

Dr. Seuss publishers unleash controversy over legacy of famed children's author

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More than 29 years after his death, children's author Dr. Seuss, the pen name of Theodore Seuss Geisel, has had his catalogue "sanitised" by his estate publishers, Dr. Seuss Enterprises, with six books permanently removed because they are deemed to "portray people in ways that are hurtful and wrong."

The six titles that have been removed span four decades: *And to Think that I Saw It on Mulberry Street* (1937), *McElligot's Pool* (1941, finished 1947), *If I Ran the Zoo* (1950), *Scrambled Eggs Super!* (1953), *On Beyond Zebra* (1955) and *The Cat's Quizzer* (1976). The reason cited has been cartoon images, drawn by Geisel himself, that are considered derogatory or insensitive, as in the case of a sketch of a Chinese man included towards the end of *Mulberry Street*, the first of his successful series of children's books.

That Seuss found his métier in 1937 was recognised by noted British children's author Beatrix Potter (*The Tale of Peter Rabbit* and many others) when she received a copy of *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street*. Potter judged it the "cleverest book I have met with for many years. The swing and merriment of the pictures and the natural truthful simplicity of the untruthfulness ... Dr Seuss does it thoroughly!" This early promise was to fully materialise later and enabled generations of children and their parents to explore imaginary linguistic realms, with accompanying original illustrations.

In response to the controversy, Mandy, an Australian elementary school educator, recently explained her reaction to *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street*: "I want to use it to encourage young writers in Grade Prep, to see themselves as authors, how to grow an idea.

"It touches on the fact," she went on, "that [in the book] Dad doesn't like Marco being so imaginative—now we're more likely to encourage that sort of imagination.

"It's a great model of how you can expand an idea—it's very deliberate. The theme across *Mulberry Street*—he has to pare it back again for his dad at the end of the story—it's a great example of what writers do."

She spoke about the stereotype of the Chinese man with sticks which features toward the end: "It is a busy page—it is the busiest page. It could create discussion now of historical difference—and isn't it great that we don't put out those differences now?"

"How are children supposed to have an understanding of historical change—you can challenge racism in a respectful way. Examples to challenge it, and to be able to challenge it—we've got

a better attitude—it's an important conversation. You have to read to think."

One only needs to contrast this intelligent and humane approach to Dr. Seuss's work with the ongoing political-ideological tug of war in the US. Issues in the latter include whether the books should be condemned as racist, whether the estate's action is censorship and the efforts of the ultra-right to claim Seuss for themselves—a political obscenity given his long record as a liberal opponent of anti-Semitism and bigotry in all its forms, including an entire volume collecting stories attacking racial stereotyping.

Fox News and other Murdoch media deliberately poisoned the controversy by an exaggerated focus on what they claimed was "book burning" and "cancel culture," while the advocates of identity politics appointed themselves the arbiters of right and wrong for everything in Dr. Seuss down to the Cat in the Hat's bowtie.

As the wrangling continued and sent ripples internationally, 1.2 million copies of his books have been sold in America alone since the announcement of the withdrawal, with Seuss books at one point occupying nine of the top 10 slots in the bestsellers' list.

In fact, the remarkable scale and quality of Dr. Seuss's literary efforts needs to be understood within an overview of his life, as well as the historical context he worked in, or the real political implications can be buried.

In the early 1940s, after years of working in advertising and having already published *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street* and *Horton Hatches the Egg* (1940), Geisel (born in Springfield, Massachusetts in 1904) began working as a political cartoonist for *PM*, the liberal daily newspaper.

Joining the army in 1943, Geisel eventually took charge of the Animation Department of the Air Force's First Motion Picture Unit. Working under Hollywood director Frank Capra, Geisel wrote the short propaganda films *Your Job in Germany* and *Our Job in Japan*. Geisel found Capra a congenial mentor, but their subsequent ideological and artistic paths diverged with the emergence of McCarthyism.

As a cartoonist, Geisel criticised the Dies Committee (which later became the House Un-American Activities Committee, HUAC) in 1942, and by 1947 he was opposing the anticommunist purges and witchhunting as HUAC held a series of hearings into "subversives" in the film industry.

A cartoon in the satirical magazine *Judge* showed his sympathy for the accused and his opposition to the blacklist being prepared,

although the magazine's days were numbered. Capra was to collaborate with the witchhunt, giving secret testimony to the FBI.

