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Literární díla Davida Walliamse ve vztahu k politické korektnosti

Literary works of David Walliams in relation to political correctness

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**Čestné prohlášení**

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**Abstract**

This bachelor thesis is concerned with literary works of David Walliams in relation to political correctness. The aim was to analyse Walliams’ literary works based on recent media criticism. The thesis comprises two main parts: the theoretical part, where I introduced the term of political correctness, demonstrated its mechanisms and impact, and the practical part, where I focused on identifying controversial themes in Walliams’ works, specifically racism and cultural stereotypes, body shaming, misogyny and sexism, classism, and LGBTQ+ elements. Additionally, I compared these elements with their presence in children’s literature and evaluated the criticism directed at Walliams’ works. I was hoping to demonstrate that the reading experience and enjoyment of reading come first in children's books and politically correct content is secondary.

**Introduction**

In the realm of children's literature, the issue of political correctness has become a matter of increasing concern and debate. This Bachelor's thesis explores selected literary works by David Walliams within the context of political correctness. Familiar with Walliams' works while reading to my children, this author was a clear choice for me not only due to his prominence as a children's author but also his works' recent encounters with criticism, primarily centred on concerns of inappropriate content. Furthermore, the literary world faced similar challenges earlier this year when the works of Roald Dahl came under scrutiny for containing offensive language.

As a mother of an autistic son with limited verbal abilities, I was naturally worried about his reading skills. However, ever since my son was introduced to Walliams’ books at the age of 7, he was drawn to these stories and has now read all of them in both Czech and English. This experience has motivated my belief that contemporary discussions surrounding political correctness in children’s literature are both a relevant and controversial topic. As a parent, the content is not of the most importance to me as long as my child reads and enriches his language.

This thesis consists of a theoretical and practical part. To begin with, in the theoretical part I will define the term political correctness and explore the varied perceptions of this term supplemented by a brief historical overview. Secondly, through its influences on society, language and culture I will demonstrate how political correctness works and highlight its benefits and drawbacks. Subsequently, I will provide an overview of issues related to political correctness in children’s literature, including censorship, and controversial rewriting and criticism. Finally, I will conclude the theoretical part with an analysis of the influential factors that have shaped David Walliams' writing.

The main aim of the practical part is to analyse the literary works of David Walliams in relation to political correctness. I will commence with the identification of controversial themes in Walliams’ works based on the criticism received in the media. Specific areas of focus will be racism and cultural stereotypes, sexism and misogyny, body shaming, classism, and LGBTQ+ elements. Furthermore, I will examine these elements in comparison with their presence in children’s literature. To conclude, I will evaluate the justification of the criticism of Walliams’ works.

In my thesis, while the debate on PC remains crucial, I aim to demonstrate that the reading experience and enjoyment of reading take precedence in children’s books, with politically correct content being of secondary concern. This thesis will hopefully contribute to the ongoing delicate discourse and enrich the academic ground in the field of literature and English language teaching.

# What is political correctness

## Definition of the term

There is not just one generally accepted definition of the term Political Correctness (PC). Defining this term comprehensively is difficult. If asked to define this term, most people’s responses would address the major problems such as not using derogatory words, treating everyone with respect, or being tolerant to and promoting diversity (Hughes, 2010, p.8). This closely corresponds with neutral tone in dictionary entries:

1. *The avoidance of forms of expression or action that are perceived to exclude, marginalize, or insult groups of people who are socially disadvantaged or discriminated against* (English Oxford Living Dictionaries, 2019).
2. *The act of avoiding language and actions that could be offensive to others, especially those relating to sex, gender and race* (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023).

## Perception of the term

Some authors and public figures may present opposing, more affectional interpretations of PC expressing their stands on this key phenomenon of contemporary public life. Here is a selection of varied views:

1. Lessing (2004, as cited in Hughes, 2010, p. 13) expresses her dislike of PC by calling it mental tyranny and poison gas.
2. Coleman (2000, as cited in Browne, 2006, chapter 1) feels that those politically correct started being more intolerant of differences and dissent. He compares PC to soft totalitarianism representing a new form of injustice.
3. Weyrich (1999, as cited in Browne, 2006, chapter 1) is also increasingly concerned with the growing aversion of PC towards fundamental Western values, predominantly freedom of speech.
4. Furthermore, Fry is fearful of PC for depriving individuals of their freedom. He sees it as a weapon that the Right uses to dictate to people what is acceptable or not with regard to their behaviour or language (Dyson, Goldberg, Fry et al, 2018, p. 88).
5. Similar to Fry, Short (1995, as cited in Hughes, 2010, p. 13) believes that the hard-Right invented PC so they could excuse xenophobia, hatred, and intolerance of some of their supporters.
6. Sarrazin (2015, p. 33) states that more militant PC proponents associate this term with borders of decency, and anyone who does not conform to their value judgment is not decent. The rules of PC are gradually being transformed into accepted moral standards.
7. Finally, there are of course those, such as Chait (2015), who state that PC as a moral ideology does not exist, because it is only pretentiously used by those in power on the Left to silence a sensitive debate and to dismiss and belittle uncomfortable ideas.

As we can see, society is divided on the ambiguous matter of PC. It is a subjective issue. It is both fiercely ridiculed and praised at the same time. We must determine if the PC movement is truly founded on tolerance, empathy, and compassion, or if radicals are only exploiting PC to further their deliberate repression of free speech (Thanassi, 2021).

# History of political correctness

## The beginnings of PC

Since humans have been able to communicate with words, they have also used them to suppress those who are not expressing the “correct” thing. Even though at present it connotates with unpleasant feelings, PC was created with the hope that everyone would live in a more tolerant society (Kay, 2019). Also, Hughes (2010, p.4) exemplifies the far-reaching history of PC going as far back as the 13th century. In one of the earliest works of literature, *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer questioned conventional notions of authority and the Divine Right, together with several examples of racism, xenophobia, and misogyny. In the 1600s, a good case can be made from Shakespeare's plays because many of them provocatively and unsettlingly illuminate unsolvable moral and political issues. A few examples include Hamlet's sexist remark, *“Frailty, thy name is woman,”* Shylock's remark, *“Has not a Jew eyes?”* and Falstaff's cynical interpretation of what “honour” means. Browne (2006, chapter 3) adds that Christianity also displayed signs of PC in its persecution, and even went a step further by using violence to enforce its intolerance, just like radical Islam does now.

## Origins of the term

It can be difficult to identify who began PC. One must take into account not just history, since PC is embedded in politics, but also the moral dimension and its conception of fairness which dominated in education reforms. Historically, the phrase ‘politically correct’ first appeared in a Supreme Court case Chisholm versus Georgia in 1793. A small section of the decision contained the following phrase: *“The United States,” instead of the “People of the United States,” is the toast given. This is not politically correct.* The phrase “politically correct” was used in this instance in its literal sense. A toast just to the “United States” is not accurate enough (Hughes, 2010, p. 60-62). Contrarily, according to Perry (1992, as cited in Suhr, Johnson, 2003, p. 8-9) an American author and critic Joseph Krutch Wood used for the first time the term ‘correct opinions’ in a 1935 discussion of academic freedom when he declared that the Left was becoming more like the conservative Right in their view that correct opinions, rather than free debates and opposing ideas, should be promoted in schools.

## PC in 20th century

Modern PC first emerged as a policy concept describing the party line of the Chinese Communist party as it was put out by Mao Tse-Tung in the 1930s. Its main focus was on “doing the right thing” and “thinking the right thoughts”. This tactic was also employed by Russian Marxism in an effort to influence people to adopt the “correct” way of thinking (Hughes, 2010, p. 60-62). German Marxists sympathizers who were critical of and sought to be saved from a Western culture founded the Institute for Social Research at Frankfurt University (the Frankfurt School) in 1923. The Frankfurt School began applying new Marxist techniques. Because they could no longer make a convincing economic case against Western capitalism, their central focus shifted to cultural and social issues which led to the development of PC as we know it today. When the Nazis came to power in Germany the “Frankfurt School” re-established itself in the US and its Marxist ideology swiftly became popular across US universities which have become a stronghold of PC.

