



JK Rowling's Hypocrisy: the Author who Smearred Jeremy Corbyn Gave Us Books and Films Full of Antisemitic Stereotypes

Rowling has proven herself a very loyal supporter of Israel, so she is given a free pass, despite the blatantly antisemitic caricatures, the likes of which have rarely been seen in popular culture since the days of Nazi filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl.

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By Alan Macleod

Star author J.K. Rowling has again made headlines, this time after comedian Jon Stewart took her to task for the antisemitic portrayal of goblins in her “Harry Potter” books and movies. Stewart joked that the goblins were indistinguishable from representations of Jews in the infamous conspiracy text “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion.” “Yeah, they look like Jews, but what if the teeth were sharper?” he quipped. The clip went viral after it was picked up by a Newsweek article entitled “Jon Stewart Accuses J.K. Rowling of Antisemitism in ‘Harry Potter’.”

Stewart is far from the first to notice that Rowling’s depiction of goblins as a race of greedy, money-obsessed, fundamentally untrustworthy hooked-nosed little subhumans who control the entire banking system is distinctly similar to racist depictions of Jews. In 2020, Saturday Night Live host Pete Davidson performed a monologue on the same topic.

“Who controls the banks? Jews, obviously! Little, giant nosed Jew goblins! And I can say that, obviously, because, as you can see, I’m half goblin,” he said, referring to his Jewish father. “If this isn’t a ‘Jews run the banks’ reference, why do they all look exactly like Alan Dershowitz?!” he added. In the “Harry Potter” series, goblins are loyal only to their own kind and are employed almost solely in the banking or metal-smithing/jewelry-making industries – two stereotypically Jewish professions.

However, Rowling was immediately and vociferously defended by a wide range of Jewish groups and centrist pundits. The Campaign Against Antisemitism – a U.K. group that was set up in 2014 at the same time as Israel was carrying out Operation Protective Edge, a campaign of destruction in Gaza that killed more than 2,000 Palestinian civilians — released a statement saying that:

The portrayal of the goblins in the Harry Potter series is of a piece with their portrayal in Western literature as a whole. It is the product of centuries of association of Jews with grotesque and malevolent creatures in folklore, as well as money and finance. The mythological associations have become so ingrained in the Western mind that their provenance no longer registers with creators or consumers.

The group added that they were “immensely grateful” for Rowling’s work as a “tireless defender of the Jewish community in its fight against antisemitism.” Prominent Jewish personalities also came out to defend the indefensible. “The goblins in Harry Potter need to be seen not in a simplistic Team Rowling vs. Anti-Team Rowling way but in a many-centuries long, deeply subconsciously embedded cultural context,” said comedian David Baddiel. “J. K. Rowling is not an antisemite. And the ease with which major voices and legacy media outlets are smearing her as one because they dislike her stance on a different issue is truly dystopian,” wrote political scientist Yascha Mounk. Dave Rich, a journalist and the director of policy for the U.K.-based Jewish nonprofit Community Security Trust, summed it up: “Sometimes a goblin is just a goblin,” he said, referencing an apocryphal quote attributed to Sigmund Freud, suggesting that people were reading far too much into the affair.

After the furore, Stewart himself rapidly backtracked, claiming that “no reasonable person” could have concluded that he called Rowling antisemitic and that the media coverage of his words was “bonkers.” He also addressed Newsweek directly. “You used to mean something,” he said, adding that now, “your business model is fucking arson!” “Eat my ass, Newsweek,” he concluded, presenting the media as making a mountain out of a molehill. Newsweek has subsequently received a great deal of negative publicity for apparently putting words in Stewart’s mouth. However, it is difficult to see what other message a comedian quipping that Rowling’s next book could be called “Harry Potter and the Reichstag Fire,” could be sending.

Notably, what this whole controversy largely misses is Rowling’s connections to the Israeli state and its operatives. Politically a centrist, neoliberal Blairite

from the right wing of the British Labour Party, the Scottish author was a key part of the manufactured antisemitism crisis that dominated British politics in the 2010s and helped sink the candidacy of socialist Jeremy Corbyn. Corbyn was a vocal supporter of Palestinian liberation and promised to increase taxes on the ultra-wealthy.

When she was a poor, single mother living off government assistance, Rowling appeared to support more left-wing politics, but has since drifted rightwards. In 2018, she even shared an article called “The Old Left and the New Anti-Semitism” from *The Spectator*, a publication that runs articles such as “In Praise of the Wehrmacht” and “A Fascist Takeover of Greece? We Should Be So Lucky.”

