

**DAVID
BADDIEL**

**JEWS
DON'T
COUNT**

About the TLS

The *Times Literary Supplement* was born in January 1902. Its first ever front page bashfully stated that ‘during the Parliamentary session Literary Supplements to “The Times” will appear as often as may be necessary in order to keep abreast with the more important publications of the day’. Fortunately, the question of necessity was not left in the hands of literary journalists (who, we can imagine, might occasionally push for a holiday or two), and the title became a weekly one. A few years later, the *TLS* split entirely from *The Times*.

Since then, we have prided ourselves on being the world’s leading magazine for culture and ideas. Our guiding principle for the selection of pieces remains the same as it ever has been: is it interesting; and is it beautifully written? Over the years, our contributors have included the very best writers and thinkers in the world: from Virginia Woolf to Seamus Heaney, Sylvia Plath to Susan Sontag, Milan Kundera to Christopher Hitchens, Patricia Highsmith to Martin Scorsese.

The book you are holding is part of a brand-new imprint, *TLS Books*, by which we are striving to bring more beautiful writing to a wider public. We hope you enjoy it. If you want to read more from us, you’ll find a special trial subscription offer to the *TLS* at the back of this book.

In an ever-quickenening culture of flipness and facility, fake news and Facebook, the *TLS* is determined to be part of the counter-culture of quality. We believe in expertise, breadth and depth. We believe in the importance of ideas, and the transformative power of art. And we believe that, in reading the *TLS* – in whatever form, be it in a magazine, online or in a book – you are supporting a set of values that we have been proud to uphold for more than a hundred years. So thank you for that.

Stig Abell, Editor-in-Chief, *TLS Books*
London, 2021

Also by David Baddiel

The Death of Eli Gold

The Secret Purposes

Whatever Love Means

Time for Bed

FOR CHILDREN

Future Friend

The Taylor Turbochaser

Head Kid

Birthday Boy

AniMalcolm

The Boy Who Could Do What He Liked

The Person Controller

The Parent Agency

Copyright

TLS Books
An imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF

The-TLS.co.uk

HarperCollinsPublishers
1st Floor, Watermarque Building, Ringsend Road,
Dublin 4, Ireland

First published in Great Britain in 2021 by TLS Books

Copyright © David Baddiel 2021

David Baddiel asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

Jacket design by Ellie Game

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the non-exclusive, non-transferable right to access and read the text of this e-book on-screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, down-loaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of HarperCollins.

Source ISBN: 9780008399474
Ebook Edition © February 2021 ISBN: 9780008399498
Version: 2020-12-23

Dedication

To my mother, Sarah Fabian-Baddiel,
who never failed to make herself count.

Contents

Cover

About the TLS

Also by David Baddiel

Title Page

Copyright

Dedication

Jews Don't Count

Coda

Acknowledgements

Enjoyed the book?

Also from TLS Books

About the Publisher

Jews Don't Count

I'm going to give you some examples of a recurring phenomenon. My publisher here is the *Times Literary Supplement*, so let's begin with a literary example. In August 2020, the British newspaper the *Observer*, which, along with its sister paper the *Guardian*, is politically the most progressive mainstream news outlet in the country, published a review of the screenwriter Charlie Kaufman's first novel *Antkind*, by a critic called Holly Williams. It wasn't a very positive review, criticising the book mainly because the narrator operates from what Williams calls a 'white-male-cis-het perspective'. In other words self-evidently white, male and, less self-evidently, possessed of a gender that is neither trans nor non-binary, and a sexuality that is straight. Anyone occupying this square of characteristics is considered, by those who assume that all social structures are underpinned by power, privileged. White-male-cis-hets have four head starts in life. A book written from a white-male-cis-het perspective would routinely be marked down by a platform like the *Observer*, keen always to re-centre the cultural conversation away from that square.

However, the narrator in *Antkind* is called B. Rosenberger Rosenberg. He describes himself early on as having a 'rabbinical' beard, as 'Jewish-looking'; perhaps even more of a giveaway, at one point he wears a tie with the slogan '100% Kosher'. There are numerous occasions when other characters behave anti-Semiticly towards him, assuming his behaviours tally with Jewish stereotypes, whispering 'Jew' under their breath as he leaves rooms, or shouting 'Fuck you, Hebrew!' directly at him. But in the *Observer* review, there's no mention of his Jewishness, or the issue of Jewishness in the book in general, despite it including – thank you, Kindle – sixty mentions of the word 'Jew', and ninety of the word 'Jewish'. And, of course, Charlie Kaufman himself is Jewish.

But I guess none of this, for Holly Williams, has any bearing on B. Rosenberger Rosenberg's white-male-cis-het perspective: no bearing, that

is, on his privilege.

Here is another example, this time from the Danish comedian Sofie Hagen. In a – very good – 2019 short film she made about body positivity, Hagen recites a list of ‘the most oppressed people in society’, a list that includes: ‘Black people and people of colour, queer people, trans people, Muslims and people with disabilities’. Which indeed is a pretty good stab at covering the waterfront of what many progressives would consider to be the most oppressed groups, the most persecuted minorities, in society.