PC ideology grew in popularity in the US in the 1960s as a result of the strong liberal movement's opposition to conservative rules. However, PC was taken too far and its hard-line ideology transformed rebellious liberalism into *a dogmatic and conformist, even bullying ideology* which was the exact reverse of what it had set out to achieve (Browne, 2006, chapter 3). Ironically, PC soon spread throughout Western democracies, particularly on American university campuses where the freedom of expression is a fundamental principle (Hughes, 2010, p.7). Heated public debates began in US universities in the mid-1980s when Left liberal views were unpopular in the greater conservative culture. Students and academics began referring to films, TV shows or people with Left-liberal views as politically correct (Bush, 1995, p. 43).

In contrast to the US, the time for PC in Britain did not come until 1997, the year the newly elected Labour government for the first time enacted PC’s dictates. The previous conservative government was not concerned with PC and it was irrelevant for the Labour government before that because it was not a popular concept at that time (Brown, 2006, chapter 4).

## PC in 21st century

The growth of PC in the early 2000s was greatly influenced by the digital revolution. Access to information was no longer restricted, and everyone had a voice. This has caused generational division. It's not because generation Z (people born between 1997 – 2012) is suddenly more empathetic, sensitive, and dissatisfied; rather, it's because of the influx of postings and videos that highlight injustice or strong emotions (Thanassi, 2021). By the 21st century, in Britain PC had permeated every sphere of daily life. It has dominated in public services and institution, from local authorities to central government. Even the BBC and all the other channels now institutionalise PC (Brown, 2006, chapter 4).

# How PC works

As stated above, PC is a complex and often debated topic. To understand its aim and how it works, one must explore how it influences the use of language, culture, and society (Hughes, 2010, p. 38). PC is founded on a number of idealistic assumptions, including those of equality, representativeness, and conformity. PC assumes how society should be organized and how individuals should treat one another. A society, however, is composed of people and groups with various backgrounds, manners, customs, needs, and expectations. The fundamental idealistic assumption is equality, which is greater in American ideology because Britain still accepts the monarchy, nobility, and social classes. The second underlying assumption is that people of all races and genders are fairly represented in all areas of life. The third and the most problematic is the assumption of conformity since PC aims to repress long-standing discriminatory behaviours and set new standards for respectful language (p. 21-23).

## The benefits of PC

There are many who believe that PC does have a purpose. Also in agreement with this is Roxburgh (2002, as cited in Browne, 2006, chapter 5) who states that PC *is the product of civilisation, and reflects a basic desire to tolerate, not persecute, those who have different faiths, beliefs, or skin colour*. PC helps to prevent abuse of power, racism and discrimination in various social contexts. Additionally, PC promotes open-mindedness and reduces institutional insensitivity towards minority groups (Browne, 2006, chapter 5). Furthermore, Graziano (2018, p. 4-9) suggests that the perceived benefits of PC are so significant that they influence people’s decision to support and adhere to it. The advantages of complying with PC include receiving a portion of the rewards, releasing oneself from liability for one’s actions, and avoiding excommunication. However, this comes at cost of giving up one’s power. PC seduces by giving the impression that it is a promised land, but in reality, it only benefits those who control the system.

## The drawbacks of PC

PC is a controversial topic due to its many drawbacks. Browne (2006, chapter 6) highlights that PC is criticised for promoting a “victim mentality”, suppressing free speech, distorting public debate, and discouraging personal responsibility. What is more, PC can harm the very groups it intends to help, such as women, the vulnerable, the unemployed, and minority individuals. Competitive victimhood and the rewards of victim status are seen as problematic outcomes of PC. Browne suggests that PC stifles opposing beliefs through self-imposed censorship and attaches moral superiority to PC while shaming opposing viewpoints. Dyson (Goldberg, Fry et al, 2018, p. 73) highlights how the loss of individuality within PC can perpetuate discrimination and inequality. He believes that people are not allowed to exercise their personal autonomy and authority, resulting in unfair treatment based on group dynamics, such as race and gender. Dyson emphasises the need to recognise and respect the individuality of all members of society, only then can true equality be established.

## PC influence on society

Both Kay (2019) and Browne (2006, chapter 4) discuss the influence of PC on society, but they present contrasting opinions on its impact. Kay sees the problem with PC as human nature, as people seek power and use rules or legislation to obtain it. This leads to the weaponisation of discomfort and passive aggression when people encounter opposing views. Interestingly, Kay points out that PC is meant to be a left-wing philosophy, but as leftists often feel paralysed by fear of saying the incorrect thing, they tend to suffer the most. In contrast, Browne views PC as a luxury afforded by a powerful society. According to Browne, PC is an effective ideology that employs “divide and rule” strategy to its advantage. It promotes measures that strengthen it even more, such as Third World immigration to the West, bringing in threats to traditional Western values, and slicing society into ethnic groups, enabling identity and grievance politics to flourish.

## PC influence on language

Language is not neutral, but it instead mirrors contemporary beliefs and unwholesome attitudes. In the PC debate, it has been discussed how to rename groups of people who are traditionally outsiders, such as immigrants, colonised people, minorities, homosexuals, or the mad, to use the traditional terminology. The PC's semantic aims were to alter deeply embedded prejudices and their semantic correlates by introducing new and neutral vocabulary terms. Politically correct language avoids judgmental terms and opts instead for manufactured euphemism replacements. However, language that is biased and stereotyped has grown entrenched, as seen in words for the aforementioned groups. The effort to reword derogatory vocabulary in a neutral language suitable for public conversation has not been universally embraced. Many of the formulas of PC seem unnatural, imprecise, and euphemistic, which invites criticism and mockery (Hughes, 2010, p. 14-16). Hughes agrees with Fry (Dyson, Goldberg, Fry et al, 2018, p. 23) in the sense that by simply prescribing language and forcing uncomfortable and silly phrases, PC fails to achieve its goal of creating more tolerant society.

## PC influence on culture

Since becoming the dominant ideology in society, PC has had a significant influence also on culture through the means of the entertainment industry, literature, music, and social media. In culture, PC is enforced, for example, through popular figures adopting and promoting politically correct beliefs, the influence of the broadcast media like the BBC, or the conformity of the film industry, as being politically correct means being protected from any potential criticism (Browne, 2006, chapter 6).

Hughes (2010, p. 23) focuses on the impact of PC within the field of entertainment. In the US, there is a prevalent double standard where television police series, hospital series, and soap operas strive to be politically correct by featuring diverse and representative casts in terms of race and gender. However, sitcoms and drama series tend to appeal to specific groups and may lack diversity. In the UK, entertainment has historically been aimed at a predominantly white audience and has featured white actors and themes influenced by class and region. While there have been recent attempts to introduce multicultural elements, the British public still believes that immigrants should integrate with British society and culture rather than forming isolated parallel societies (Browne, 2006, chapter 6). Also Coleman (2000, as cited in Geser, 2008, p. 7) recognises how PC controls and influences culture. Because the politically correct acknowledge their inability to control the economy, they instead prioritise controlling the culture as a means of shaping societal values and beliefs.

According to Geser (2008, p. 37), PC is both necessary and challenged in the age of the Internet and social media. He suggests that PC is necessary to maintain civility and respect in online interactions, where everyone can communicate with each other (and potentially attack others) without any formal rules. However, he also points out that the foundations of PC are being challenged because the Internet allows for more diverse voices to be heard, undermining the idea that self-expression is limited and controlled by dominant majorities. Fry (Dyson, Goldberg, Fry et al, 2018, p. 63-65) presents an opposing view to Geser, drawing from his personal experiences of PC restrictions on television speech, such as the censorship of profanity. He criticises the practice of claiming offense on behalf of others and argues that such reasoning is insufficient. Fry attributes the progress in his culture, such as his ability to marry someone of his gender, to human decency rather than PC.

