

# On media storms, and transphobes, and free speech, and the establishment.

(Dated 22nd August, 2022.)

Unless you were asleep last week, you'll have noticed I made the news. I made the news a *lot*. The Daily Mail (twice); the Times (twice); the Telegraph; the Observer, plus radio and any number of online and international outlets, including UnHerd, where stories go to die. The story has taken many forms. That J.K. Rowling feels "betrayed" by my "lack of support" for her; that my views on trans rights makes me ineligible for any public role; that people are calling for my removal from the Board of the SOA; that I'm a monster because I replied to a post from a satirical Twitter account with - shock, horror - a smiley.

I haven't talked to anyone in the Press, in spite of many journalists asking, so this "story", was taken from Twitter, where stories evolve at such a rapid rate that by the time they make the broadsheets, no-one really knows what shape the story started out at all.

But this is what it has become. I've been repeatedly (and wrongly) accused of a number of things, which when you unpick them, boil down to one thing. That as Chair of the Society of Authors (the authors' trade union), I've abused my position to discriminate against people who don't agree with my support of the trans community.

Full disclosure: this isn't new. Ever since I was elected Chair in 2019, I've been getting increasing amounts of abuse, pressure and demands for "debate" from people with gender-critical views. Some of them are colleagues; some women I once considered friends. Some of these women now have become single-agenda tweeters, railing night and day online about what defines a woman, and spreading misinformation and fear about the trans community. Many of these women claim to be afraid, and to have suffered cancellation for their views. Some of them feel that as Chair of the SOA, I should have taken their side in Twitter debates, signed petitions, joined hashtags to validate their beliefs.

**But here's the thing. The SOA represents everyone. It has over 12,000 members. It needs to stay neutral to represent all its members equally. And it has a strict policy of non-intervention in Twitter debates between members, even when they get nasty, because Twitter can be a nasty place, and the SOA can't be everywhere.** That's why I tweet in my personal capacity unless I specify otherwise.

The gender critical lobby has had real difficulty understanding this. Over the past two years, I've been under increasing pressure to "speak out" about individual cases (I can't); ally myself with transphobes (I won't) and "denounce" death threats to J.K. Rowling (which I do, but apparently not often enough.) Over the past two years I've received countless abusive tweets, urging me to kill myself, or resign from the SOA, or hoping that I would die of cancer, all from the gender-critical lobby.

The latest eruption began last week, with the stabbing of Salman Rushdie, a man whose life has been under threat since most of us can remember. Last Friday, an Islamist fanatic managed to get close enough to stab him, leaving him with terrible injuries. The literary world was shaken. Friends of Rushdie's spoke out in horror. But those of us who only knew him for his books were also deeply shaken and upset. **Because this wasn't just a violent attack on an author, horrific though that may be. It was an attack on free speech, a principle all creators hold dear.**

Free speech is a term that has been misused a lot recently, especially by people wanting their say, but denying it to others. In fact, free speech is like oxygen: you can't remove it from someone else without also losing it yourself, which means that, if you believe in free speech, you can't then go around deciding who deserves it and who doesn't. Rushdie is a great writer. But even if the victim of the stabbing had been a minor writer, a bad writer, or a writer with problematic opinions, the same attack on free speech would have happened, threatening writers everywhere. **The principle of free speech matters. And it matters to all of us.**

I wrote about this a bit on Twitter, where many authors were still upset, struggling how best to respond to the horrific attack. Twitter being Twitter, there were also a number of angry Islamist accounts, crowing about the Rushdie attack and targeting anyone who expressed sympathy. Some were abusive, some even threatening. Several people I follow were sent messages on the lines of: *Shut up or we'll come for you next.* I got one myself. So did J.K. Rowling. But on Twitter, size matters. What J.K. Rowling, with her 14 million followers, says is instant news. **So when J.K. Rowling announced that she'd had a death threat from an Islamist account saying: *You're next, her name trended for two days, and Rushdie's all-too-real attack was overshadowed by a Twitter threat.***

Now, it isn't up to me to decide whether the death threat was credible, or whether J.K. Rowling should be afraid. I don't know how many threats she's received, or how many she thinks are credible. Having had them myself, I know they can be upsetting and frightening. But a threat on Twitter is not the same as being stabbed in the eye, and I didn't see the need to comment.

