

The Impact of Dr. Seuss on the Modern Library

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INFO 284: History of Libraries in the U.S.

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March 24th, 2021

Introduction

Universally recognized, Dr. Seuss's children's books have been heralded by parents, educators, and children across the world. While Dr. Seuss can be credited with having created a new kind of reading primer to entice young readers, his earlier works were not nearly so child friendly (Nel, 31). Many are aware of Seuss's racist depictions of Japanese people in his World War II propaganda, and some may even be aware of his sexist work for the Dartmouth college paper, Jack-O-Lantern. One could easily dismiss these as the writings by an adult, meant for adults, not for the consumption of children, however over his fifty-year-long career, Seuss let his biases and racial opinions leak into his picture books.

While I believe that Seuss's perspective on non-white individuals changed over time, there is no denying that it peppered much of the work throughout his careers. We can look at his most thoughtful books, such as *The Lorax* which features a message of environmental protection, or *Horton Hears a Who*, from which we receive that ever-present chorus of "A person's a person, no matter how small," but these are works that do not define all of Seuss's long career. Behind the friendly face of Dr. Seuss is Theodor Geisel, a man with flaws, biases, and harmful viewpoints. Dr. Seuss was the face of Read Across America Day for twenty years, from 1997-2017, and while he is no longer official sponsored by Read Across America Day, his presence is still strong in celebrations by teachers and librarians across the country. His works are generally strong and entertaining to read, but this should not preclude audiences from addressing and acknowledging his problematic past. In this paper, I would like to discuss Geisel's history as an author, the recent 2021 upheaval of his "cancelled" works, and how libraries can appreciate his literature, while making room for materials that better represent modern American children. This

paper is not meant to demonize Geisel, but rather to educate readers on the motivation behind the recent controversial decision from Dr. Seuss Enterprises by examining Geisel's history.

Geisel went through a variety of pseudonyms throughout his career, with "Dr. Seuss" being his most well-known. It can be a challenge to separate the man from the writer, and so Geisel and Dr. Seuss will be used interchangeably throughout this paper, generally when referring to his personal and professional life, respectively.

Literature Review and Research Methodologies

As the subject of the "cancellation" of Dr. Seuss is fairly new, it has not yet been widely written on in an academic sense. Geisel has been the subject of speculation in recent years, particularly regarding his racial insensitivity and the lack of female characters in his books. While the more modern information for this research paper was primarily pulled from online news articles, many of the sources cited regarding Geisel himself are peer-reviewed.

Two texts that were extremely helpful in gathering information on Geisel include Phillip Nel's *Was the Cat in the Hat Black?* and Brian Jay Jones's *Becoming Dr. Seuss*. Both books were well-researched, with Jones's biography spanning the whole of Geisel's life and Nel's including examples that extended beyond Geisel's work. Jones's work serves as the primary source for the section below titled "Introduction to Seuss", which offers a "crash course" in Geisel's life.

While researching, it became quickly apparent that Jones takes a rosier view of Geisel, sometimes skirting what was explicit racism on Geisel's part as "not intentionally cruel- there were no jokes about slavery, lynching, or other kinds of violence- but Geisel's art and language played squarely into the negative racial stereotypes so pervasive in the mainstream culture of the

era,” (2019, p. 92). Make no mistake- Geisel’s art and comments are extremely racist, and Jones attempts to soften that blow by redirecting the reader, reminding them that “only a small number [of cartoons drawn by Geisel] are truly racially insensitive- there are probably more misogynistic cartoons and cartoons about drinking,” (2019, p. 93). Replacing one instance of bigotry with another does not erase the harm of either. While Jones’s book is well-researched and extremely thorough regarding Geisel’s personal history, he could likely be described as an admirer of Geisel, continuing to defend the author (as well as Dr. Seuss Enterprises) when asked about his opinion on the ceasing of publication of six Dr. Seuss books (Jones, 2021). Much of Jones’s work is unfortunately filled with sentiments that essentially boil down to excusing Seuss because he was using the common language of the time, suggesting that he relied on caricatures because he was a lazy artist, and even suggesting that artists of color were doing the same thing. (2019, pp. 92-93). In many ways, I agree with Jones: Geisel *did* get better as time went on, but that should not excuse or dismiss his previous (and multiple) actions and statements. The excuse of “That’s just what was normal back then,” should not be relied upon so heavily, particularly when one considers that it is *not* the language that *everyone* used. Social acceptability does not equate to something being morally right or wrong.