# PC in children’s literature

## The evolution of children’s literature

The development of children’s literature has been marked by changes in society and evolving perceptions of childhood throughout history, with ancient and medieval cultures exposing children to adult elements (such as violence, sex, or coarse humour) before the idea of protecting them emerged in the sixteenth century. The modern middle-class childhood has been managed and restricted by adults, including their access to knowledge and books. The nineteenth century saw the emergence of a separate genre of children’s literature, often focused on moral content. Until the 1960s, censorship within mainstream children’s literature was relatively dormant. However, since the mid-1960s onwards, children’s books have become a battleground for personal, social, and political forces, with calls for more inclusive and socially aware children’s books. Topics such as teenage sexuality and so called “problem novels” addressing various personal and societal issues became prominent (Scott, 1983, p. 28-37).

## The impact of children’s literature

The canon of children’s literature has significant influence on shaping the consciousness of generations and is a pervasive presence in Western culture. Adults, as creators of children’s books, hold responsibility for shaping the meaning and messages conveyed to child readers. In order to transform societal conceptions of race, class, and gender, the canon of the children’s literature needs to be challenged (Jussawalla, 1997, p. 180-181).

Children lack the ability to critically analyse or interpret texts. Instead, they may form generalised beliefs and stereotypes based on what they encounter in literature (Jussawalla, 1997, p. 181). Kohl (1995, p. 41-43) recognises the powerful impact of childhood reading, as it not only leaves a lasting impression but also shapes their values and dreams. While reading can perpetuate negative images and stereotypes, limit aspirations, and erode self-respect through racism or sexism, stories also serve as a powerful tool for nurturing children's imaginations and allowing them to explore their own identities. Therefore, some authors, for example Kohl (1995, p. 87-98) and Yenika-Agbaw (1997, p. 446-447) emphasise the importance of critical reading skills and highlight how discussions and connecting texts to children's lives can enable them to question complex stories from a young age, speculate on the author's intent, and understand social and cultural contexts in texts.

## Censorship in children’s literature

Questions are raised about the portrayal of oppressive themes, such as racism, sexism, and inequality, in classic children’s books and whether they should be a significant part of children’s reading material. Instead of the complete removal of these books, Kohl (1995, p. 3-23) encourages analysing them and involving children, teachers, and parents in the process, although stressing that a book’s charm should not override the offensive attitudes it embodies. The argument is made that children should be allowed to encounter stereotypes, question authority and learn to critically evaluate cultural practices. Furthermore, Kohl criticises the publishers’ tendency to censor or alter texts, especially those for schools. While addressing biases is important, Kohl cautions that eliminating biases can lead to a loss of complexity and variability in literature. Surveys conducted by the writers’ group PEN indicate that publishers are not simply promoting PC among authors, but are actively censoring any material deemed politically incorrect. Moreover, publishers face external pressure from schools, libraries, and local authorities to conform to PC in their publications (Hughes, 2010, p. 10).

## Controversial Rewriting and Criticism in Children's Literature

Some form of criticism, efforts for rewriting or banning have affected a number of famous works, including those of Roald Dahl. As recently as February 2023, Dahl’s books made headlines regarding controversy surrounding the rewriting of his books to remove offensive language and address sensitive issues. The publisher *Puffin Books* reviewed the texts with the goal of ensuring that Dahl’s stories remain enjoyable for today’s children (Syed, 2023). Authors Syed (2023), Vernon (2023), and Taylor (2023) reported on the controversy of rewriting and many changes made, for example, adding gender-neutral terms such as people instead of men, parents or family instead of mother or father, omitting some words such as ugly or fat, altering unfavourable depictions of women, removing references to violence, and also some passages which were not written by Dahl have been added. While some voices within the publishing industry criticise the updates as censorship, others argue that it is necessary for a contemporary audience. Among the critics of the rewrites are British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak who advocates for preserving literary heritage and free speech, or Suzanne Noseel of PEN America who proposes the inclusion of introductions to provide context instead of altering the original text (Syed, 2023). The controversy highlights the tension between adult sensibilities and children’s enjoyment of books. As Dahl once said *“I never get any protests from children. All you get are giggles of mirth and squirms of delight. I know what children like.”*

David Walliams, a contemporary children's author, also appears to understand what children like. According to his publisher *HarperCollins*, over the past decade he has achieved remarkable success as a beloved children’s author. With a total of 34 diverse titles, his books have been translated into 54 languages, selling an incredible 50 million copies worldwide (HarperCollins Publishers, 2022). However, despite their success, Walliams’ books have also faced criticism since 2020 due to concerns about inappropriate content. Several articles discussing these issues have emerged in British media, including *The Guardian* (Flood, 2021), *The Independent* (Harrison, 2020), or *Sky News* (2021). The identification of specific controversies in Walliams’ books will be explored further in this thesis.

# David Walliams

To gain a closer understanding of what has shaped David Williams’ life, his personality and inspiration for his work, his autobiography called *Camp David* (Walliams, 2013) has been drawn on.

David Walliams is a renowned contemporary English comedian, presenter, actor, and children’s author. He was born on 20th August 1976 (Banstead, England). His birth name was Williams, however, whilst pursuing his artistic career, he needed a unique name, so he chose to alter it to Walliams (p. 160).

## Family background

Walliams comes from a religious, conservative, working-class family. His parents were Peter Williams (an engineer for London Transport) and Kathleen Ellis (a school laboratory technician). Walliams had a very loving close relationship with his mother who overcompensated for her unaffectionate husband who never knew how to bond with his son and thus Walliams never got his father’s acceptance and always felt like a disappointment to him (p. 2-5).

From early childhood, Walliams was of a habit of listening to conversations around him and making mental notes for the future use (p. 5). He was the happiest when he was watching comedies with his family; he had a great need to perform and was enjoying the attention; he wanted to make his parents proud (p. 248).

## School years and beginnings of his career

His education started at Collingwood Boys’ School where he first encountered a fearful atmosphere and physical punishment (p. 13). Later he attended a private Reigate Grammar School. Being a scout from the age of eight marked his growing up. It was among the scouts where he experienced cross-dressing and performing, the feeling of humiliation after failing to obtain a sports badge, his first sexual experiences with the other boy scouts, and being sexually punished and ridiculed by the coach. He was in a fragile mental state. He was confused and depressed; the feeling of shame made him violent. At the age of 12, he tried to kill himself for the first time (p. 31). At grammar school, Walliams found it difficult to fit in with his immaturity, exhibitionism, and thought-provoking ideas (p. 63). On the other hand, he was thriving during school plays due to his effeminate character and sheer enjoyment of acting and generating laughter (p. 41).

In the last year of grammar school, he successfully landed his first role in the National Youth Theatre. The same year, in 1989, Walliams got into Bristol University to study drama. Although he was experiencing his first success professionally, depression and loneliness drove him to attempt yet another suicide (p. 135 -137).

## A transition from a student to professional comedian

It was at Bristol University where Walliams met his future partner in comedy, Matt Lucas. This collaboration was to become life-changing for both of them. (p. 142). In this partnership, however, Walliams felt inferior (p. 348) and was challenged by Matt’s natural talent in comedy, which made Walliams driven to always deliver a perfectionist performance (p. 182). After university, Walliams’ career was progressing slowly. He played numerous small parts in TV shows (p.245), together with Matt Lucas, they performed their own sketches at Edinburgh Comedy Festival (p.188) and he was a sought-after writer for children’s TV.

His comedy career peaked in 2003 with iconic TV show *Little Britain*, for which Walliams was awarded the Best Newcomer at the British Comedy Awards (p. 367). In *Little Britain* Walliams and Lucas’ aim was to truthfully portray stereotypical British society in all its ugliness and hilariousness while drawing inspiration from everyday life (p. 346). It is astonishing that Walliams wrote his major comedy work through a life period of heavy depression with omnipresent suicidal thoughts. Due to failed relationships, he thought of himself as unlovable, became a sex addict and had to seek psychological help (p. 317).

