

Writer's Block

by [James A. Tweedie](#) (January 2024)



Two Men at a Table– Erich Heckel, 1912

My book agent shook his head sadly.

“I’m sorry, but the publisher can’t accept the manuscript for *The Man from India* as written.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means she’s willing to give it another chance if you make a few changes.”

"Like what, for example?"

"She says you've got to change the name from "Ayer's Rock" to "Uluru."

"I understand," I replied, "but the story is set ninety years ago when everyone called it 'Ayer's Rock.' It would be historically inaccurate to call it Uluru."

"She says the old name is offensive to the Aboriginal community and it's important to be culturally sensitive."

"Well, I'm willing to make the change if that's what it takes to get the book published."

"That's a start. But she also says the section where your character—what's his name?"

"Conrad Marchbank."

"Right. Where he climbs Ayer's ... I mean when he climbs Uluru. That needs to come out."

"Look," I said. "I know it's not allowed anymore and I know Aboriginal people in Central Australia believe climbing the Rock is a desecration of a sacred place, but I actually raise the issue in the story even though tens of thousands of people were climbing it every year back then, and were still doing it until recently. I can't take it out. It's central to the story. It's where Conrad has his first experience of a spiritual awakening—one that leads him to seek out an Aboriginal Elder for understanding and guidance."

"Sandra—that's the editor's name—Sandra says that part has to come out, too. Because you're not an Aborigine, you can't create an Aboriginal character and pretend to speak for him. That's considered cultural appropriation."

"But I didn't create the character! He was a real person I actually met. I changed his name, though, since the book is

fiction.”

“I’m glad you brought that up since you can’t use his name, either.”

“Why not? It’s a made-up name.”

“Yes, but towards the end of the book you mention that he dies and in some Australian indigenous cultures the names of those who have recently died are not mentioned for a period of time. There are some who might be offended if you referred to him by name—even a fictional one. It would be culturally inappropriate.”

“Yes, but the only time I use his name is when he’s still living.”

“I know, but he’s dead now so the name has to go. And speaking of names, she doesn’t like the name Conrad Marchbank, either. She says it sounds too ‘British colonial,’ too white and too upper class.”

“But he IS British,” I cried, “and ninety years ago India WAS a colony and, in any case, he IS white and upper class—that’s the whole point of the book—how he comes to recognize the social, racial, and economic privilege he enjoys as an upper caste member of an oppressive society and then spends the second half of the book trying to leverage that privilege to initiate positive, proactive social change after he returns to England.”

“Sandra says that part has to come out, too. It’s too condescending to show a white male trying to help people of color. She suggests you change Conrad to an Ethiopian immigrant who becomes a British citizen, travels to India, sees how exploitive and oppressive British colonialism is, and brings that sharpened moral conscience back to England where he stirs up a social movement that sweeps the country and drives the standing Parliamentary government from power.”

"I couldn't do that even if I wanted to," I said. "You've told me that I can't project myself as a white male onto a non-white character. If I accept that, I'll end up with a book where all the characters are white."

"No," my agent sighed. "They would only be white MALES, because you can't project your white maleness onto a female character, either. What would that be called? 'Sexual appropriation?' But that doesn't sound right."

"How about 'gender appropriation?'"

"That sound better. It's important to get the terminology correct since everybody seems to be offended by everything these days."

"Even Sandra?" I asked. "Is she by any chance white?"

"I believe so, yes."

"Then why is she identifying with offense taken by people of color and trying to mitigate it in the books she publishes? Isn't that condescending, too? Along with a hint of a transference of cultural identity?"

"Who knows," my agent replied with a shrug. "It's just the way things are and there's really nothing we can do about it except to acknowledge our personal and collective racism and relinquish as much of our privilege and power as we can."

"So," I said. "You're going to step down as a literary agent because your position is sustained by systemic racism through leveraging your white male privilege?"

"No," he said. "You don't understand. It doesn't apply to me or to Sandra. At the moment, it only applies to you. We're talking about your book."

"Okay," I sighed. "So, if I'm going to have any chance of getting my book published, I'm going to have to change my lead

character into a white male Ethiopian immigrant?"

My agent slowly shook his head before adding, "I know it sounds strange, but that won't work, either."

"And why not?"

"Because the book will smack of patriarchal, misogynist, white supremacist racism if all your characters are white males."

"But ... " I stammered.

"I know," sighed my agent "it's Catch-22 all over again."

"What if I wrote a historical novel showing the effect that Che Guevara's medical degree had on the success of the Cuban Revolution?"

"You're not Latino, but if you were able to avoid any signs of cultural, ideological, or racial bias against him or the Revolution, I think you might have a chance on getting it published."

"As long as I refer to him as "Dr. Guevara," right?"

"Sounds good. When it's finished, give me a copy so I can pass it on to Sandra. You never know."

"That's one way to put it," I said.

[Table of Contents](#)

James A. Tweedie has lived in the United States, Scotland, and Australia, and is presently in Washington State. To date, he has published six novels, three collections of poetry, and one collection of short stories. His stories have appeared in regional and national anthologies both online and in print

while his poetry has been featured nationally and internationally. James' prose has been recognized with two Silver Awards from Writers of Tomorrow and a First-Place prize in the inaugural Edinburgh Festival Flash Fiction Contest. His poetry has earned him a Laureate's Choice Award in the 2021 Maria W. Faust Sonnet Contest, Winner in the 2022 100 Days of Dante Poetry Contest, First Place in the 2021 *Society of Classical Poets* International Poetry Competition, and the Quarterly Prize for Best Poem from *The Lyric*.

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