One article that was consulted frequently is Ishizuka and Stephen’s 2019 article “The Cat is Out of the Bag: Orientalism, Anti-Blackness, and White Supremacy in Dr. Seuss’s Children’s Books”. This article was published in *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature*, a journal hosted by St. Catherine University’s Master of Library and Information Science Program and University. RDYL is a peer-reviewed journal that was established 2016 that hosts two journal issues a year, published online to make them accessible to all. Ishizuka and Stephens also use Phillip Nel’s work as a reference throughout the article.

Research for this paper was done through reading articles and biographies on Seuss and cross-referencing them with one another, as well as examining Seuss's original works, both those that are ceasing publication and those that are still widely circulated. Articles related to Read Across America Day were analyzed as well, to find others with the opinion that while Dr. Seuss does not necessarily need to be censored or removed from libraries, it is perfectly acceptable to de-emphasize his books to make room for other literature.

Introduction to Seuss

Theodor Geisel was born March 2nd, 1904, in Springfield Massachusetts. The son of a successful brewer, Geisel had a happy childhood and young adulthood. During his years at Dartmouth, he explored an interest in writing and illustrating, creating comics for the college's "funny" papers, Jack-O-Lantern (often shortened to Jack-O). After graduating and pursuing a doctoral degree at Oxford, he met his future wife, Helen, who encouraged him to write and illustrate as a career. With the success of his first published children's book *And to Think that I Saw it on Mulberry Street*, Seuss had cemented his career as an illustrator. He worked throughout World War II, creating propaganda supporting American troops and denouncing Hitler, Mussolini, and the entire population of Japan. These anti-Japanese sentiments came back to haunt Geisel a decade later, who reportedly wrote *Horton Hears a Who* as an apology for the hurtful statements he made during the war. It should be mentioned that there was never an official apology from Geisel regarding his hurtful words (Ishizuka and Stephens, 2019, p. 18).

In 1957, with the help of Phyllis Cerf and his wife Helen, Geisel established Beginner Books, a publishing company which would soon be purchased by Randomhouse, which sought to publish books for young readers. With the introduction of *The Cat in the Hat*, Beginner Books was a massive success, leading to even greater recognition of Dr. Seuss. After Helen committed

suicide in 1967, Geisel remarried Audrey Dimond, a woman he had been having an affair with, less than a year later. Dimond took over Helen's role at Beginner Books and served as a frequent inspiration for Geisel.

Geisel passed away in 1991, receiving multiple posthumous awards and the American Library Association's establishment of the Theodor Seuss Geisel Award, which honors American authors and illustrators who create books that "demonstrate creativity and imagination to engage children in reading," (ALA, 2020).

The "Cancellation" of Seuss and Other Authors

March 2nd, 2021 marked Read Across America, a common school and library holiday across the country, often kicking off a variety of children's reading programs in libraries. March 2nd also marks the birthday of Theodor Geisel. It is common for libraries and schools to use Dr. Seuss's birthday to help guide their theme for Read Across America Day. On March 2nd 2021, Dr. Seuss Enterprises shared the following statement:

"Today, on Dr. Seuss's Birthday, Dr. Seuss Enterprises celebrates reading and also our mission of supporting all children and families with messages of hope, inspiration, inclusion, and friendship.

We are committed to action. To that end, Dr. Seuss Enterprises, working with a panel of experts, including educators, reviewed our catalog of titles and made the decision last year to cease publication and licensing of the following titles: *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street*, *If I Ran the Zoo*, *McElligot's Pool*, *On Beyond Zebra!*, *Scrambled Eggs Super!*, and *The Cat's Quizzer*. These books portray people in ways that are hurtful and wrong.