## A transition from a comedian to a children’s author

It was never Walliams’ intention to become a writer and his success has surprised many. For Walliams, it is writing where he can express his creativity and limitless imagination (Gibbs, 2016). Even though *Little Britain* was intended for adults, lots of children loved the show too. This gave Walliams the initial idea to create something appropriately humorous for children. As a boy, Walliams loved reading Roald Dahl’s books which became an important source of inspiration, as well as being observant and drawing on his personal experiences. His books are set in a real although timeless world, they reflect on children’s feelings and their dependency on adults; further, the books deal with many sensitive matters which are balanced with humour (Jewell, 2017).

## Other achievements

Along with his creative career, Walliams is an accomplished sportsman, a devoted supporter of the Comic Relief charity and since 2017 an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) (Zelasko, 2023). He successfully raised money by swimming the English Channel in 2006, the Strait of Gibraltar to Morocco in 2008, and the River Thames in 2011. His book *The Queen's Orang-Utan*, the proceeds of which went to Comic Relief, and swimming have both helped him collect millions of pounds to support the poor in the UK and Africa (Comic Relief, 2017).

# Controversies in David Walliams’ works

Books serve as personal journeys for authors, revealing their stories and intimate thoughts, allowing readers to connect with them and experience their lives. Such passionate stories become enduring parts of readers' identities (Lehr, 1995, p. xv). However, books evoke strong emotions, and conflict is inherent even in seemingly innocent children’s literature where the pain and challenges of life resonate with readers who identify with the characters. As a result, any book can become a target of controversy. Children's books have evolved from simple stories about animals and fairy princesses to discussing topics like drugs, sex, homosexuality, and death, and consequently are often perceived as threats to young minds. Censorship in children’s books, often driven by a desire to protect children from perceived harm, is a result of societal biases. Liberals aim to shield children from racist or sexist stereotypes, while conservatives fear the questioning of conventional values like faith or parental roles. Advocates of intellectual freedom express concern, believing exposure to diverse ideas nurtures critical thinking. It is vital, however, to recognise that not all concerns about books warrant labelling as censorship. *Censorship is not a problem of good versus evil but of “your” perception of good versus “my” perception of good.* (Lehr, 1995, p. 1-4).

In this context, David Walliams' literary works, much like the stories that have come before him, have received both praise and scrutiny, and in 2020, the criticism intensified when activist Jack Monroe voiced strong disapproval on Twitter, characterising the stories as *sneering classist fat-shaming nonsense.* Monroe (2020, as cited in Harrison, 2020) accused Walliams of *targeting the working class* and using the word “*fa”* as a *derogatory description, pretty much throughout.* The prominent controversies within Walliams’ books, according to numerous subsequent articles, encompass themes such as racism, misogyny, body shaming, classism, and LGBTQ+ elements. This chapter aims to identify each controversial theme (as discussed in several press articles), while also undertaking a comparative examination of occurrences of political incorrectness in Walliams' works in relation to similar themes found in children's literature.

## Racism and cultural stereotypes

Prior to 1960, black characters were frequently absent from British books due to their rarity (Butler, Reynolds, 2014, p. 145). Nonetheless, during the 1960s and 1970s, there was a growing recognition in both Britain and America about the significance of children's literature in promoting equal roles for minority groups in society. This was seen as a means to not only shed light on past oppression but also to acknowledge how literature itself contributed to this by employing language, characters, and situations that perpetuated stereotypes and marginalized specific groups. This examination involved a re-evaluation of classic children's books from the past to see how they portrayed characters from minority ethnic groups, as well as the creation of new works of fiction to educate white readers about the oppression of other ethnicities (p. 172-173). In the 1970s, Latimer (1973, p. 21-22) observed that even beloved characters like clowns, fairies, Peter Pan, and Little Red Riding Hood were predominantly depicted as white, while black characters often appeared in stereotypical, negative, and minor roles. This prompted a question of whether it is appropriate to assess a book based on its portrayal of race. Some book reviewers argue that doing so means using literature as a means of spreading certain ideas and letting societal and political concerns become more important than artistic expression. However, Latimer suggests that as long as race plays a significant role in society, such evaluations are justifiable.

### **Raj, the Indian news agent**

One of the contentious characters embodying elements of casual racism and cultural stereotypes in Walliams’ books is Raj, an Indian newsagents’ shop owner (Donohoe, 2018). Raj stands out among Walliams' readers due to his recurring presence throughout the books. Beloved by young customers, he's portrayed as a kind and humorous figure, albeit a bit chubby, messy and lazy, who delights in selling and consuming sweets (The world of David Walliams, 2023). Criticism of Raj's character stems from his portrayal of offensive traits, including his shrewd approach to money – attempting to sell items beyond their sell-by date – and his humorous mispronunciation of certain English words. These depictions have drawn condemnation from activists and religious leaders who perceive Raj as propagating harmful stereotypes. Some find the portrayal of an Indian shopkeeper selling expired goods disconcerting. They argue that such characterisation unfairly targets and distorts the Asian community, even drawing parallels to offensive stereotypes from anti-Semitic literature before the war. However, some authors dismiss the accusations as excessive PC, asserting that Raj's traits are for comedic effect and aren't reflective of real Indian shopkeepers. They perceive the controversy as unwarranted, labelling critics as privileged individuals seeking unnecessary outrage (Donohoe, 2018). These controversies in relation to the Raj character are evident from the following examples:

In ***Bad Dad***:

* Raj used a rolled-up newspaper to scoop melted ice cream and offered a “milkshake” to a young customer for five pence. Raj tried it himself and found it a bit gritty (Walliams, 2017, p. 124-125).
* Raj panicked when he realised that three customers to whom he sold expired fudge were admitted to hospital. Raj was feeling remorseful and prayed for forgiveness: *“Lord, please have mercy on my soul! I am not a bad man. I just use best-before dates as a very rough guide, rounding them up to the nearest decade!”* (p. 127).
* Raj was trying to comfort Frank, whose father was imprisoned, by offering him anything from his shop for free, within a value of eight pence. The boy, initially excited, realised the limitation when choosing a chocolate bar: *“That’s ten p, young man.” “Pass it to me, please,” said Raj. Raj then unwrapped the bar, took a bite off the end and passed it back to the boy. “That was a two-p bite. There you go. We are even now.”* (p. 284-285).

In ***Grandpa’s Great Escape****:*

* Raj cannot say the main character’s surname Bunting – pronouncing it “Bumting” instead: *“Ah! Mr Bumting! Master Bumting!” “It’s Bunting!” corrected Jack. “That’s what I said!” protested Raj. “Bumting!”* (Walliams, 2015, p. 109-110).
* Raj tries to sell a chocolate-covered toffee with the chocolate licked off and the toffee missing, offering it at half price: *With that the newsagent took out a shiny piece of purple paper from his pocket. “Raj, that’s just wrapper!” “That’s why it’s half price.” “There’s no sweet!” “You can sniff the wrapper!”* (p. 111).
* Raj admits to feeling hungover after consuming three boxes of expired chocolate liqueurs. He confesses that these were unsold from Christmas 1979, showcasing his excessive thrift: *“Three boxes that is,” confessed Raj. “I feel rather hung over today. You see I hadn’t sold them at Christmas and they had gone out of date.” “But it’s only January.” “This was Christmas 1979.”* (p. 115).
* Raj absentmindedly tastes a lolly from the counter, only to discover it doesn’t taste good. He returns it to the display for sale, sparking rumours among local kids that many of Raj’s sweets are “pre-sucked” (p .134).

In ***The Midnight Gang****:*

* Raj sent some tins of chocolates to his favourite young customer who was in the hospital to cheer him up. Raj mentioned that these were the best chocolates in his shop, despite being a few years past their expiration date: *“They were the absolute best tins of chocolates in my shop. Left over from a few Christmases ago. Only a few years out of date”* (Walliams, 2016, p. 246).
* Humorous and shrewd depiction of Raj is apparent from his recent incident where he accidentally stapled his fingers together while pricing items with special offers in his shop: *“Two nights ago I was involved in a very serious stapler accident. I was in my shop stapling some prices to products. I had some very special offers on. One hundred pencils for the price of ninety-nine. Buy a ton of toffees – get one toffee absolutely free. Second-hand birthday cards with the names Tipp-exed out, half price. And, somehow, I managed to staple my fingers together.”* (p. 247).

