STICKS & STONES

words CHERIE GILMOUR

> 'Dad knew the value of being intellectually brave when it came to literature.'

WHEN DAD WAS A YOUNG BOY, HE borrowed books from the library about Hitler. His horrified mother made him return them; it wasn't appropriate for a young boy to read about genocidal dictators. It sparked something in him because, all these years later, the fuel of fascination has never died down. Dad and I once shared a Netflix account that slowly adapted to his tastes. Netflix would give me a slew of suggestions like, *Hitler: The Rise of Evil, Hitler's Olympics*, and *Downfall*.

'My dad's obsessed with Hitler,' I would tell friends, who would laugh uncomfortably. 'I mean, he thinks he's evil; he's just fascinated,' I would clarify.

Harry Potter was released when I was ten, not far off the age of Harry, who is eleven in *The Philosopher's Stone*. As a voracious reader, I couldn't wait to get my hands on the series. But my Christian parents (including my Hitler-obsessed father) were resistant because they had wizards and witches. There was a conversation in many Christian circles that Potter could be a 'gateway drug' into the occult. Jacqui Komschlies wrote in *Christianity Today*, 'We're taking something deadly from our world and turning it into what some are calling 'merely a literary device.'[1]

Eventually, my parents caved, perhaps influenced by C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* series, which, despite featuring witches and magic, was a metaphor for the great Biblical narrative of redemption and never led to me practising witchcraft as a child. Maybe they also knew I would get my hands on the books come hell or high water. I wasn't going to miss the biggest blockbuster of children's literature in decades.

But I think there was more to it than that. Dad knew the value of being intellectually brave when it came to literature. He knew what it was like to be insatiably curious, even when it came to reading about historic atrocities or characters engaging in actions many would label 'evil.'

The recent Roald Dahl brouhaha, where words like 'fat' and 'ugly' were changed to accommodate 'modern sensitivities,' led to an uproar that caused the publishers to backflip and reinstate the originals alongside the updated versions. The current debate around safety and censorship in literature seems mostly focused on children and children's books. They are the ones in need of 'protecting' as my parents tried to do with me. Which raises the question, how exactly is protecting them going to help?

The same week that the Dahl debacle launched a million think pieces, another ruckus took place over at the Adelaide Writers' Festival. Director Louise Adler had invited a Palestinian writer who had previously described Volodymyr Zelensky as a 'Nazi-promoting Zionist,' which led to three Ukrainian speakers pulling out.

However, in an interview, Adler defended her decision, declaring 'If writers' festivals, like universities and the media, cannot with care and considered approach engage with complex and

contentious issues, then we have a problem with civil society.'[2] She spoke about the need for 'brave spaces' not 'safe spaces.'

Considering society's current obsession with 'safe spaces,' which Oxford Languages defines as places 'in which a person or category of people can feel confident that they will not be exposed to discrimination, criticism, harassment, or any other emotional or physical harm,' you start to wonder if we've lost our intellectual grit. What kind of people will we raise, who crumble at the phrases 'shut up,' or 'don't be an ass' (as recently censored in Enid Blyton books)?

Douglas Murray notes in *The Madness of Crowds* that the idea of words causing harm and the word 'triggered' in its current usage only appeared around 2013. 'Everybody has begun to at least sense in recent years that a set of tripwires have been laid across the culture,' he writes. In reality, words, ideas, and people can all be labelled as 'harmful' and removed or silenced lest they blow up in public controversy.

From the outside, the goal appears noble: to protect others from harmful ideologies or words that have previously been weaponised; we know that words can cause enormous damage—look at people who have been bullied on Twitter. But the reality is that when we trade in the social media currency of uproar and witch-hunt, denouncing any who transgress the latest catalogue of sins, there is no room left for civilised debate. Nuance gives way to black-and-white thinking, and, as Waleed Aly and Scott Stephens wrote in their recent *Quarterly Essay*, 'Uncivil Wars,' 'there is only winning and losing now.' Twitter interactions do not reflect good human relationships; they are the shadowy reflection of the very worst in human nature.

What if, by censoring words for the sake of our children, we're disempowering them from building resilience and finding the strength to make robust rebuttals where needed? Can we teach them to seek out conversations in person rather than online, or is that unrealistic?

