

## Why cancel culture is ‘obscene’

*Attacked and falsely accused of transphobia, award-winning author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is hitting back, excoriating her critics and their sanctimonious hypocrisy.*



*Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is calling out social media hypocrisy and ‘sanctimony’.*

By Rosemary Neill  
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When the Nigerian literary star Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was accused of being transphobic on social media, her initial default position was to remain silent. The winner of the Orange and PEN Pinter prizes is famous — her TED talk calling for more diversity in storytelling attracted almost nine million views — so she figured that people posting false or distorted claims about her “comes with the territory”.

As the online abuse continued, Adichie became concerned that “in this age of social media, where a story travels the world in minutes, silence sometimes means that other people can hijack your story and soon their false version becomes the defining story about you”.

Last month, the author of celebrated fiction works *Purple Hibiscus*, *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Americanah*, decided she had had enough. In an eloquent yet ferocious essay

titled *It is Obscene*, she called out social media militancy and accused two of her former writing students of “insulting” or trying to cancel her, and engaging in “ugly opportunism” after she remarked that “trans women are trans women” in a 2017 television interview.

Recently, she was attacked online again — and even accused of trying to “kill children” — after she described an essay that Harry Potter author JK Rowling penned on sex and gender as “a perfectly reasonable piece”.

In *It Is Obscene*, which is posted on her website, Adichie broadens her aperture to excoriate the many “social-media-savvy people who are choking on sanctimony and lacking in compassion, who can fluidly pontificate on Twitter about kindness but are unable to actually show kindness .... People who claim to love literature — the messy stories of our humanity — but are also monomaniacally obsessed with whatever is the prevailing ideological orthodoxy.”

She also takes on social media warriors “who demand that you denounce your friends for flimsy reasons in order to remain a member of the chosen puritan class. People who ask you to ‘educate’ yourself while not having actually read any books themselves ... People who wield the words ‘violence’ and ‘weaponise’ like tarnished pitchforks.”



*Adichie on stage with former US first lady Michelle Obama at The Royal Festival Hall in 2018.*

Adichie’s essay created such a sensation her website temporarily crashed. It was reported by media outlets from the Daily Mail to The New York Times (but has received relatively little attention in Australia, where Adichie gave the opening address at the 2009 Sydney Writers Festival). While conservative commentator Piers Morgan called *It Is Obscene* “absolutely brilliant”, the Nigerian linguist Uju Anya tweeted: “Chimamanda has the right to express rage and disappointment at people she thought were friends who used and deeply hurt her. Trans women also have the right to be outraged and defend themselves against being targeted by her malicious politics she tries to pass off as benevolence.”

Adichie's essay, combined with related controversies involving authors JK Rowling, Abigail Shrier and John Boyne, underscores how the literary community remains deeply split over the trans agenda. One group — among them Stephen King and Margaret Atwood — characterises the extraordinary rise of transgenderism as a straightforward case of advancing minority rights, while the dissenting authors are concerned about tensions between trans activism, women's rights and freedom of speech.

The dispute between Adichie and her students stretches back to an interview she conducted with Britain's Channel 4 in 2017. The author was asked a loaded question about whether a trans woman who "grew up enjoying the privilege of being a man" was "any less of a real woman?" Adichie replied that "trans women are trans women", and that "if you've lived in the world as a man" and change gender, "it's difficult for me to accept that then we can equate your experiences with the experience of a woman ... who has not been accorded those privileges".

Adichie now says the "larger point" of the interview was "that we should be able to acknowledge difference while being fully inclusive". Her essay includes emails that her two ex-students had written seeking her approval after they attacked her. She claims one of them called her a "murderer" on social media, so she was "stunned" when she discovered this same ex-student had included her name in their author bio, without asking her permission.

Adichie has just released a book, *Notes on Grief*, about her father's recent, unexpected death. In her essay, she claims one of the former students "created a space in which social media followers have ... (claimed) that the sudden and devastating loss of my parents within months of each other during this pandemic, was 'punishment' for my 'transphobia'".

"This person has asked followers to pick up machetes and attack me."

This is an apparent reference to posts by the nonbinary Nigerian writer Akwaeke Emezi, who graduated from Adichie's Lagos writing workshop and now lives in the US. In the wake of Adichie's support for Rowling's essay, Emezi tweeted: "I trust that there are other people who will pick up machetes to protect us from the harm transphobes like Adichie & Rowling seek to perpetuate."

Emezi and another Nigerian writer, Olu Timehin Adegbeye, have since identified themselves as Adichie's students turned detractors. Emezi claimed on Instagram that Adichie's essay was designed to "incite hordes of transphobic Nigerians to target me".

This writer's literary fortunes are rising: Emezi has been short-listed for the 2021 Dylan Thomas and Orwell prizes for Political Fiction, recently appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine and has struck a seven-figure deal with Amazon studios for her forthcoming romance novel, *You Made a Fool of Death With Your Beauty*. Despite this success, she maintains the publishing industry is "transphobic", commenting on Instagram: "You in the industry continue to platform her (Adichie), laud her work with no mention of the harm her views inflict on the trans community, and on other writers."





*UK author JK Rowling.*

Adebeye has been more conciliatory, stating: “I loved Chimamanda ... I am also profoundly thankful for the kindness that I have received from queer and trans people everywhere.”

Adichie is not alone in coming under heavy fire for departing from the rigid party line social media demands on transgender issues. Since US journalist and author Abigail Shrier published her book, *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters*, last year, she has fought off attempts to have it censored, cancelled or removed from library shelves.

Shrier has just published an online essay titled *The Books Are Already Burning*, about the attempts to censor her book, and the many “silent supporters”, including psychiatrists, teachers and left-wing journalists, who share her concerns but are too afraid to say so publicly.

