

In the far-from-diverse publishing industry, sensitivity readers are vital, says researcher

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Publishing houses have set the cat among the pigeons. They have introduced "sensitivity readers." Some authors are claiming this amounts to censorship. But what is the truth of this relatively new practice?

Sensitivity readers are contracted by a publisher to provide editorial

feedback on omissions, discontinuity, cliché and credibility issues in a book draft—specifically where they relate to subject matter about people from marginalized groups.

Part of being an author is writing outside of personal perspectives and experiences. Sensitivity reads provide tailored feedback to help authors feel confident about narrating subject matters beyond their own experiences.

Sensitivity readers understand the nuances of the writing process and may be writers or editors themselves. Like freelancers, they are contracted by authors or publishers. They mostly evaluate characterization, offering [historical context](#) or experience on circumstances, cultural attitudes or speech styles that may be unfamiliar to the author.

The author can then, if they wish, use this feedback to redraft sections of their book.

Some writers, including [Lionel Shriver](#) and [Kate Clanchy](#), have felt affronted by the idea of [sensitivity](#) reading. Author Anthony Horowitz [told The Spectator](#) that he felt "he was being told what to write by an outside party" when advised by a sensitivity reader on his representation of a Native American character.

Subeditor Jonathan Bouquet agreed in [an article for The Observer](#), claiming that sensitivity reading marks the loss of "nuance and true meaning in our use of the English language."

It is quite remarkable to assert that something as commonplace as editing—which by its very nature is an "outside party" intervening in the writing process—has the power to strip language of meaning.

Editing, not censoring

Most writers—of fiction and otherwise—do not and have never lived in a world where words are allowed to flow straight from their heads into the hands of readers. The image of a lone genius typing away at their masterpiece doesn't represent modern publishing.

The collaborative process of editing is vital, and excellent editorial guidance is a blessing for any writer. It helps improve a book's clarity, structure, style, readability and overall effectiveness. No publisher will take a project from manuscript to printing without an editor monitoring its development. For those who do not wish to be a part of this process, there are ways to [self-publish](#).

According to data from the [UK Publishers Association](#) in 2022, half of those working in the publishing sector have attended a Russell Group university (compared with only 6% of the UK's population) and nearly a third were raised in London or the [affluent](#) South East of England. Of those surveyed, 82% were white and only 15% weren't British, even though [at least 19](#) sovereign nations around the world are majority native English speaking.

In the UK, if you are a writer from an underrepresented background, it is statistically very likely that your in-house editor won't be. Given this low ethnic and class diversity (the industry [does a bit better](#) on gender, [sexual orientation](#) and disability) a sensitivity reader's feedback can crucially round out that of an in-house editor's.

This is not a question of censorship, because the findings of a sensitivity reader can be taken up fully, in part, or not at all. Only the publisher can make final decisions on a book manuscript.

Whose language is it anyway?

In his Observer piece, Bouquet uses the phrase: "our use of the English language." The notion that the English language only truly belongs to a tiny subset of the global mass of people who use it reveals a troubling sense of proprietorship.

There are many reasons why English literary expression continues to flourish around the world, long after the days of British colonialism (during which English was a deliberate imposition), but exclusivity isn't one of them.

Book sales in the UK have seen [a downward trend](#) in the past decade. Meanwhile, English language book exports to the rest of the world account for 59% of its total sales. [India](#) is the second largest global market for English books.

To think that "meaningful" writing in English equals the unadulterated thoughts of a select array of British and North American authors of largely similar backgrounds is, at best, humorously provincial, and at worst, contemptuous gatekeeping.

Authors who are happy to receive guidance from their in-house editors but draw the line at additional feedback from sensitivity readers perhaps believe that they have nothing left to learn. If we selected and elevated books based on such arbitrary (that is, race and class-given) confidence, there would be little need for critics, editors, publishers, or the study of English at universities, for that matter.

English language literary expression, with its resilient ability to touch and be transformed by many pens around the world, deserves better.

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