Earlier in the war, under the influence of anti-Japanese hysteria, Geisel had penned a racist cartoon in *PM* in support of the mass internment of Japanese Americans by the Roosevelt administration. This was the period when most liberals supported the roundup, a position reinforced by the American Communist Party, which went so far as to support the 1945 atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Given the censorship and intellectual conformism of the 1950s, with the false equation of Stalinism and communism, Geisel-Seuss turned away from political cartoons and his attempts at moviemaking to focus on the genre of children's literature, especially as it turned out, comic verse. He remarked in 1952 that "we maverick humorists prefer to write exclusively for children."

The author-cartoonist was an iconoclast, given to challenging rather than reinforcing conformity, a feature of many of his children's books. He doggedly pursued a democratic goal that is under attack today in the context of the contemporary business model of education—in other words, he valued teaching masses of children to read and write while *fostering* rather than *stifling* their capacity for critical thinking.

Geisel later reassessed his support for the anti-Japanese campaign of World War II, traveling to Japan to discuss with educational professionals and dedicating *Horton Hears a Who!* to a professor he met in Kyoto.

Visiting Utah, he was intrigued by the three-year-old son of an admirer, who could recite an entire Seuss book before he was old enough to read. He began to question the accepted age at which children could be reached through writing.

In 1955, one educational theorist wrote of his verse: "Sound! It's a tantalizing trickster when Seuss manipulates it. It's as if the words so neatly pinned down to the pages by clean, clear type were just on tip-toe with excitement to be turned loose by being read aloud."

From his dual concern for imagination and literacy was spawned, on a whimsical challenge, the world-famous *The Cat in the Hat* (1957). Geisel was able to help knock out formal dependence on the lifeless primers that had bedeviled elementary school reading classes in advanced capitalist countries.

The Sneetches, a short story he wrote in 1953, presented a strong message against intolerance and discrimination. Sneetches with stars on their bellies engaged in endless and ultimately futile efforts to assert their superiority over sneetches without stars.

*And really, it's sort of a shame,
For except for those stars, every Sneetch is the same.*

Clearly intended as an attack on the Nazis and anti-Semitism, it was published as a book in 1961 together with *The Zax* and other stories, in what amounted to a gesture of support for the Civil Rights movement then sweeping the South.

Theodore Geisel died in September 1991, having established himself as the preeminent author of children's books aimed at beginning and early readers. By then, however, American liberalism was shifting sharply to the right, as the ruling elite, gripped by deepening economic crisis and the declining world position of American imperialism, ditched the limited social

reforms of the Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal and Lyndon Johnson's Great Society.

Repudiating equality as the driving force of the struggles and urban uprisings of the 1960s, the Democratic Party sought to divert attention from the basic class division in society and to elevate a privileged section within the African American population to serve as a buffer. It sought to cultivate a base within privileged sections of the upper middle class, who wanted to grasp a bigger share of the wealth of the top 10 percent, using race, gender and sexual orientation.

This process penetrated deeply into American culture, affecting even so seemingly innocent a subject as children's literature. Thus, Philip Nel, author of the book *Dr. Seuss, American Icon* (2003), now promotes Black Lives Matter, which he claims has "brought into focus the need for diverse books for young readers." He attacks what he calls "the man of his time" narrative, employed in defence of Geisel/Seuss.

While advocates for "diversity" have spearheaded the attack on Dr. Seuss for his alleged racial insensitivity, open defenders of racism and gender bias, like the fascistic Sen. Ted Cruz, Texas Republican, are allowed to posture as opponents of censorship and the "book-burning" attack on the children's author.

Dr. Seuss is not a literary spokesman for "American hegemony" and a modern "white man's burden," as his most hyperbolic opponents on the pseudo-left now claim—citing white hunters capturing African elephants in the *Horton* books. One might ask, if one had the slightest knowledge of history, let alone an imagination, how else would an elephant get to America in 1940?

On the contrary, Geisel's "left" sensibilities, however impaired by the historical period through which he lived, tended to set him at odds with the "civilising" mission of the so-called "American Century." And they helped him provide the light touch and the positive encouragement that can help a young reader/listener find access into the wide world of books. For many millions internationally Dr. Seuss provided and will continue to provide that open sesame.



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