### **Brian Wong, a Chinese boy**

In***The World’s Worst Children:***

A story in *The World’s Worst Children* book titled *Brian Wong, Who Was Never, Ever Wrong* was removed in response to critical evaluations. Concerns were raised that the story was contributing to the normalisation of derogatory humour targeting minority groups from a young age. Specifically, the surname “Wong” used in the story was noted for its potential to perpetuate mocking in playground settings. Additionally, the character Brian’s visual depiction, characterised by *big head in which to store big brain, super-magnifying glasses, smug grin* (Walliams, 2016, p. 159), aligns with stereotypically nerdy appearance, and was seen as reinforcing the ‘model minority myth’ which tends to portray Chinese individuals as overly studious, and high-achieving. A comparison was made to *the comics that white supremacists have telling Chinese people to go back to China* (Terry, 2021).

* Brian is portrayed as an extremely studious person, always striving to be right and excelling in maths – his favourite subject. He enjoys solving challenging maths problems, even when not assigned any. He annoys others by asserting *“Brian Wong is never, ever wrong!”* (Walliams, 2016, p. 160).
* Brian’s intense focus on maths made him very pale, and his eyesight weakened from solving equations late into the night, leading him to wear thick, wire-framed glasses. He was proud of his mathematical abilities, and despite always providing correct answers, he feared being proven wrong(p. 161).

### **The Tang twins**

In ***The World’s Worst Teachers:***

Similar to Brian Wong, the Tang twins are also portrayed as studious characters, working exceptionally hard at school and always receiving perfect scores on their tests (Walliams, 2019, p. 80). The twins take pride in being called ‘nerds,’ viewing it as a compliment (p. 102). Moreover, Monroe (as cited in Gallagher, 2020) raised concerns about the illustration of the twins' eyes as “horizontal slits”, which also corresponds with the criticism of Brian Wong’s character for reinforcing cultural stereotypes.

### **Miss Tutelage, a parent**

In ***The World’s Worst Parents****:*

Accusations of racism have arisen in relation to a character, Miss Tutelage, an allegedly black female teacher featured in *The World's Worst Parents*. The focus of criticism has been on attributes such as her big frizzy hair and a surname that some find challenging to pronounce.

* *“You wouldn’t dare, Frizzball!” he exclaimed* (Walliams, 2020, p. 173).
* *“He looks like that English teacher, Miss … er… Tutti-Frutti, no, I mean Miss… um… Tutankhamun, Miss… erm… Archbishop Desmond Tutu!”*
* *“Oh! Aren’t you a clever clogs, being able to pronounce Tuta… Tuty… Tuto…” The brute still couldn’t pronounce it* (p. 163).

However, HarperCollins Children's Books, the publisher, has provided clarification, asserting that Miss Tutelage is, in fact, portrayed as a white character (Gallagher, 2020). This clarification raises questions about the accuracy of certain criticisms directed at Walliams' books, which may have been based on incorrect assumptions regarding the character's racial background.

## Sexism and misogyny

Gendered children’s literature emerged in the mid-1800s, with distinct books for boys and domestic stories for girls. Adventure stories were primarily associated with boys (Salem, 2006, p. 85). Since the mid-nineteenth century, there has been a clear division between literature intended for boys and girls, with female characters often conforming to traditional gender roles, and even when written by women, these works frequently portrayed female characters as lacking in power (Pinsent, 1997, p. 75). The 1970s saw feminist awareness about gender biases and stereotypes in children’s books, emphasising the underrepresentation of female characters and how stereotypical portrayals reinforced gender bias. However, the representation of more male characters persisted into the 1990s, the contemporary children’s literature began to reflect changing gender role definitions and behaviours (Salem, 2006, p. 85-86).

Many children already develop strong perceptions of gender roles in society and their own place within it by the time they start primary school (Pinsent, 1997, p. 75). Literature for children and adolescents is a powerful tool for conveying societal norms, values, and ideologies. Sexist ideas are introduced early through comics, illustrated stories, adventure novels, and children's magazines, and play a significant role in shaping these ideologies (Michel, 1986, p. 20). Also Paterson and Lach (1990, as cited in Salem, 2006, p. 85) highlight that exposure to sexist images in literature can negatively impact children’s self-esteem and perceptions of abilities, especially girls. Fox (1993, as cited in Salem, 2006, p. 86) argues that failing to engage and staying ignorant equates to participating in acts of sexism. Salem (p. 86-87) also stresses that authors and teachers both share responsibility in addressing gender stereotypes in children’s literature. Nevertheless, as books carry authors’ views about gender, there is no politically innocent children’s literature in this regard.

Balanced and unbiased gender portrayals counter the negative impact of gender stereotypes. Books that either omit females or portray them in subservient roles can disempower female readers and reinforce male readers’ unconscious biases. In contrast, literature portraying females equally can help females realise their potential and help males prepare for a future of interacting with women on equal terms (Pinsent, 1997, p. 77).

In several of Walliams' literary works, a recurring theme emerges where female characters are often portrayed negatively, with many mothers notably absent, and a significant portion of antagonistic characters being female (Williams, 2018).

### **Rita, Frank’s mum**

In ***Bad Dad:***

Rita is an example of an emotionally distant mother. She has embraced a lifestyle that contrasts sharply with her previous role as a wife and mother.

* She has willingly distanced herself from her family: *When they arrived back at the flat, Mum wasn’t there. She had left a note on the kitchen table. It read: To Frank and Gilbert, I am sorry. Rita* (Walliams, 2017, p. 19).
* Despite her new lavish lifestyle, she never invited Frank to visit. When she forgot his birthday for the second year in a row, Frank lost interest in reconnecting with her (p. 21).
* She now lives in a lavish house and has become associated with Mr. Big, a character connected to a world of crime and luxury. This transformation is reflected not only in her appearance, which is marked by excessive grooming, makeup, and jewellery: *Mum looked very different to how Frank had remembered her. Now she was all hair and make-up and nails. Her skin was a good shade darker, and she was dripping in gold jewellery. She looked like a gangster’s moll, which was exactly what she had become (p. 222).*
* Mr. Big belittles Frank’s father by implying that Frank’s mother preferred his lavish lifestyle and expensive gifts over what his father could provide: *“Around this time of night you can find her alone in the drawing room downing a bottle of vintage champagne. Something your daddy here could never provide for her.” (p. 219); “Look at it, woman!” said Mr Big. Mum’s eyes lit up. “Oh, Biggie! It’s beautiful!” The little crime boss scooped up huge bundles of cash and handed them to her. “There you go, babes. Buy yourself something nice for your birthday.” “You’re the best, Biggie!” squealed Mum as she threw her arms around Mr Big and gave him a long, slobbering kiss* (p. 224).
* Mr. Big is asserting dominance and control over Rita: *“It’s none of your business how I speak to her. She’s my property now,” he continued to Dad and Frank with a sinister smile* (p. 226-227).

### **Sapphire Stone, a Page 3 girl**

In ***Billionaire Boy:***

*Billionaire Boy* has been criticized for its treatment of women and its potential impact on young readers. Concerns are raised about the book referencing Page 3 girls, which is viewed as inappropriate as it could potentially lead to uncomfortable conversations or the reinforcement of the objectification of women (Powell, 2020): *“I can’t son, sorry. I’ve got a date with this beautiful girl tonight,” said Mr Spud, indicating Page 3 of the Sun. Joe looked at the page. There was a photograph of a woman whose clothes seemed to have fallen off. Her hair was dyed white blonde and she had so much make-up on it was difficult to tell if she was pretty or not. Underneath the image it read, ‘Sapphire, 19, from Bradford. Likes shopping, hates thinking.’* (Walliams, 2011, p. 36-37).