Instead I put up a poll, asking fellow-authors if they'd ever received a death threat. I wanted to use it as a way of talking about author safety. As it happened, Chuck Wendig had been posting about his latest death threat the day before Salman Rushdie was stabbed (a weirdly specific death threat, in which his correspondent expressed the hope that Chuck would be, er - ***raped to death by a dolphin***), and the tone of my first poll reflected the jokey nature of our interchange. In the light of the Rushdie stabbing, though, I realized that wasn't appropriate. I deleted the poll almost at once and started again with a more neutral wording, but the folk on Twitter who watch me for any ammunition they can use had already screencapped it and passed it around. It made the papers, variously as: *Harris Mocks Rushdie* or *Harris Mocks Rowling*, but I was doing neither. **Death threats – to anyone, including J.K. Rowling – are absolutely wrong. They're also a crime. Crimes are for the police to sort out. Free speech, however, is a legitimate principle for a union to uphold.**

But free speech isn't always the speech that you agree with. Free speech can be confrontational. It can be unfair. It can even be upsetting. I've upset a lot of gender-critical people with my own use of free speech; my refusal to join their hashtags, sign their petitions, enter their debates. That doesn't mean to say I don't believe in theirs, or that I wouldn't fight for their rights as fiercely as for anyone else. But that has never been enough for the people who want me gone.

Since last week, the wave of people demanding my resignation – or just my removal – from the SOA has grown. Many of those who have joined the "debate" are not members. Many are not even authors. **Nearly all are transphobes, though. Because that's what all this is about. Not all gender critical people may be transphobes, but all transphobes are gender critical.** Graham Linehan has been posting about me since 2020, calling for me to be dismissed. He doesn't know what the SOA does. He doesn't care. He's just one of many prominent transphobes who believe that someone who believes in the rights of trans folk doesn't deserve a voice of their own.

**I have a trans son.** He came out very recently, and I haven't discussed it online. Last week, I discovered that some of my principal detractors had found out about this. After talking to my son, and with his permission, I went public. I love my son more than words can say, and I didn't want anyone to think that I was ashamed of him. **Kathleen Stock, among others, gloated that this was proof of my bias. She (rather chillingly) denounced me for having "undeclared trans-identified offspring," and claimed that this was the "real" reason for my support of trans folk. Kathleen Stock finds it hard to believe that someone might uphold a principle without having a personal interest.** Actually, I've been a supporter of trans rights for much longer than this. Like I said, I believe in supporting the rights of *all* marginalized groups.

So, just what are they saying now? That I'm jealous of JKR? I'm not. I love my life, and I love my son, and I wouldn't change that for anything. That because of my pro-trans beliefs, I should be cancelled or lose my job? That would be ironic, wouldn't it, coming from people who are claiming to have been cancelled for their gender-critical beliefs. And full disclosure: it isn't a job. It's an elected position, as part of a Board of twelve people. It's voluntary, time-consuming, often thankless, and unpaid, and I do it because I care about authors' rights. All authors' rights; whether they're famous or not; whether I agree with their politics or not.

But this assault isn't going to stop. Given how many people pretend to be "fearful of speaking out", they're certainly doing a hell of a lot of it. I've had open attacks this week from a certain sector of the author community – all London-based, all cis, all white, all influential people (many of them men) with lots of friends in the right-wing media – saying that they are *coming for me*. One person compared it to the March of the Ents, going after Saruman. The literary establishment, it seems is desperately afraid of progress.

Here's the thing, though. I'm stubborn. I've never fitted into the London literary scene, so the fact that it now feels the need to mobilize against me means very little to me. This week, I've had death threats, attacks in the media, and countless abusive messages. I don't care. I'm not afraid. I was elected to this role to help protect authors' rights. That means yours, whoever you are, and those of all other authors. If you're a member of the SOA, then we have elections yearly. You too can stand for the Board, and be elected, and add your views to the diversity of views already expressed there. Till then, I'll do what I've always done. Raise awareness of authors' rights.