In 1965, a debate took place at the University of Cambridge between William F. Buckley and James Baldwin. The topic was 'The American Dream is at the Expense of the American Negro.' (You can watch the whole thing on YouTube.) Viewing it, the first thing that comes to mind is: civilised. Both speakers, tuxedoed, address the crowd (all men, of course) and make their case. James Baldwin makes a point so achingly resonant in today's cultural climate, it could have been a tweet: 'One's reaction to that question—and, in effect, where you find yourself in the world, what your sense of reality is, what your system of reality is. That is, it depends on assumptions which we hold so deeply so as to be scarcely aware of them.' The two men are at complete odds with each other's point of view, and yet they speak eloquently and show respect to each other.

To fight against harmful speech, we need more speech—better speech—not silence. Somewhere along the line, the belief crept in that harmful speech must be silenced. Nadine Strossen writes about 'counterspeech' in her book *Hate: How to Fight it with Free Speech*. She quotes the outcome of the historic 1927 Whitney vs. California trial in which it was declared that, 'the fitting remedy for evil counsels is good ones. If there be time to expose through discussion the falsehood and fallacies, to avert the evil by processes of education, the remedy to be applied is more speech.'[3]

Nadine Strossen comes to a similar conclusion in her book. She refers to the counterprotesters at a 'white power' rally in North Carolina who wore clown costumes and held signs reading 'wife power' and 'white flour.' Anyone in a long-term relationship knows the power of a well-placed joke to diffuse a tense interaction. What better way to knock the gravitas out of white supremacists than ridicule?

'We may be small, but we're quite tough.'

J.K. Rowling used humour in a tweet that questioned the notion of erasing the word 'woman' for the sake of the transgender community's inclusion. She wonders what we used to call women: Wumben? Wimpund? Woomud?

Ironically, after originally being lambasted by conservative Christians, she now faced a witch-hunt by the trans community after the tweets.

In the podcast *The Witch Trials of J.K. Rowling* hosted by Megan Phelps-Roper, Rowling says she needed to weigh in on the transgender debate after she'd witnessed intimidation and bullying of anyone whose views were different or challenged the commonly accepted orthodoxy. 'Authoritarianism,' she says, 'has always been a theme of *Harry Potter* and should raise alarm, no matter what the cause.'

There is no such thing as 'safety' in being human, and trying to seek it out leaves us more vulnerable. We are subject to the forces of illness, nature, differences in opinions and values, let alone our ultimate mortality. Think of our hunter-gatherer ancestors, if they had hidden away in caves away from fierce animals—they would have starved to death.

We live in relatively comfortable circumstances in our Western first-world; free from wars and preventable diseases, but we should not let this rob us of courage. In a speech for a Defend Free Speech campaign in Britain, Rowan Atkinson points out that we should expose people to all kinds of speech, in the same way that we expose children to childhood diseases in order to help them build their immunity. We need to raise children who are well-versed in reality: there are harmful words, ideas and people, and we might not even agree on what they are, but you must be prepared to face them. Isn't this the stuff of our childhood stories that we love? Taking on monsters, slaying dragons.

When I think of my kids, I want them to be brave and resilient with an abundance of humour to tackle the conflicts, disappointments, and causes they feel strongly about.

I want them to fight hurtful or damaging words with sharp quips and clever speech because it will make them victors, not victims. We need brave spaces for wrestling with complex and contentious ideas, rather than the shallow, bloodied waters of Twitter. As we live increasingly atomised lives, we have lost many of the natural community connections where conversation once happened. We should be building the town square again, the real physical places where people from all walks of life congregate and natural conversation occurs.

Rather than living in fear of words that will psychologically wound us, we should be more fearful of raising a generation of people who have no intellectual grit, unable to stand in the face of ideas they don't agree with. We shouldn't underestimate what our children can handle, because doing so may have the opposite effect of weakening them.

As Lavender, Matilda's best friend in Roald Dahl's classic says: 'We may be small, but we're quite tough.'

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References
[1] Jacqui Komschlies, *The Perils of Harry Potter* (web resource)
[2] Chip Le Grand, *Brave Spaces, But Not Safe Ones: What Louise Adler Did Next* (web resource)
[3] Bureau Brandeis, *Justice Brandeis on Freedom of Speech* (web resource)