Ceasing sales of these books is only part of our commitment and our broader plan to ensure Dr. Seuss Enterprises's catalog represents and supports all communities and families.

This statement was met with great uproar, with some people praising the decision, indicating that there were far better books to read in the Seuss library, to others criticizing it on the basis of

“cancel culture” (Pratt, 2021). The outrage among Seuss fans was loud, with misinformation quickly spread about which books were no longer being sold and going so far as to compare the “cancellation” of Seuss to the celebration of the explicit (and not marketed to children) 2020 song “WAP” by Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion (Sadeghi, 2021).

Both public libraries and school libraries met this news with different approaches. Some, such as Loudoun County Public Schools, located in Virginia, are de-emphasizing Seuss’s works, particularly when related to Read Across America Day (Asmelash, 2021). As discussed further below, Seuss has long been connected to Read Across America Day, with his recognizable characters encouraging young people to read. Other libraries, such as the Chattanooga Public Library chose to reclassify and relocate the six books to their non-fiction young adult section for the purpose of scholarly research (Aguilar, 2021). Some libraries stated they would not be changing anything about how they present the books, citing the ALA’s “Freedom to Read” statement (O’kane, 2021).

While many saw this move as an attack on Seuss (orchestrated by his own company), and bowing to “cancel culture”, it is important to remember that this is not the first time a children’s author has been called out for insensitivity in their works. J. K. Rowling, author of the Harry Potter series, has been considered “cancelled” for her transphobic statements and racist, stereotypical depictions of native people in *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* (Sepsey, 2016). Roald Dahl, whose books have been challenged for a variety of reasons, remains a hugely popular author of children’s books, but he has come under fire before for his blatant racism, both in the form of anti-Semitic remarks and racist depictions of Black people in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (Gershon, 2020). In 2018, the Association for Library Service to Children chose to rename the “Laura Ingalls Wilder Award” to the “Children’s Literature Legacy Award”

in an effort to make the award more inclusive and remove the shadow of racism over the original name (Dankowski, 2018). Wilder, who wrote the *Little House* series has been long criticized for her depictions of Native people.

Despite all these instances of authors being critiqued for their racism in books, their books are still widely popular. Roald Dahl still occupies shelves and the *Little House* series certainly is not going anywhere. Some are concerned that cancel culture is coming after Dr. Seuss, but frankly, he is in no real danger. Even J.K. Rowling, who is a modern author still alive and capable of responding to her criticism, is in no danger of losing her entire audience. Many historians and authors believe that these books can and should continue to be read, but with the heavy reminder that there are contextual reasons for the depictions within. Erasing passages and replacing them with “washed” versions, as was done with the Nancy Drew reprints of the 1950’s, is not the solution either (Ruggirello, 2018).

Opinion on Seuss and Dr. Seuss Enterprise’s decision

It is easy to search through Geisel’s long history and endless illustrations and cartoons, pointing fingers at everything problematic and denouncing him a villain, but this thinking is not necessarily productive. Geisel made many mistakes and said and wrote hurtful things, and while I do not believe in simply writing it off as “That’s just how it was back then,” we have the awareness that his writing came from a context and viewpoint that was vastly different than the commonly held beliefs of today. There was not a push for diverse children’s literature in the mid-1900’s. This is not to excuse Geisel’s shortcomings, but to offer an explanation for them, as Geisel was a man who did somewhat adjust his viewpoints with age and experience, as many of us do. In 1978, Geisel himself would quietly change a detail in the now-defunct *And to Think that I Saw it on Mulberry Street*, changing the slur “Chinaman” to “Chinese man”, and removing

the character's ponytail and yellow skin tone (Jones, 2019, p. 418). While this is not the response that I would expect today, I think that by making that change, Geisel took a step in the right direction. In my eyes, Dr. Seuss Enterprise's decision to remove the six books is the 2021 equivalent to Geisel quietly adjusting the text in one of his books forty years after its initial publishing.