In her 2018 crime novel “Lethal White,” Rowling’s villain is Jimmy Knight, a far-left, antisemitic conspiracy theorist who is obsessed with Israel and its machinations. Subtlety is not Rowling’s strong suit, and Knight was understood on all sides to be a thinly-veiled attack on Jeremy Corbyn, whom the Labour Party right wing was working with the Conservative Party to try to unseat. Some at the time joked that Rowling should have called Knight “Bleremy Blorbyn.” Rowling funded Corbyn’s opponents, constantly attacked his policies, and compared his “dimwitted” supporters to fascists in a number of public statements.

Many of the same individuals and groups defending Rowling last week were also at the forefront of the coordinated smears of Corbyn: Yascha Mounk constantly attacked Corbyn for his supposed antisemitism; Dave Rich skewered him for standing in front of a mural that featured art he deemed to be racist; David Baddiel published a column in the far-right *New York Post* claiming that the left sees antisemitism as “acceptable” racism. Meanwhile, the leader of the Political Investigations Team at the Campaign Against Antisemitism gloated that his organization had “slaughtered” Corbyn through a secret campaign that used “our spies and intel” to bring him down.

Harry Potter and the prisoners of Bethlehem

Rowling herself has been one of the most prominent defenders of Israel, even if she occasionally admonishes it for its excesses. In 2015, she signed a letter that denounced cultural boycotts of Israel, describing them as “divisive and discriminatory,” and called for more artistic collaboration with Israel, not less. The letter was in response to a growing campaign of Boycott, Divestment and

Sanctions (BDS) within the field of arts, education and literature. Explaining her decision, she asked why there are no cultural boycotts against North Korea or Zimbabwe, ignoring that both those countries are not only under a de facto total cultural boycott, but also under economic sanctions that are crippling their societies. “If any effects are felt from the proposed boycott, it will be by ordinary Israelis, many of whom did not vote for Mr. Netanyahu,” she added, using the same argument that conservatives in the U.K. deployed against the boycott of Apartheid South Africa. She has also recruited many of her most famous characters to back up her position, arguing that Professor Dumbledore would never shut off communication with his enemies. In 2020, she was identified as the fourth most important pro-Israel influencer in the world by Tel Aviv-based marketing firm Social Lite Creative LLC, the highest gentile on the list.

The letter, signed by over 100 prominent figures, also announced the founding of a new organization called “Culture of Coexistence.” The group is now defunct and appears to have done little except organize a trip to Israel for many of Britain’s most influential art and museum curators. As such, it joins the myriad of groups running interference for Israel that pop up in response to mounting negative publicity. Its stated goal was to oppose the rising BDS movement, which is evidenced by the fact that its tagline was “engagement not boycott.”

A driving force behind Culture of Coexistence’s foundation was Rowling’s literary agent Neil Blair. Formerly Warner Bros’ Head of Business Affairs for Europe, Blair plays an outsized role in Rowling’s personal and professional life. He serves as the director of Pottermore Ltd. (Rowling’s digital publishing, e-commerce, news and entertainment empire) and also is the chairman of Brontë Film and Television, a company founded to develop and produce TV and movie versions of Rowling’s books, such as “The Casual Vacancy” and the “Cormoran Strike” mystery series. In addition to this, he is the chairman of her children’s charity, Lumos.

Blair is also an ambassador for The Abraham Initiatives, a similar group that promotes cultural connections between Israel and the West, as well as the vague idea of “coexistence” between Israeli Jews and the Arab community. According to the organization’s most recent annual report for the British Charities Commission, The Abraham Initiatives’ “mission” is to advance “synergy between Israeli bodies, individuals, initiatives and programs with

respective agencies and institutions in the U.K.” Which Israeli bodies do they mean specifically is left unstated, yet many are highly suspicious of the group, suggesting that its purpose is to produce soporific statements about dialogue, hope and change, trapping Palestinians into endless cycles of negotiation and discouraging them from taking any useful action, all while painting a veneer over the decades-long occupation. “The Abraham Initiatives is leading people to swallow the lie that Israel is a democracy, and that Palestinians and Arabs within the Israeli state are free,” said Lowkey, a London-based rapper and activist for Palestinian liberation, adding:

The aim of it is to discourage BDS in the name of peace through dialogue. There are loads of organizations just like them and this is the language that they speak in; that these two sides need to sit down and talk about things. But that just instantly violates the principles of BDS.”

In this sense, then, these organizations operate as a sort of soft counterinsurgency, something that is made clear when looking at their funding sources. The Abraham Initiatives is directly funded by the Israeli government, the European Union, and by CIA–front group USAID. It is also sponsored by the State Department through the U.S.-Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI). Government cables released by WikiLeaks famously revealed that MEPI was the vehicle through which the U.S. secretly sent money to Jihadist groups in Syria with the goal of overthrowing the Assad administration.

