seem a sensible means to protect young people of the present UK from possible harm nor to prepare them for their future lives. Instead of more equal, pc rather appears to make societies unjust in a different way. It is important to ask for the legitimacy of a phenomenon that progressively affects entire societies. There can be no doubt about whether societies need tolerance, respect, diversity, inclusivity, equality or justice, but how all this can be achieved needs to be discussed openly. If one cannot critically address this "how", one might ask whether the measures in

question even aim at finding the best possible compromise between wrongdoings of the past and a better future for all members of society. Criticism does not mean fighting the “whether” and opposing to change, but pointing to possible shortcomings of the “how.”

As a child, I enjoyed listening to the German audiobooks *Fünf Freunde* “by Enid Blyton”. Most of these stories were not even written by Blyton herself, and I do not recall whether they included any of the terms that are now considered controversial. Surely, I did not even care as a child, but I do know that all the audiobooks that are translations of Blyton’s original stories are now introduced by disclaimers warning of dated and offensive language. Making Blyton’s narratives politically correct is a falsification of her language, which becomes relevant regarding all those people who could feel offended by her original language use. After all, Blyton did use potentially offensive terms and people who care not to encounter them should think about reading some of the plenty of alternatives by other authors while leaving Blyton’s books to those who want to read and learn from them and all their instructive shortcomings. To put my ideas in Kafkaesque terms:

Altogether, I think we ought to read only books that bite and sting us. If the book does not shake us awake like a blow to the skull, why bother reading it in the first place? So that it can make us happy, as you put it? Good God, we’d be just as happy if we had no books at all... What we need are books that hit us like a most painful misfortune, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, that make us feel as though we had been banished to the woods, far from any human presence, like a suicide. A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us.¹⁷⁹

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I did neither use AI tools for my research nor my writing process.

Despite thorough investigation and proofreading, inadvertent mistakes may be possible, for which I take full responsibility.