* A Page 3 girl, Sapphire, is characterised as materialistic, and demanding. She places great importance on expensive possessions, such as a Dior handbag, and is dissatisfied when she does not receive all the variations of it: *“Please take a seat. I see you brought the new Dior handbag I sent you.” “Yeah, but this bag comes in eight colours,” she complained. “One for each day of the week. I thought you were gonna buy me all eight.” “I will, my sweet princess…” spluttered Mr Spud* (p. 148); her focus on accumulating gifts and presents for her upcoming birthday indicates a strong desire for material goods (p. 149).
* Additionally, Sapphire’s willingness to accept a proposal of marriage from Mr. Spud only after receiving a large diamond ring suggests that she might prioritise wealth and material benefits in her relationships: *“I asked her yesterday and she said ‘no’, but then I asked her again today and gave her a great big diamond ring and she said ‘yes’.”* (p. 219).
* Sapphire's self-centred nature became evident when Mr. Spud's financial situation changed*: Sapphire was hurrying out in a pair of impossibly high heels, laden with a huge suitcase and numerous handbags. “Out of my way!” she hissed. “Where’s my dad?” demanded Joe. “I dunno and I don’t care! The idiot has lost all of his money!”* (p. 267-268).

Furthermore, Powell (2020) argues that the mention of a female masseuse at the protagonist's disposal (Walliams, 2011, p. 13) raises concerns that young boys reading this book may develop a mind-set that disrespects women, particularly those in the service industry.

## Classism

In the 20th century, advocates for more realistic children's books argued that urban and minority children rarely saw themselves represented in literature. The selection was limited, and children’s books only seemed to cater to middle-class readers, excluding others from appreciating their cultural heritage. Children's books mostly avoided topics like drugs, sex, poverty, death, and broken families, sticking to the ‘happy ending’ formula (Cullinan, 1974, p. 415).

However, today's children face early exposure to real-life challenges, including the harsh realities of the world. When they discover books that resonate with their experiences and emotions, it creates a strong connection to literature (p. 417). Kohl (as cited in Jones, 2008, p. 43) underscores the role of children's books in shaping culture and highlights their potential to reshape how children perceive and connect with the world.

In contrast, Jones (2008, p. 42-43) raises concerns about how children, who notice their own experiences missing from the books they read, might interpret and interact with a world that considers them so insignificant. Furthermore, Jones questions the portrayal of economic lives deemed normal or desirable in children’s books and calls for stories of a broader range of economic backgrounds, from homeless shelters to various forms of employment and government assistance.

In agreement with Jones is Carthew (2016) who also recognises a significant lack of representation of working-class experiences in children's and teen literature. She emphasizes that despite progress in other media, children's literature still falls short in celebrating this often overlooked aspect of diversity. The lack of these stories is attributed to those commissioning new books who may not be comfortable with or knowledgeable about working-class experiences. Carthew advocates for literature to address this gap, asserting that working-class protagonists don't need to be portrayed as addicts, alcoholics, or victims; they can simply be working-class, with all the compassion and warmth that entails.

### **Pat Patterson, the supermum**

In ***The World’s Worst Parents:***

Monroe (as cited in Gallagher, 2020) accused Walliams of using working-class women as subject for humour in his stories aimed at children, viewing it as problematic and distasteful. Monroe specifically condemned Walliams for depicting a single mother of two who works as a cleaner as one of ‘the world’s worst parents’ and boring *because she lives in a tower block and cleans toilets* even though she is characterised by love for her children and a sense of humour.

* *Pat Patterson not only had a boring name, she also had the most boring job in the world. She was a toilet cleaner. Pat lived with her two children on the top floor of a crumbling tower block* (Walliams, 2020, p. 274).
* *Both found their mother boring. All she talked about was the toilets she’s cleaned that day* (p. 275).

### **Lord Granville Grandiose**

In ***The World’s Worst Parents***:

Furthermore, Monroe (as cited in Gallagher, 2020) criticizes the inappropriate use of misfortune and poverty as subjects for humour, as evident in the character of Lord Grandiose.

* Granville expresses amusement by snorting when he finds something funny, *like the misfortune of poor people* (Walliams, 2020, p. 247).
* Granville’s behaviour towards his servants is characterised by cruelty and lack of empathy for those in subordinate positions. He physically assaults his servants by, for example, pointing champagne bottles at them and shooting the corks at them(p. 248); in anger, throwing food items like a Yorkshire pudding (p. 256), and roast potatoes and peas (p. 260).
* What is more, Granville is in a relationship with Lady Lavonia Lavish, a woman equally rude and ill-tempered. *She had become famous in upper-class twit circles for firing her maid out of a cannon to the next county when she’d brought her a cold cup of tea* (p. 250).

## Body shaming

Books are frequently entering homes without considering their content or the potential impact they may have on a child. Erikson (as cited in Mauldin, Lough, Thurston, 2003) highlights that children already at the age of two can experience shame and self-doubt if they do not perform certain tasks. Fossum and Mason (1993, as cited in Mauldin, 2006, p. 19) define shame as a pervasive feeling of inadequacy, unworthiness, and being fundamentally bad. According to Kaufman (as cited in Mauldin, Lough, Thurston, 2003), shame can be related to various aspects of a child’s life, including their body size, weight, height, or birth defects. Shame leads to self-doubt and disrupts a child’s sense of security and confidence. Even the seemingly harmless name calling like “piggy” or “fatty” has the potential to harm a child’s delicate self-esteem and shape their view of the world and their position in it (Kilbourne, 1995, as cited in Mauldin, 2006, p. 8-9).

Shaming in stories is employed to convey community sanctions and discourage certain behaviours. The term “fat” is considered shaming due to societal norms. Some children’s books indirectly depict body shaming, subtly suggesting shame through character descriptions. On the other hand, take Dr. Suess’s book *Sneetches*, for example. This book directly addresses the issue of body image and societal acceptance. It challenges the idea that individuals who look a certain way are socially appropriate, ultimately promoting acceptance and inclusivity for all body types (Mauldin, 2006, p. 12-14). Also, Smith (2016) addresses concerns about body shaming. She particularly criticises the description of *Aunt Sponge’s* appearance (in *James and the Giant Peach* by Roald Dahl)for being excessively negative and promoting disdain towards this character based on her body size, especially when a character’s behaviour already serves to establish them as antagonistic. Smith emphasises how these descriptions can lead to readers associating a character’s physical appearance with their moral character, which can perpetuate stereotypes (Mauldin, 2006, p. 14).

Walliams' books prominently feature bodily functions and various forms of scatological humour. While this type of humour appeals to young readers and contributes to the comedic elements of his stories, some indicate that there might be an overabundance of such humour in his books (Williams, 2017). Additionally, concerns were raised about the humiliation of female characters based on their underwear (Williams, 2018), ridiculing characters with glasses, and using the word “fat” as a negative portrayal on numerous occasions (Monroe, as cited in Gallagher, 2020).

### **Miss Hare, a Science teacher**

In ***Demon Dentist:***

Miss Hare accidentally falls and ends up in a comically awkward position. She experiences humiliation related to her underwear. Some believe that such humour directed at children normalises misogynistic attitudes that could contribute to adults not taking sexual harassment seriously (Williams, 2018).

* *Miss Hare had flashed her knickers to the entire class. The pupils, who had been expecting nothing more exciting that afternoon than seeing some ball bearings roll slowly towards a magnet, exploded with laughter. Now they had had a good look at their teacher’s knickers. And these were no ordinary knickers. Oh no. These knickers were rather large and rather frilly, almost Victoriany* (Walliams, 2013, p. 166-168)*.*

### **Winnie, a social worker**

In ***Demon Dentist:***

When Winnie was caught in her underwear, she experienced a moment of embarrassment and humiliation.

* The description of her bra and knickers is used for comedic effect but also contributes to body shaming by making fun of the character’s choice of underwear and their appearance, thus perpetuating body shaming stereotypes: *The bra was quite the biggest Alfie had ever seen. It looked like it could comfortably hold two footballs, and was bright orange. The knickers, that might have doubled as a child’s play tent, were a shocking shade of pink* (Walliams, 2013, p. 343-344).

### **Brian Wong, a Chinese boy**

In ***The World’s Worst Children:***

References were made to Brian's enlarged eyes caused by his thick lenses.