They grow us tough in Yorkshire.

Close notes  
275751,002  
Oldest first

sassyscot

Brilliant response to the appalling behaviour of a very noisy minority. The way that they went after your son is unacceptable. All good wishes to you and your family.

[annarti](#)

As an Aussie not on Twitter, first I've heard of any of this but, FWIW, this kind of stuff is why you only ever rise higher as my favourite author. And congrats to your son for coming out! The irony for those claiming he's the reason for your trans-support is that it's probably more likely the other way around, that your support of trans people made him feel safe being able to do so, and this can only be a good thing.

[jraa77](#)

A beautiful and funny piece, power to you.

[sentient-carrot](#)

Absolutely insane how lacking in self-awareness or reflection they are to think that their hateful views are something that should be supported, when it's of an utmost importance that one does the opposite and denounces that vile, nasty ideology transphobes adhere to.

[sighagainagain](#)

But even here, you couldn't resist a swipe at JKR ("I do have thoughts about white women online who make the all-too-real attack on a brown man about their own experience, but that's a different discussion"), implicitly accusing her of racism now. And I suspect you are using the lazy slur "transphobe" to mean "anyone who doesn't agree with all the aims of some trans people".

[sighagainagain](#)

[@sentient-carrot](#) If you call anyone who doesn't agree with all the aims of some trans people a "transphobe", what do you call people who actively try to physically or verbally attack, hurt or humiliate trans people?

[crimsonaccent](#)

[@sighagainagain](#) thats cause JKR is a racist. Shockingly, bigots tend to be bigoted against multiple groups. I see that you had to hyperfocus on a single point of this essay.

[porthos4ever](#)

Dear Volunteer, you do the hardest and most important kind of work. Your tenacity is so appreciated. And congratulations on your new son <3

[sky-larking](#)

\*sending much love 🍀\*

[floraone](#)

Brilliant response and I send you all of the love. Yours is the voice of reason, compassion, and tolerance.

[namloeschur](#)

Great piece. Authors need you.

[wrongtrousers](#)

Iconic response!

[sighagainagain](#)

[@crimsonaccent](#)

[sighagainagain](#)

[@crimsonaccent](#) Shockingly, some people happily fling slurs of all sorts at anyone with whose views they disagree, whether the slurs are merited or (as in your ludicrous "racist" slur for JKR) not.

[yaquiet-soph](#)

Been following the mess on twitter a bit; the fury from terfs imagining someone accepting and loving a trans family member is truly sad, and I hope that any trans family they have can find support and safety elsewhere. The way they're framing you having a son as something nefarious you need to declare is truly sickening and such an obvious fascist dogwhistle.

[greedyrunner](#)

Thanks for that and solidarity . . .

[sentient-carrot](#)

[@sjhagainagain](#) transphobes as well. And terfs -do- actively try to verbally attack, hurt and humiliate not only trans people, but people that support trans people or just people that have masculine features in general. But just because one is a milder variant of a transphobe doesn't make them not transphobic and harmful. So that.

[otafma](#)

your daily reminder that Twitter is fucking dogshit

[privatepangolin-blog](#)

[@sjhagainagain](#) No she didn't - she mentioned a principle not a person & she's right to do so

[dragonfla](#)

I left Twitter years ago for my own mental health, but you're one of the reasons I occasionally miss it. I'm not a member of the SOA but I'm glad you're leading it right now. Thank you.

[whiteneckedjacobin](#)

You claim to be for free speech, but you don't demonstrate this in your acts.

[rtgrl](#)

good on ya. some big reaches even in the comments here

[rnokish-rnokery](#)

im so happy and grateful u are fighting for us. much love from across the pond ma'am! ☺☺☺

[merinnan](#)

[@sjhagainagain](#) Oh look, a TERF sockpuppet. Bye.

[agoddamnedrayofsunshine](#)

[@sjhagainagain](#) do shut the fuck up.

[gareth-gobblecoque](#)

I'm no expert but I'd say you're right, fuck transphobes, keep doing what you're doing.

[felinedicatorminion](#)

Excellent response. I'm glad you're on here.