Underscoring the point that the Abraham Initiatives is intimately tied to the Israeli government and its nation building project is the fact that many of its directors come straight from that milieu. The co-executive director of the Abraham Initiatives, for instance, is a former spokesperson of the Israeli Ministry of Immigration and a director at The Jerusalem Foundation, a company that builds illegal settlements on Palestinian land, including in Sheikh Jarrah.

The chairman of Abraham Initiatives U.K. is Alex Brummer, an editor for the far-right newspaper The Daily Mail. Brummer was a leader of the anti-Corbyn hysteria in the British press, penning articles such as “Jeremy Corbyn’s Marxist politics of envy would bankrupt the U.K.” and castigating Jewish leaders for supposedly not speaking out enough against Corbyn’s vile antisemitism. In the three months before Brummer wrote this, there had been an astonishing 1,450 articles in national newspapers linking Corbyn to antisemitism.

Brummer is also vice president of the Board of Deputies, a Jewish group that reportedly gave the Labour Party a “hit list” of pro-Palestine activists to expel. In its latest trustees’ report, the Board of Deputies casually admitted what so many had been alleging – that they maintained a “close working relationship with the Embassy of Israel in the U.K., including with the ambassador, diplomats, and professional staff, and strengthened links to the Israeli Ministry of Strategic Affairs and the Israeli Defense Forces.”

Rowling is not shy to advocate for political causes she believes in, whether it is opposing Brexit or funding the campaign against Scottish independence. The wealthy writer also helped promote Bana al-Abed, a Syrian child whose relentlessly anti-Assad and pro-Western intervention tweets made her a star. A few weeks after her infamous tweet, “Dear world, it’s better to start third world war instead of letting Russia & Assad commit #HolocaustAleppo,” Rowling and Blair contacted al-Abed after she announced her love of Harry Potter. “Bana, I work for Jo. Would you be able to read an eBook? If so I’d be happy to get a copy over to you,” Blair wrote. “Brilliant idea, Neil, I’ve been obsessing over this all morning!” Rowling replied. The exchange made headline news the world over, appearing in CNN, Time Magazine and the BBC, among others. Al-Abed later signed a book deal with Blair and his agency. That al-Abed clearly could barely speak even basic English at that time, let alone at the advanced level of her tweets, raised suspicions about what sort of operation her Twitter account was. Rowling and especially Blair have made their position on regime change and Syria clear.

Putting the screws to pro-Palestinian artists

BDS has again hit the headlines this week, as, just hours before it was set to begin, dozens of acts withdrew from the Sydney Festival in protest at the Israeli government sponsoring events in an attempt to launder its international reputation through the arts. One group that has chosen not to perform is Melbourne-based musicians Karate Boogaloo, who explained:

Boycotts and divestments have a strong track record of holding governments and corporations accountable for their actions, which is why Karate Boogaloo is standing in solidarity with Palestinian people and boycotting the Sydney Festival as a result of it accepting money from the human rights-abusing regime that is the Israeli Government.”

The action has been another public relations disaster for Israel. Consequently, its advocates, including Neil Blair, sprung into action. A host of the most powerful individuals in the creative industries came together to sign an open letter denouncing the “cowardly and shameful” artists and performers who are setting up “yet another roadblock to peace and its subversion of art for nefarious political purposes.” Besides Blair, signees include Jeremy Vuernick, executive vice president of Capitol Records; Jeff Sosnow, executive vice president of Warner Music; Jacqueline Saturn, president of Virgin Music; and David Levy, former president of Turner/WarnerMedia. While the signees represent a who’s who of corporate executives who control the arts industry, tellingly, the most relevant artist whose name appears is Gene Simmons, the Israeli frontman of 1970s rock band Kiss.

The letter, which was organized by a group called Creative Community for Peace, also claimed that the boycott organizers “intentionally misrepresent the truth about Israel” and that, “[w]hile art can reflect politics, and artists can choose to reflect their politics in their own art, art should never become subservient to politics and artists and cultural events should never be forced to be politicized.”

Lowkey, who interviewed the organizers of the boycott for an upcoming edition of his MintPress podcast, *The Watchdog*, described the letter as a power-play from the industry and an attempt to suppress free speech. “The Creative Community for Peace letter is a veiled threat to the people within the music industry that have pulled out of this festival,” he said, suggesting that artists the world over will understand that the message is that BDS is unacceptable to industry moguls and their careers will suffer if they support it. Perhaps in this light, Jon Stewart’s bizarre backtracking on Rowling and “Harry Potter” might make more sense.

Like Culture for Coexistence, Creative Community for Peace was established to counter mounting international criticism of Israel and the rise of the BDS movement. It is essentially the same organization as StandWithUs, a right-wing, pro-Israel advocacy organization, having partnered with the group between 2011 and 2013. Furthermore, Creative Community for Peace was founded by David Renzer whose wife Esther co-founded StandWithUs. StandWithUs openly works on behalf of the Israeli Foreign Ministry. “It is true – we are using...StandWithUs for leverage,” said Danny Ayalon, former Israeli deputy foreign minister and ambassador to the United States.