* *He wore wire-framed glasses with lenses so thick that they magnified his eyes to the size of tennis balls* (Walliams, 2016, p. 161); *Wong looked at the teacher, his goggly glasses enlarging his eyes to the size of cymbals* (p. 166); and *he had to put even thicker lenses in his glasses so now his eyes were the size of footballs* (p. 174).

## LGBTQ+ elements

Books have the power to engage us, impart knowledge and enable us to gain insights into various perspectives. It is essential that quality literature reflects the lives and identities of all individuals (HarperCollins Publishers, 2023).

In the past, it was generally believed that there were no gay or lesbian students, and therefore, professionals did not see the need for LGBTQ+ content in children’s books. The lack of awareness and societal prejudice potentially discouraged young people from seeking such books (Anderson, 1992, as cited in Salem, 2006, p. 103). In the 1960s, one of the first books addressing teenage homosexuality was John Donovan’s *I’ll Get There, It Better Be Worth the Trip.* It has faced criticism for portraying homosexuality negatively (Jenkins, 1998, Norton and Vare, 2004, as cited in Salem 2006, p. 104), viewing it as a choice or something that could be changed through heterosexual experiences (Cart, 1996, as cited in Salem, 2006, p. 104). The sexual revolution in the 1970s gave birth to the young adult problem novel, which began to tackle issues of sexuality, social rebellion, and personal growth. Nevertheless, similar to the 1960s, the main problem in gay-themed novels was still the trend of punishment and homophobia rather than homosexuality itself (Kidd, 1998, Cooper, 2000, as cited in Salem, 2006, p. 104). Despite changing attitudes in the 1980s, the first published lesbian young adult novel, *Annie on My Mind* by Nancy Garden, was banned and challenged frequently between 1990 and 2000 before eventually gaining recognition (Jenkins, 2003, as cited in Salem, 2006, p. 105).

Garden (2001, as cited in Salem, 2006, p. 105) believes that there are no longer any taboos against such literature and emphasises the importance of preparing teens for the adult world and providing them with a safe space to discuss difficult subjects. According to HarperCollins Publishers (2023) reading LGBTQ+ books offers benefits not only to those who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community but also to those outside the community. It helps individuals within the LGBTQ+ community feel more accepted in society, provides representation of diverse families and gender identities, and shares experiences. Additionally, it offers a window into these experiences for those outside the LGBTQ+ community, promoting empathy, understanding, acceptance, and reducing stereotypes. Since young children encounter concepts related to sexuality and gender identity early on, these books are crucial for ensuring inclusivity and promoting acceptance of sexual and gender diversity.

### **Auntie Flip and Reverend Judith**

In ***Bad Dad:***

There has been some criticism within the Christian community stemming from the depiction of a gay marriage between a female vicar and the protagonist's aunt. The portrayal of Frank's single aunt is characterised by pity for her situation, and it is implied that the book presents celibacy in a negative light, describing it as *sad, pitiful, restricted and loveless*. On the other hand, same-sex marriage is depicted in a positive light, seen as *natural, freeing, and fulfilling.* These views may not align with traditional Christian beliefs, hence sparking criticism within the Christian community (Drew, 2018).

* Auntie Flip is portrayed as a character who is uncomfortable with physical affection, like hugs, and has never been married or had a romantic relationship (Walliams, 2017, p. 45).
* However, Flip appreciates compliments from Reverend Judith (p. 251) and a gift of flowers and confesses that she has never been kissed. This revelation leaves those around her feeling sympathetic and sad for her, as they realise she has lived a life without love and affection (p. 272).
* There was a growing connection between the two women, Auntie Flip and Reverend Judith, and they were astonished by their own instinctive reaction of hugging each other (p. 409).
* They gradually developed a romantic relationship, leading to their marriage: “*I love you.” It was six months later, and Frank and his father were sitting in church listening to two other people say those three words to each other. It was the marriage of Reverend Judith and Auntie Flip. The happy couple looked into each other’s eyes and kissed. “My first kiss!” exclaimed Auntie Flip. “And certainly not your last,” said Judith* (p. 412).

### **Denis, the boy in the dress**

In ***The Boy in the Dress:***

Walliams (2008) emphasises Dennis’s inner world, sensitivity, and emotional connection to his mother. Dennis is a twelve-year-old boy who feels distinctively different inside; his inner world is colourful and poetic, providing a contrast to the dullness of his daily life (p. 11). Despite the typical desire of children to grow up, Dennis missed the physical affection of his mother (p. 21). Dennis enjoys cross-dressing and exhibits characteristics that challenge traditional gender norms for boys.

* Dennis expresses a fascination with female clothing, such as a lovely yellow dress his mother wore (p. 14), and he is captivated by fashion magazines featuring beautiful women’s clothes and accessories (p. 39-40). *Dennis pored over every page, mesmerised by the dresses – their colour, their length perfection* (p.48-49).
* Dennis not only admires female clothing but also desires to wear it. He feels a sense of liberation and excitement when dressing up in girls’ clothes. *“Nice. It feels nice.” In fact, it felt more than nice; it felt wonderful* (p. 98-99); *Dennis gazed at himself. For a moment he was shocked by what he saw. Then the shock turned to wonder, and he laughed. He felt so happy he wanted to dance. Sometimes you feel things so deeply that words aren’t enough* (p. 102). Dennis tries on various dresses, shoes, and accessories from his friend Lisa’s wardrobe and enjoys the sensation of wearing different outfits (p. 107).
* Dennis challenges conventional gender norms by embracing the idea that clothing and appearance should not be restricted by gender. He questions the rules that dictate what people can and cannot wear: *“It’s not fair, though, is it? I mean boy’s clothes are so boring.”; What was wrong with wearing the things you liked? (p. 83-84); “It’s not fair,” said Dennis. “Girls have got all the best stuff!” (p. 106); I can be whoever I want to be! he thought (p. 107).*
* Dennis’s interest in clothes leads to conflicts with authority figures like his father and the school’s headmaster, who express strong disapproval.

His father was visibly angry and disapproved of his interests: *“What have I done to deserve this? My son likes wearing dresses!”* (p. 167-168); *“I’m sorry. It’s just not right. A boy your age reading Vogue magazine.”* (p. 54). He blamed Dennis’s interest in cross-dressing on his mother, suggesting she was too lenient and responsible for this behaviour (p. 171).

The school’s headmaster also reacted with anger upon discovering Dennis wearing an orange sequined dress. The headmaster further belittled Dennis for wearing makeup and high heels, deeming it ‘disgusting’. Moreover, he made Dennis feel ashamed of himself, and insisted on his expulsion from the school: *“You’re a disgrace. I am not having a degenerate like you in my school.”* (p. 162-164).

* Despite facing initial ridicule and mockery (p. 157), Dennis’s football teammates, recognising that Dennis had faced unfair treatment for his choice of clothing, showed support and solidarity by wearing dresses themselves throughout a football match (p. 190-193). Dennis ultimately finds support also from his father, who acknowledges his bravery and expresses pride in him (p. 219).

# Evaluation of the justification of the criticism

The criticism of politically incorrect content within Walliams’ books was directed at nine books published between 2008 and 2020. After scrutinizing controversies around 13 characters, several conclusions can be drawn. The majority of the criticised characters are minor ones, having minimal impact on the story and often providing comic relief when handling serious and potentially distressing themes for young readers. While Walliams occasionally employs racial stereotypes, as seen in examples like Raj or Brian Wong, any negativity in these minor characters is diminished by kindness, sensitivity, courage, and a sense of justice provided by the main characters or the overall moral messages. This serves as a counterbalance to the criticism. Even Raj, despite his questionable entrepreneurial practices, is primarily characterised by his community-centred, welcoming, and caring nature, outweighing his flaws. Misunderstandings fuelled the criticism of Miss Tutelage, driven by an overly zealous politically correct mind-set rather than genuine flaws in her character. Sexist themes are typically deemed unsuitable for children’s literature. However, modern children regularly encounter such topics in various media. Portrayals of characters like Rita or Sapphire Stone can encourage discussions about women’s roles in society, materialism, and the pursuit of wealth. Instances of body shaming directed towards Winnie or Miss Hare can illustrate the idea that anyone could face humiliating circumstances, but it is possible to move past them. Pat Patterson, depicted as the worst parent who cleans toilets, paradoxically showcases the virtues of hard work, resilience, and dedication to family. Her character highlights the strength of single parents striving to provide for their children despite societal prejudices. Not all criticism arises from PC; sometimes, it stems from specific groups disliking certain character aspects. For instance, some Christians may oppose the positive portrayal of LGBTQ+ characters like Aunt Flip, who exhibits selflessness, love, and care for her nephew in times of need, or Denis, who despite facing ridicule, bravely expresses his true self and challenges gender norms.