The former Wall Street Journal reporter explains that *Irreversible Damage* “is an investigation of a medical mystery: Why is the number of teenage girls requesting (and obtaining) gender reassignment skyrocketing in the United States, Canada, Scandinavia and Europe? In Great Britain, it’s up 4400 per cent over the last decade. Though it shouldn’t be, this has become a highly controversial area of inquiry. The book is an exploration of why so many girls would, in such a short time frame, decide they are transgender. And it raises questions about whether they’re getting appropriate medical treatment.”

Shrier supports “medical transition for mature adults and (I) believe that transgender individuals should live openly without fear or stigma. Yet since publication, I have faced fierce opposition.” A lawyer from the American Civil Liberties Union called for the book to be banned, while trans groups pressured Target and Amazon to remove *Irreversible Damage* from their virtual shelves. Amazon employees claimed *Irreversible Damage* violated the online retailer’s prohibition on books “that frame

LGBTQ identity as a mental illness". The online giant is still selling the title but shut down an advertising campaign for it. Last month, a doctor's favourable review of Shrier's book was pulled from the blog site Science-Based Medicine.

"Half of Twitter seems to think I'm some sort of demon," Shrier writes in her essay. "But if you read my inbox, you'd think I was popular, awash as I am in secret fan mail and 'silent supporter' notes." She appreciates those "silent" messages but adds: "The inescapable reality is that defeating this ideology will take courage ... Courage requires each one of us to speak up, publicly, for what we believe in. Even when — especially when — it carries costs."

Rowling, meanwhile, has faced accusations of transphobia, which she denies, after tweeting about trans issues and publishing her 2020 essay in which she argued that biological sex was real. In that essay, she revealed she had been accused of "killing trans people", called a "c..t" and "bitch" and been threatened with violence for speaking out about trans activist positions she disagrees with.

She wrote: "I've read all the arguments about femaleness not residing in the sexed body ... I find them, too, deeply misogynistic and regressive." She added that the gender neutral language that calls women "people with vulvas" strikes many women as "dehumanising and demeaning".

She acknowledged trans people often suffered abuse and "need and deserve protection" in her essay, which the BBC nominated for its Russell Prize. But the fallout from her transgender views continues: In February a UK school stripped her name from a hall, last month a New Zealand literary festival abandoned plans to hold a Harry Potter event, and last year Perth bookshop Rabble Books and Games said it would stop stocking the author's titles to make "Rabble a safer space".

That move followed a controversy over her latest crime novel, *Troubled Blood* (written under the pseudonym Robert Galbraith), featuring a heterosexual serial killer who disguised himself in a woman's coat and wig while killing one victim. Even before the book was released, the hashtag #RIPJKRowling trended on Twitter.

Prominent writers including Lionel Shriver, Ian McEwan and Tom Stoppard signed a letter supporting the Harry Potter author in the face of "an onslaught of abuse that highlights an insidious authoritarian and misogynistic trend in social media". That letter has since been signed by 30,000 people online. Meanwhile, *Troubled Blood* raced to the top of the UK bestseller charts when it was released last September.

On the other side of the ideological divide are writers including King, Atwood and Jeanette Winterson who have signed open letters in the UK, Ireland, Canada and the US expressing support for trans communities. In May, King claimed Rowling cancelled him from her Twitter account after he posted a tweet declaring: "Trans women are women". The horror genre legend told *The Daily Beast*: "We have differing opinions, but that's life. Keep in mind too that Jo's opinion on trans women is an outlier in her entire political spectrum."

The US letter supporting trans people states: “Non-binary people are non-binary, trans women are women, trans men are men, trans rights are human rights. Your pronouns matter. You matter. You are loved.”

This incendiary issue is also playing out here, albeit on a smaller scale. Last year, Craig Silvey — the Western Australian author of the modern classic *Jasper Jones* — faced questions about whether, as a heterosexual man, he had the right to pen his new novel, *Honeybee*, about a troubled transgender teenager.

Indeed, the introduction to an article in *The Guardian* asked: “Even if it’s written well, should it have been written at all?” Silvey’s empathy for his protagonist combined with his track record as one of our best contemporary novelists seems to have insulated him from cancellation: *Honeybee* went on to win the fiction prize at the 2021 Indie Book Awards.

In contrast, in 2019 Irish gay writer John Boyne faced Twitter threats of violence and calls to boycott his YA novel, *My Brother’s Name is Jessica*, which is about a boy dealing with his sibling’s gender transition. His crime? Boyne, author of the Holocaust-themed bestseller turned film, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, had written: “I don’t consider myself a cis (non-transgender) man; I consider myself a man.”

In February this year, independent Melbourne bookshop Readings backtracked from the belated apology it made for having programmed UK feminist Juliet Bindel three years earlier. Bindel’s 2018 talk related to her book, *The Pimping of Prostitution*, not transgender issues, yet the bookshop initially apologised “for any hurt caused by highlighting the work of an author whose current stance is to divide our community”.

Bindel’s anti-prostitution views and a controversial remark she made about gender reassignment surgery years before — for which she apologised — had apparently caused a backlash. Melbourne author Alison Evans, who writes “YA fiction for bisexual and nonbinary representation”, threatened to back out of an event if Readings did not apologise for having hosted Bindel years before.

Managing director Mark Rubbo has since apologised for the apology, admitting: “Our post was an ill-considered attempt to acknowledge the distress that our event with Julie Bindel may have caused ... I regret the apology.”

In her essay, Adichie says she has “spoken to young people who tell me they are terrified to tweet anything ... because they fear they will be attacked by their own”.

With a devastating flourish, she concludes: “The assumption of good faith is dead. What matters is not goodness but the appearance of goodness. We are no longer human beings. We are now angels jostling to out-angel one another. God help us. It is obscene.”

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