

On Art and Artists: How to Reconcile Personal Ethics With Beloved Literary Work

If there's one major industry buzzword lighting the way for fiction in the 2020s, it's "representation" (see also: *diversity, inclusivity, #ownvoices*). We're seeing an inspiring influx of stories for all ages that centre around BAME, LGBTQ+, non-binary and transgender protagonists, as well as non-Western cultures, religions, and mythologies. And everyone is welcome. Everyone finally has a place in the universal, ever-changing tapestry of story.

Which is why it can be so difficult to watch the people who helped weave that tapestry together turn on us, tearing apart what we thought we understood about the stories that shaped us as people. People who found courage in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series are reeling from [her recent tirade](#) on the rights of trans women, which has snowballed through the social media world and shows no signs of slowing down. Nearby, in a neighbouring kingdom in the vast land of Fandom, people who grew up with *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* are facing a similar dilemma with the fall of Joss Whedon. And now, with [the recent Oscars debacle](#) fresh on everybody's minds, people are questioning their love for the work of Will Smith and if they have a societal responsibility to cast that love aside.

Despite the rise of social media, this dilemma isn't a new one. For decades people have been asking questions like, "Can I still love the music of Bob Dylan even though he sexually assaulted young women at the [height of his career?](#)" and, "Can I still love *The Great Gatsby* even though F. Scott Fitzgerald was a narcissistic little bitch who [gaslit and plagiarised his wife?](#)"

Where does art end and the artist begin?

When viewed through the lens of our own experiences, this question becomes an intensely personal one. There are people alive in this world today because needing to read the next *Harry Potter* book kept them from committing suicide. There are lifelong friends and lovers who have been brought together by their shared love for these books and their world. There are people who drew on the strength of Buffy Summers and her friends to make it from one day to the next in their own personal high school hell. Do the choices of an

author erase all this? There's no clear-cut answer, and this is something fans have been struggling with more and more.

Daniel Radcliffe, one famous example of a life that has been irrevocably altered by J. K. Rowling's work, offered these words of wisdom to his fans: *"I really hope that you don't entirely lose what was valuable in these stories to you ... if you found anything in these stories that resonated with you and helped you at any time in your life — then that is between you and the book that you read, and it is sacred. And in my opinion, nobody can touch that."*

What Radcliffe is saying is that stories are so, so much bigger than any one person can ever be — even the one person who planted the story seed in the first place. They are entire symbiotic worlds that exist between and around the book and the reader, a judgement-free safe place that grows and shifts into whatever the reader needs it to be in that moment. That is the magic of story, and no one can take that away.

And yet, there comes a moment when we have to close the book, leave that world behind, and step out into the other one — the one where we have jobs, and responsibilities, and we smile at people we don't like very much, and we scroll through our news feeds and remember that the world is not always so judgement-free and safe after all. And that's the moment where we re-examine how our love for a creation by a controversial creator fits into that world and who we want to be within it.

I am not transgender, and so my voice is not one that can fully appreciate the struggle and betrayal trans women and men might be feeling in the wake of J. K. Rowling's unexpected onslaught. All I can do is urge you to never, ever feel shame for loving a powerful story, for allowing words to reach you on an intimate and visceral level. It is up to the individual to decide for themselves how intermingled their love for a story and their cultural views and identity need to be, and whether or not they can exist independently of each other.

As you make that choice for yourself, here are a few things to consider:

Embrace shopping local

If you want a beloved story to remain a part of your life, but can't bear to watch any of your hard-earned cash go to someone whose actions you disagree with, consider shopping at second-hand retailers instead. Since many of our most beloved works of literature have sold

millions upon millions of copies, it's quite easy to find them at used bookstores worldwide. When you buy books at independent second-hand shops, your money is instead going to support local businesses run by people who love books as much as you do.

Explore new stories

The beauty of art is that it is a renewable resource. New books are being written, songs are being composed, and screenplays are being optioned all the time. If you feel in your bones that it is time to say goodbye to a beloved story, you're in luck, because there's a whole world of inclusive and magical books out there waiting for you to discover them. The publishing industry is more open to diverse and experimental work than it has ever been, and talented new authors are flooding the market with astonishing debuts. The connection you felt with the book you've left behind won't be lost to you for long.

Make art

This, really, is what it all comes down to. Neil Gaiman's artistic manifesto "[Art Matters](#)" delves into this in more detail, but at its core, artistic creation serves two purposes: Firstly, it allows us to nourish our spirits through catharsis and discovery. Secondly, it allows us to create the thing we need — that the world needs — so that it can nourish and heal others too. A famous writer's adage (originally attributed to American novelist Toni Morrison) says, "If there's a book that you want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it." Admittedly, we're not all writers, but we do all have the potential to create inside of us — whether that's through painting, dance, poetry, or complex architectural structures of newspaper clippings and popsicle sticks. If you see something wrong or missing in the world, use what strengths and skills you have to fill it and weave yourself into the tapestry of story.