But it misses out one persecuted minority, one of the most persecuted minorities in history. Now. Imagine that the main character in *Antkind* belonged to any of these minorities that Hagen mentions. The central premise of the *Observer* review – that the problematic issue with *Antkind* is that it is written from a white-male-cis-het perspective – would dissolve, and with it, most of the review’s negativity. Which means that despite the history of persecution, there is only one minority that, for the privilege-checkers, stays firmly in the square of privilege.

Time for a high literary example: on New Year’s Day 2017, BBC Radio 4 broadcast Jeremy Irons reading from the complete collection of T. S. Eliot’s poems, almost in their entirety. Anyone who knows Eliot’s poetry will know that reading all of his poems means the inevitable inclusion of these lines from ‘Gerontion’:

My house is a decayed house,
And the Jew squats on the window sill, the owner,
Spawned in some estaminet of Antwerp,
Blistered in Brussels, patched and peeled in London.

And from ‘Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar’:

The rats are underneath the piles.
The Jew is underneath the lot.

I remember listening, and wondering how the BBC would get round this. When it came to these particular poems, they enlisted the help of Anthony Julius, a Jewish lawyer, and the author of *T. S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism and Literary Form* (1995), who prefaced the readings with his theory of how the highly prevalent, fashionable anti-Semitism of the time informed and possibly even enhanced Eliot's work. To simplify considerably, Julius believes that Eliot was such a great poet that he could – almost uniquely, although there is of course *The Merchant of Venice* – make anti-Semitism into art.

I wrote to Anthony Julius after this because I think his position is wrong. I'm an Eliot fan, but I think the poetry does not redeem the hatred. We ended up some time later having lunch and talking about it for three hours (a very, if I might say so, Jewish reaction to the whole thing).

But none of this shook off the feeling I had, on New Year's Day 2017, that, however great the writer, however great the writing, no other minority group would be compared to rats, or envisaged as any similar negative racist stereotype, on Radio 4. It is not inconceivable that the BBC might read a whole Agatha Christie book on New Year's Day. It is, however, inconceivable that anyone will hear Jeremy Irons' voice saying, 'And now, *Ten Little N****rs*'.

Meanwhile, in mid-2020, following the spate of statues being toppled as part of the Black Lives Matter protests, a protester a long way from Minneapolis – in Broadstairs, Kent – sprayed the words 'Dickens Was A Racist' on the Dickens Museum. The protester was called Ian Driver and his inspiration was a letter that Dickens had written decrying the Indian Mutiny in 1857. Unquestionably, the letter is racist. However, it is strange that Ian Driver had to go all the way to a relatively obscure piece of writing by Dickens to become inflamed by his racism, when, in *Oliver Twist*, in plain sight, for years and years and years, has been Fagin.

But maybe he doesn't count.

The modern cultural conversation about reassessing great writers from the past in the light of current political understanding is not always, however, negative. In the case, for example, of the early twentieth-century novelist

Edith Wharton, that reassessment has recently been about upping her status in the canon, with a sense that, as a woman, she had been overlooked. In the latter part of 2020, the *Guardian*'s online reading group chose Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* as its book for September. Meanwhile, in *The Times*, Anna Murphy wrote of her love for *The House of Mirth*, and specifically about how pleased she was that Wharton was finally being recognised as 'a match' for Henry James.

It's certainly the case that with some notable exceptions, women authors have not been given their due by the culture, so this re-evaluation of Wharton made me decide to pick up *The House of Mirth*. I was very much enjoying the heroine Lily Bart's adventures in the first few pages, until a character called Mr Rosedale – 'a little Jew who had been served up and rejected on the social board a dozen times within her reminiscence' – is introduced. The issue is not, of course, that Wharton, in her time and context, wrote things that we would now consider to be anti-Semitic. The issue is that this is not a problem for her present feminist reclamation. Meanwhile, other types of racism that her writing might express continue, for some, to be. In an essay for the feminist website Jezebel, the Victorian literary scholar Rachel Vorona Cote writes: 'Excluding what Wharton's characters – or, for that matter, Wharton herself – might have to say about my Jewish family, my whiteness supplies me with a pair of cozy blinkers that occlude the tarnishing details. Once I turn my attention to the novel's treatment of persons of color – peripheral, dismissive – I cannot regain my uncomplicated enjoyment of it.'

It's good that Vorona Cote is interrogating Wharton's assumptions. If I was to interrogate her own, the question I would ask is: why exclude what Wharton's characters or Wharton herself would say about Jews?

Here's another example.

In 2019, a production of *The Color Purple*, based on Alice Walker's novel, was due to be staged as a musical in London. About four weeks before it opened, the actress who was going to be playing the starring role of Celie, Seyi Omooba, was found to have posted – in 2014 – homophobic messages on Facebook. Omooba is from an evangelical Christian background, and her posts were fairly standard evangelical Christian