

Honouring free speech or hate speech? Writers weigh in on award to Charlie Hebdo

Written by The Conversation

The American branch of [PEN](#), a literary and human rights organisation, has prompted 35 writers to protest its decision to give recognition to the French newspaper

[Charlie Hebdo](#)

. At its upcoming gala, PEN will present its Freedom of Expression Courage award to Charlie Hebdo's editor-in-chief, Gerard Biard, and Jean-Baptiste Thoret, who was late for work on the day that ten of his colleagues were

[killed](#)

by Islamic extremists.

Peter Carey, Michael Ondaatje, [Francine Prose](#), [Teju Cole](#), Rachel Kushner and Taiye Selasi are among the major novelists who have expressed discomfort with the choice of Charlie Hebdo and withdrawn from the event.

The various perspectives presented by the writers acknowledge that the murder of Charlie Hebdo employees was ["hideous"](#), but question the validity of honouring the controversial publication.

Prose suggests that the satirical newspaper's work does not have "the importance—the necessity—that would deserve such an honor". While Cole did not "want to sit in a room and cheer Charlie Hebdo".

The contents of the newspaper, the dissenters suggest, would not merit an award in its own right. Charlie Hebdo aspires towards "equal opportunity offence". However, these writers argue the newspaper is problematic for its racism and sexism, especially for content that is seen as Islamophobic.

In a [letter](#) to PEN's Executive Director, writer Deborah Eisenberg proposes that the notion of equal opportunity offence is not possible unless the "targets' of offence occupy an equal position" within a given culture. Charlie Hebdo's cartoons of Muhammed, she argues, humiliate a population of French Muslims who are "already embattled, marginalized, impoverished, and victimized".

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Novelist Salman Rushdie has unique experience of persecution given the years he spent in hiding after the Ayatollah Khomeini [issued a fatwa](#) against him. In a [condemnatory tweet](#), Rushdie described the key dissenting writers as “Six Authors in Search of a bit of Character”.

The list of writers has since grown to include 35 authors, who have [signed a letter](#) disassociating themselves from the PEN award.

This debate has prompted an erudite discussion about the limits of free speech and the point at which free expression no longer signifies bravery. There has been some reference to [neo-Nazi s](#), for example, as exemplars of free speech, but as obviously undeserving of praise for voicing their unpalatable opinions.

For Rushdie, the merits of Charlie Hebdo as a publication are almost irrelevant. What is of sole importance is that “people have been murdered for drawing pictures”. Freedom of expression must not come at the price of death no matter where any individual might perceive offence.

Continuing to “draw pictures” required a significant degree of courage. The Charlie Hebdo office was [firebombed in 2011](#). Editor Stéphane Charbonnier, who was killed in the massacre, received numerous death threats and lived under police protection.

The week after the attack, remaining staff published [the next issue](#) to schedule. It featured a caricature of Muhammed, repeating the very act that allegedly motivated the massacre. The usual [print-run](#) of 60,000 copies swelled to 5 million copies, as French people rallied to support the notion of free speech.

If the content of Charlie Hebdo is relevant in determining whether it deserves to receive the PEN award, then it is important to consider it within its cultural context.

The newspaper is a left-wing, anti-religious publication. A glance at some of its most offensive-looking cover cartoons suggests some highly problematic elements of racism and sexism.

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However, as several commentators and [one website devoted to the topic](#) explain, familiarity with the style of satire being employed shows there is a strong criticism of homophobia, racism, and gender inequality in the publication. This does not mean that “racist tropes” or stereotypes are not inherent in Charlie Hebdo,

[as Max Fisher shows](#)

. Yet we could equally say the same about seemingly innocuous cultural products as Disney animated films.

Without wishing to support [“the right to be a bigot”](#), the position of the dissenting PEN writers, which differentiates worthwhile kinds of free speech based upon subjective notions of offence, is difficult to uphold.

Charlie Hebdo may have targeted marginalised people in its aim at equal-opportunity offence. Yet it also undoubtedly embodies courage with respect to freedom of expression.

Editor Charbonnier clearly knew there was some risk entailed in satirising religion. Two years ago [he told La Monde](#), “I’d rather die standing than live on my knees”. It is this commitment that PEN seems to be commending, rather than the relative merits of each Charlie Hebdo article or cartoon.

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