In this light, then, critics see Creative Community for Peace as not being about peace at all, but about preserving the unequal status quo through vague calls for dialogue and non-violence, all while vigorously opposing any direct action that could prompt Israel to end its decades-long occupation. “Creative Community for Peace is basically the Israel lobby within the music industry,” Lowkey concluded.

Rowling’s free pass

If backers of Israel’s policies were concerned by the Sydney Festival news, they were flat out dismayed when “Harry Potter” star Emma Watson came out in support of the Palestinian cause last week. Sharing an image of Palestinian protestors on her official Instagram page (which has nearly 65 million followers), Watson wrote (quoting British-Australian scholar Sara Ahmed):

Solidarity does not assume that our struggles are the same struggles, or that our pain is the same pain, or that our hope is for the same future. Solidarity involves commitment, and work, as well as the recognition that even if we do not have the same feelings, or the same lives, or the same bodies, we do live on common ground.”

Unlike Rowling, however, Israeli officials immediately portrayed Watson as a bigoted racist. “10 points from Gryffindor for being an antisemite,” wrote Danny Danon, Israel’s former ambassador to the United Nations. His successor to the position, Gilad Erdan, was of a similar opinion. “Fiction may work in Harry Potter but it does not work in reality. If it did, the magic used in the wizarding world could eliminate the evils of Hamas (which oppresses women and seeks the annihilation of Israel) and the Palestinian Authority (which supports terror). I would be in favor of that!” he said. A host of pro-Israel writers and public figures followed suit, joining in the chorus.

In contrast to other times that celebrities have expressed their opposition to Israeli aggression, however, Watson has stood firm, ignoring the criticism. Furthermore, there has been notable support for her position and derision at the idea that showing solidarity with Palestine is antisemitic. This is representative of a shift both in public opinion and from official organizations. In recent years, the United Nations, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have all declared Israel to be an apartheid state and it appears the country is beginning to fall out of favor with polite society in the West. Today, it is considered gauche to be a vocal supporter of apartheid. Israel’s internal

shift to the right has also further bent its image. While it has lost significant support from American liberals, it has found backers among the global far-right. Ironically, many of Israel's strongest supporters today are antisemitic fascists, who see the country as a model for the sort of ethnostates they wish to create at home. Norwegian Neo-Nazi terrorist Anders Brevik, for example, is enamored with the Israeli state and what it has achieved, even as his manifesto is littered with ridiculous antisemitic conspiracy theories about Jews themselves. This is proof enough that blatant antisemitism can exist hand-in-hand with passionate support for the Israeli state.

This is far from the first time that figures have taken umbrage with Rowling's characters. Critics have long questioned the fact that the major Irish character in the Harry Potter series, Seamus Finnigan, is constantly blowing things up (drawing on stereotypes of IRA terrorism). The most prominent black character is named "Kingsley Shacklebolt" and the only East-Asian character is called Cho Chang, which is an incomprehensible mix of a Korean surname and a Chinese one – akin to an Asian writer naming their only white character "Pavarotti Dostoyevsky" or similar. Then there are the house elves, a race of beings whose highest pleasure is being enslaved by humans. And although it is not made absolutely explicit in the books, one of Harry's teachers is clearly gang-raped by a pack of centaurs, as anyone with even a fraction of Rowling's knowledge of mythology would have surmised. This is actually played for laughs in the books; Harry and his friends see the teacher in a comatose state in hospital after her ordeal and make horse noises to further torment her.

Rowling has proven herself a very loyal supporter of Israel, so she is given a free pass, despite the blatantly antisemitic caricatures, the likes of which have rarely been seen in popular culture, at least since the days of Nazi filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl. She is known for being fiercely protective of her work and insisted upon having extensive editorial and artistic control over the movies as well. While it is within the bounds of possibility that she did not realize that her depiction of goblins drew heavily on antisemitic caricatures embedded for centuries in popular lore, the fact that she has been extremely vocal in calling out antisemitism elsewhere, effectively appointing herself witchfinder-general in the purge of the British left, means that she cannot have it both ways. Either she is hyper-sensitive to the way in which public figures perpetuate anti-Jewish bigotry, or she is completely ignorant of it.

That Rowling is being vociferously defended by the same forces who attacked Jeremy Corbyn for standing too close to a mural with some arguably problematic images on it and condemned Emma Watson for posting a rather vague message about love and solidarity, is a further underscoring of the fact that much of the modern debate around antisemitism has little to do with actually perpetuating negative tropes about Jewish people and far more to do with one's position on the government of Israel and its right to endlessly torment and oppress the Palestinian population.

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