

Author vs. Art

The moral dilemma between controversial creators, the art that they produce, and the communities that they build

Roundtable Facilitated by Brianna Lantz

In today's world, accountability plays a major part in how consumers engage with creative work, especially the written medium. Consumers often take their personal beliefs and morals into consideration when interacting with controversial work. This tension between the product and the producer prompts the question of how readers and publishers interact with texts and authors.

What ethical responsibility do publishers, readers, and critics bear when the creator's personal beliefs conflict with the values of their work, and the values of those engaging with their work?

Our contributors, Elena Peñaloza and Rachael Rhine Milliard, explore this question while considering issues, such as authors' legacies, time, and the freedoms that define artistic creation.

Contributors

Elena Peñaloza

Elena Peñaloza is in her final year in the GWU Publishing program and plans to graduate in May 2026. A Navy veteran and currently an intern at Salky Literary Management, she serves on the Editorial and Strategy & Sustainability committees of the *GWJournal of Ethics and Publishing*.

Rachael Rhine Milliard

Rachael L. Rhine Milliard graduated from the GW Publishing program in December 2024. She has served on multiple GWJEP committees and currently works as a freelance editor for Gallopade International and private clients. She is also a contributing editor for *The Asia Cable* and a first reader for the *Radon Journal*.

Elena Peñaloza

In the age of ‘cancel culture’¹ I think that this question is an imperative one. There has been a massive movement of removing authors’ works, cancelling their personal brands, or outright hating content being constructed around authors and, by extension, their work. But what I despise most about cancel culture is the dismissal of discussion. I think at the heart of literature and creative works is the discussions that they create. There have been incredibly influential books that have sparked movements for change across the country and have traveled across borders into the hearts of readers. As publishers I think there is a major responsibility to be the driver of the discussion surrounding controversial authors, especially authors who are no longer with us, but whose works are still being published.

This is where we must do our due diligence in the forwards and editorial notes. For works that were originally published in a different time and social climate, we need to add explanations of why the work still matters, the differences in language from the original publication to now, and of course, why the publisher is continuing to publish these works. I think that exceptions are allowable for works that were made in different time periods because many of them are written in direct response to what was happening then. Especially as readers, I think we need to think critically about these works and understand

1 <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cancel%20culture>

what made them influential during that time period and how they can be adapted to create discussion and change in our own time. What lessons can we learn that are still relevant today?

For works that are attached to authors that have conflicting personal beliefs to their readers I think that is when readers need to consider their buying power. There are works that have had major impacts on our lives from a young age that now as adults we know more about the authors and we might find that their values don't align with our own. If that is the case then you have the opportunity to separate yourself from the work and its subsequent merchandise. The same goes for publishers and critics. If an author no longer aligns with a publisher's mission, then it is the publisher's responsibility to address that to their readers. Things like contracts and ongoing publications may take time for them to work through. But, in the end, they also have a responsibility to their audience to open that discussion on why they are or are not moving forward with an author's work anymore.

I think that it is wholly possible to love the work and not love the author, but that comes with its own implications. Are you willing to have the discussions with your fellow readers and be open to hearing how an author's actions have impacted the lives of others? And are you willing to critically look at the work and see why it matters? Or why it may be time to shelve it for good?

While Elena centers her discussion on current culture, language, and accountability, Rachael examines the constitutional and professional dilemmas that publishers, readers, and critics alike may face when engaging with controversial work.

Rachael Rhine Milliard

Any discussion of the ethical responsibilities publishers, readers, and critics bear when engaging with a piece of work that presents values opposed to their own must include the First Amendment, societal factors, and the tension between the personal and professional roles of individuals and those of private enterprises. There is no easy, single answer. Here, I have briefly discussed the most important items to consider when addressing the question.

One of the founding principles of the United States is that people must be free to share their thoughts and opinions without fear of reprisal from their government. Another is that people have the right to their own religious practices. These ideas are enshrined in the First Amendment to the Constitution² of the United States of America. The First Amendment provides for the freedom of religion, freedom of expression, freedom of the press, freedom to peaceably assemble, the right to petition the government, and that the government may not prohibit the free exercise of these rights. The First Amendment is the starting point for understanding the ethical responsibilities of publishers, readers, and critics regarding the conflict between personal beliefs and the values presented or represented in works of art—literary, performative, and visual.

Without the First Amendment, no one would be able to express themselves. This amendment protects all speech, art, and ideas. If it only protected one perspective, US citizens would not be part of a republic; they would be part of an authoritarian regime. Creators, then, can create whatever they like because the First Amendment protects them. In my opinion, they should be protected. Just because an individual might not like what a creator has to say does not mean that individual can infringe on the creator's rights.

The second idea to address is one of perspective. The majority typically defines the 'moral right' or 'moral propriety' for a society. 'Problematic' is a nebulous term that can be used to justify any number of abuses against the First Amendment rights of persons living and entities operating within the United States. Just because a work's themes do not align with the desired moral values or perspectives of the predominant beliefs of the society does not mean that the work is, in fact, problematic. There is an old maxim that covers this pretty well: "What is right is not always easy. What is easy is not always right."

That brief discussion brings us to the final point: how the tension between personal beliefs and professional conduct of individual and business entities influences the ethical responsibilities of those surrounding a work of art. I

2 <https://constitution.congress.gov/constitution/amendment-1/>

have a right to my personal beliefs. But my rights to my own opinions and expressions of those opinions should not be allowed to infringe on the ability and rights of others to have and express their opinions. The works I find problematic are not the same as those another will find problematic. But, as an editor and a consumer, I must still engage with these works. My professional responsibilities and the ethical responsibility not to encroach on another's rights, as described in the Constitution, require that I not inflict my opinions on the presentation or consumption of work I might consider problematic. I also have a choice about where I work and what clients I choose. I tend to send work I fear I won't be able to be neutral about to businesses that share the creator's perspective. And though I may disagree with them, they still have a right to exist and I often still read or engage with that work as a consumer.

Publishers, critics, and consumers all have a right to their own thoughts, opinions, and religions. Privately-held businesses, since corporations were ruled to be people, have a right to refuse to publish, read, or be positive about a work's theme with which they disagree. Public spaces have an obligation to all people and must walk a finer line. That is a discussion for another time. But privately-held businesses and each individual have a moral obligation not to infringe on another's expression of their beliefs, thoughts, and opinions. But they also have a right not to sell, review, or engage with the work they consider problematic. They also have a right to engage with the work in a manner that exercises their beliefs, thoughts, and opinions—with the caveat that the manner of disagreement does not damage personal property or person. I have intentionally kept specific works out of this discussion because of the nebulous nature of the term 'problematic works.' Ultimately, I think there is considerable value in reading and working with works one might consider 'problematic.' Such art is usually incredibly instructive. And such art should not be excluded from the world because it happens to not align with personal or societal beliefs.

This roundtable offers two complementary perspectives on the responsibilities surrounding controversial art that publishers and consumers should consider when engaging with problematic work and creators. While everyone has the right to freedom of expression, it may be difficult for readers to find a common ground for certain moral dilemmas.

As readers and publishing professionals, we must continually ask:

Where does ethical responsibility truly begin or end?

At what point does it seem to be a search for fault rather than genuine ethical engagement? And what are we as consumers willing to do in order to stand with our own beliefs?