According to Ishizuka and Stephens (2019), Geisel's work features White supremacy and implicit bias. In their analysis of fifty Dr. Seuss books, they found that only 2% of the human characters within those books (45 out of 2,240) were people of color, and of those 45 characters, two represented "African" characters (identified as such through the text), with the remaining 43 representing Asian characters with a strong alignment towards "Orientalism" (Ishizuka and Stephens, 2019, pp. 13-14). Ishizuka and Stephens also make note that the characters of color (who were all male) were "only presented in subservient, exotified, or dehumanized roles" (2019, p. 14). Between Geisel's early comics, his anti-Japanese propaganda, and his children's books, there is plenty of evidence of his implicit (and occasionally explicit) bias.

Geisel's issues did not lie solely with race, but with his view of women as well. Jones notes in his 2019 biography of Seuss, that the writer "considered himself a feminist", although many critics disagreed with this (p. 419). His books were often male-dominated, and those who did feature female characters often introduced them as characters who were either evil or uncreative, "such as the lazy bird Mayzie in *Horton Hatches the Egg*," (Jones, 2019, p. 419). Ishizuka and Stephens also note that almost none of Seuss's books feature female protagonists and zero of the fifty they examined feature women of color in any capacity (2019, p. 33).

One question that many people have in light of the 2021 statement is where does this leave Dr. Seuss? Can children still enjoy his stories, or is he "cancelled" for good? Theodor

Geisel was an imperfect man, and sometimes this revelation can feel shocking and uncomfortable to people. While the goal of Dr. Seuss Enterprises was to make children and families of color feel respected and heard, it came at the cost of making some people feel defensive and upset. This is the cost of change, and I think it is a worthwhile change. I do not believe that Geisel was a hateful man, and I do not believe his books should be tossed in the trash nor should they be heralded for decades to come. Dr. Seuss changed how Americans looked at children's literature, changing it for the better and making it more fun and accessible to young readers, but he is not the only one. There are other authors writing excellent literature for children who do not feel the need to rely on racial stereotypes or sexist profiling. I firmly believe that it is time for Dr. Seuss to step down and make room for others.

Looking to the Future

Seuss and his characters were the face of Read Across America for twenty years, and it is time to shake things up. Facing a need for more diverse children's literature, I believe it is time for children's libraries everywhere to better promote literature that represents children from all across our country. Instead of focusing on the work of a single author, why not bring in characters across novels written by a multitude of authors? This way, we could cover many bases and make sure that children from all kinds of backgrounds would feel welcomed. If that is over-complicated and only one author may be chosen to be the "mascot", then let us look to someone more modern. Seuss was an easy choice because of his recognizable characters and prolific nature, but he is not the only prolific picture book writer with a cast of recognizable characters. Mo Willems, multiple award winner of the Caldecott Honor, the Carnegie Medal, and the Theodor Seuss Geisel Medal, has written and illustrated several hugely popular books, including the *Elephant and Piggie* series, the *Knuffle Bunny* series, and the *Pigeon* series. These are

characters that many American children instantly recognize, holding a similar position to the well-known characters of the Cat in the Hat or the Lorax.

It should be noted that the National Education Association (NEA) has been working together with Read Across America (RAA) to adjust their theming to better reflect present-day needs. When you visit their website, gone are the Seuss characters, and in their place are suggestions for multicultural literature. The NEA and RAA are doing their part to transition to a model that promotes literacy and multicultural appreciation at the same time, but they cannot facilitate Read Across America Day celebrations across the entire country. Many educators and library staff have spent decades working under the Seuss model, and they might not be aware of the need for change. I believe that Ishizuka and Stephens put it best in the final part of the 2019 study: “While the NEA has taken steps to rebrand RAA, it is teachers, school administrators, and parents who will be creating and enacting change in their classrooms, school districts, and homes,” (p. 36). I believe that it is in the hands of educators (including teachers and librarians) to make sure that families are aware of the vast array of diverse children’s literature.

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