Despite the criticism received and the fact that several authors (for example, Kohl, Andrée, Paterson and Lach) stress the great impact of children’s literature on young, impressionable minds, not everyone takes the content of Walliams’ books so seriously. Walliams has gained popularity in recent years, and HarperCollins Publishers recognises him as a driving force in promoting the joy of reading among children, particularly reluctant readers. It is suggested that children who read for pleasure tend to perform better in life. Many voices (as cited in a video interview on the publisher’s website) praise Walliams for addressing serious topics, depicting characters from diverse backgrounds, and making his stories relatable. This, in turn, assists young learners in developing their language, reading, and speech skills (HarperCollins Publishers, 2022).

Throughout the media, multiple sources share similar opinions regarding the impact of David Walliams' books, particularly on children's literature and reading habits. Cosgrove (as cited in Quann, 2020), WHSmith book retailer (2016), and the charity Faith in Kids(2023) emphasize the importance of addressing controversial themes in children’s literature. Walliams’ books are seen as a tool for helping children understand complex issues in a safe and accessible manner. Cosgrove acknowledges that these issues are reflective of real life, and he believes that ignoring them is not beneficial. Faith in Kids argues that even if some parents may prefer not to discuss certain subjects, it is essential to engage in these conversations, as other influences may do so. Teachers and bloggers Morgs (2020) and Headley-Morris (2021) stress that Walliams’ books are popular among children due to their accessibility and ease of reading. Although Headley-Morris initially criticised Walliams’ books for lacking academic nuance, they now both suggest that, especially for reluctant readers, Walliams’ books could serve as a stepping stone to more advanced books approved by adults.

David Walliams (as cited in Miller, 2021) acknowledges the need for diversity in children’s literature. He recognises that a central character does not always have to be white. To achieve diversity in his stories, he creates characters with no racially identifiable features, and only later decides on the character’s race to avoid potential stereotypes. Walliams (as cited in Vachharajani, 2017) aims to challenge readers by incorporating real-world themes in his books, exploring the complex relationships between adults and children. He reflects on his own childhood experiences and the rules adults sometimes impose. Over time, Walliams' books have contributed to changing attitudes, making themes once viewed with caution more acceptable. He hopes his books encourage young readers to contemplate the consequences of their actions and behaviour.

Williams (2018) acknowledges the tradition of stereotypes in fiction and argues that rejecting Walliams’ works would require rejecting a broader literary tradition, as even authors like Roald Dahl have used similar grotesque characteristics to create engaging characters. She underscores the role of stereotypes as a collective creation and that authors who engage with stereotypes are products of their times.

**Conclusion**

The aim of the thesis was to analyse David Walliams’ literary works in relation to political correctness. The analysis was based on the recent criticism appearing throughout the media.

The theoretical part introduces the term of political correctness and demonstrates its mechanisms and impact. The thesis highlights that PC is a controversial concept characterised by diverse viewpoints and interpretations. While it is associated with promoting inclusivity and respectful language, PC has also faced criticism for potential censorship and the restriction of free speech. Its historical roots date back centuries, evolving into a prominent force in contemporary society. PC has an extensive influence on language, culture, and societal norms, striving for equality and representativeness. This influence has resulted in both positive and negative consequences, with debates over its role in fostering inclusivity and stifling opposing beliefs. The controversy surrounding PC extends to children's literature, with debates about how to handle problematic themes and language in children’s books. The rewriting and censorship of children's literature to conform to PC standards have raised questions about preserving literary heritage and free speech. The evolving conversation around PC reflects ongoing societal discussions about inclusivity, censorship, and the balance between free expression and promoting respect.

The analysis revealed that the controversies surrounding David Walliams' literary works reflect the ongoing debates within children's literature. Themes such as racism, sexism, classism, body shaming, and LGBTQ+ elements have raised concerns about the potential impact on young readers. These issues highlight the need for critical evaluation and discussions about the content of children's books. However, it is important to note that the majority of criticised characters are minor and do not significantly impact the story, often lightening serious themes for young readers. Their negativity is balanced by the main characters’ positive traits or the overall moral lessons. Additionally, criticism does not always originate from issues of PC; sometimes it comes from specific groups objecting to certain aspects of characters. Furthermore, it's essential to consider that Walliams’ books serve as a bridge for reluctant readers and provide accessible means to address complex issues in a safe manner. Walliams has also acknowledged the importance of diversity in children's literature, aiming to challenge readers by incorporating real-world themes and reflecting on his own childhood experiences. In the broader context, the debates surrounding Walliams' works highlight the ongoing tension between addressing sensitive topics in children's literature and promoting the joy of reading.

Ultimately, the enjoyment of reading should not be overlooked, as it has the potential to engage children, foster their language skills, and instil a lifelong love of books. Maya Angelou eloquently sums up the significance of children’s books, stating, *"Any book that helps a child to form a habit of reading, to make reading one of his needs, is good for him."*

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**Resumé**

Bakalářská práce se zabývá literárními díly Davida Walliamse ve vztahu k politické korektnosti. Cílem bylo analyzovat Walliamsova literární díla na základě nedávné mediální kritiky. Práce se skládá ze dvou hlavních částí: teoretické části, kde jsem představila pojem politická korektnost, a demonstrovala, jak politická korektnost funguje a jaký má dopad, a praktické části, kde jsem se zaměřila na identifikaci kontroverzních témat ve Walliamsových dílech, konkrétně rasismus a kulturní stereotypy, hanobení těla, misogynii a sexismus, společenskou diskriminaci a prvky týkající se LGBTQ+. Dále jsem tyto prvky porovnala s jejich výskytem v dětské literatuře a zhodnotila kritiku směřovanou na Walliamsova díla. Snažila jsem se demonstrovat, že zážitek a radost ze čtení jsou v dětských knihách důležitější než politicky korektní obsah.

**Annotation**

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| --- | --- |
| Jméno a příjmení: | Michaela Pender |
| Katedra nebo ústav: | Ústav cizích jazyků |
| Vedoucí práce: | Mgr. Petr Anténe, M.A., Ph.D. |
| Rok obhajoby: | 2024 |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Název práce: | Literární díla Davida Walliamse ve vztahu k politické korektnosti |
| Název práce v angličtině: | Literary works of David Walliams in relation to political correctness |
| Anotace práce: | Bakalářská práce poskytuje vhled do literárních děl Davida Walliamse v souvislosti s politickou korektností. Teoretická část se zabývá definicemi politické korektnosti a různými pohledy na ni, zároveň demonstruje její fungování a dopad. Hlavním cílem praktické části je identifikovat kontroverzní témata v dílech Davida Walliamse a porovnat je s jejich výskytem v dětské literatuře. |
| Klíčová slova: | Politická korektnost, stereotypy, cenzura, David Walliams, dětská literatura  |
| Anotace práce v angličtině: | This bachelor thesis provides insight into the literary works of David Walliams in relation to political correctness. The theory deals with definitions of political correctness and its various perceptions, while also demonstrating its mechanisms and impact. The main aim of the practical part is to identify controversial themes in Walliams’ works and compare them with their presence in children’s literature. |
| Klíčová slova v angličtině: | Political correctness, stereotypes, censorship, David Walliams, children’s literature  |
| Rozsah práce: | 53 stran |
| Přílohy vázané v práci: | \_ |
| Jazyk práce:  | Anglický jazyk |