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Dr. Seuss's Progressive Politics

by Peter Dreier

WHO HASN'T READ DR. SEUSS? AS KIDS AND AS parents, most Americans know all about the Cat in the Hat, Yertle the Turtle, and many other of Seuss's colorful characters. What some may not know is that despite his popular image as a kindly cartoonist for kids, Theodor Geisel, writing under the pen name "Dr. Seuss," was also a progressive and a moralist whose views suffuse his books. Some of his books use ridicule, satire, wordplay, nonsense words, and wild drawings to take aim at bullies, hypocrites, and demagogues.

In the early 1940s, before many Americans were aware of the calamity confronting Europe's Jews, Geisel—a Lutheran who grew up in a tight-knit German American community in Springfield, Massachusetts—drew editorial cartoons for *PM*, the progressive daily newspaper in New York, warning readers about Hitler and anti-Semitism and attacking the "America First" isolationists who turned a blind eye to the rise of fascism and the Holocaust.

His most popular children's books included parables about racism, anti-Semitism, the arms race, and the environment. But, equally important, he used his pen to encourage youngsters to challenge bullies and injustice. Generations of progressive activists may not trace their political views to their early exposure to Dr. Seuss, but without doubt this shy, brilliant genius played a role in sensitizing them to abuses of power.

Geisel (1904-1991) was, and remains two decades after his death, the world's most popular writer of modern children's books. He wrote and illustrated forty-four children's books characterized by memorable rhymes, whimsical characters, and exuberant drawings that encouraged generations of children to love reading and expand their vocabularies. His books, including his two most popular stories (*The Cat in the Hat* and *Green Eggs and Ham*), have been translated into more than fifteen languages and sold over 200 million copies. They have been adapted into feature films, TV specials, and a Broadway musical. He earned two Academy Awards, two Emmy Awards, a Peabody Award, and the Pulitzer Prize.

Geisel believed that children's books should be both entertaining and educational. He thought, as he wrote in a 1960 article for the *Los Angeles Times*, that writers of

"With their snoots in the air," the Star-Belly Sneetches used to "snort, 'We'll have nothing to do with the Plain-Belly sort!"

But by the end of Dr. Seuss's The Sneetches and Other Stories, the Sneetches have realized the absurdity of their bigotry.

This profile of Theodor Geisel/Dr. Seuss is drawn from Peter Dreier's next book, The 100 Greatest Americans of the 20th Century: A Social Justice Hall of Fame, which Nation Books will publish in early 2012. Dreier is professor of politics and chair of the Urban and Environmental Policy department at Occidental College in Los Angeles.

children's books should "talk, not down to them as kiddies, but talk to them clearly and honestly as equals."

From Insecticide Ads to Children's Books

GEISEL'S CAREER AS A CHILDREN'S BOOK AUTHOR HAPPENED BY ACCIDENT, ONE OF those twists of fate that occasionally change the course of history.

At Dartmouth College, Geisel served as editor-in-chief of the campus humor magazine. After graduating in 1925, he found some success submitting humorous articles and illustrations to different magazines, including *Judge*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Life*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Liberty*, using his pen name, Dr. Seuss. During the Depression, Geisel made his living drawing ads for General Electric, Standard Oil, NBC and other corporations. He achieved some notoriety for drawing advertisements for Flit, a popular insecticide. His Flit cartoons appeared not only in mass circulation magazines but also in newspapers, subways, and billboards. The slogan Geisel had created for the product—"Quick, Henry, the Flit,"—became a popular catchphrase, and the Flit advertising campaign became one of the most successful in history.

In 1931, an editor at Viking Press called Geisel and offered him a contract to illustrate a book of children's sayings, called *Boners*. The book sold well, and soon Geisel produced a sequel. Five years later, returning from Europe on a ship in rough waters and gale-force winds, Geisel began reciting words to the chugging rhythm of the ship's engines. He began saying, "And that is a story that no one can beat, and to think that I saw it on Mulberry Street," the name of a major thoroughfare in his hometown of Springfield. When he got back to New York, Geisel began writing and drawing a book that became *And to Think that I Saw It on Mulberry Street*. Despite his stellar reputation as an advertising illustrator, twenty-nine publishers rejected the book, in part because children's books in verse were out of style. Finally, in 1937, Geisel found a publisher for the book. It earned good reviews, especially for its illustrations, but sold poorly, as did his next several children's books.

Horton Hatches the Egg, published in 1940, was more successful, winning praise for its imaginative rhymes and drawings and its funny story about an elephant and a bird. *Horton* might have given Geisel the commercial boost he was hoping for, but he was preoccupied by the war in Europe, Hitler's Holocaust against the Jews, and America's need to prepare itself for war.

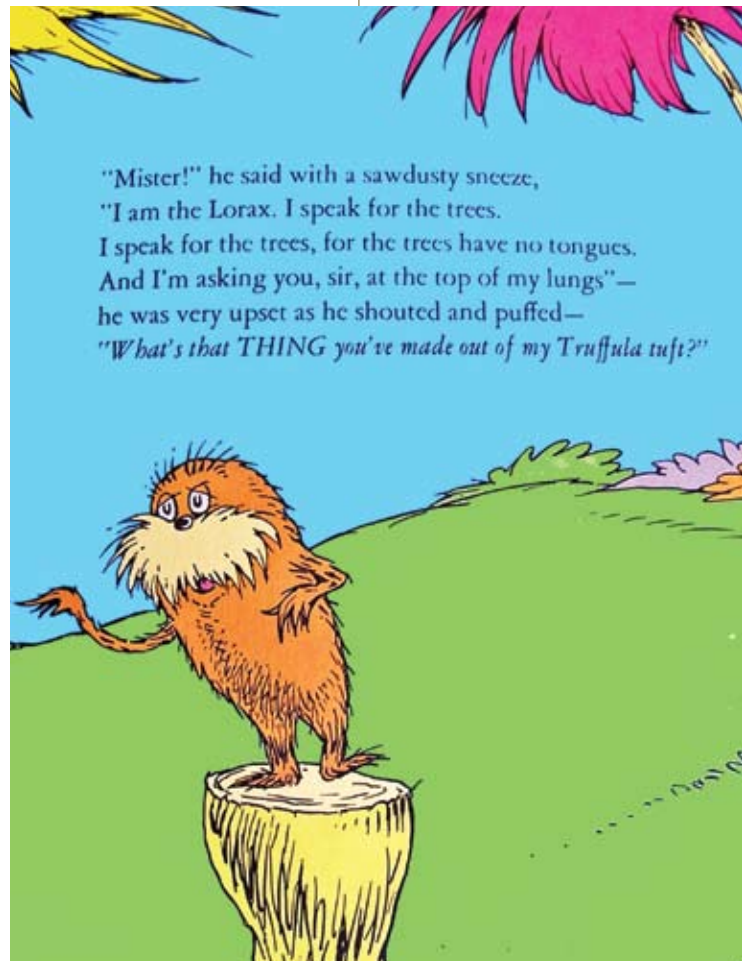
Left-Wing Editorial Cartoons

GEISEL PUT HIS CHILDREN'S BOOKS ON HOLD AND BECAME AN editorial cartoonist for the left-wing New York City daily newspaper *PM*, and then a war-time writer and illustrator for the U.S. government and the military, helping make propaganda and training films to support the war effort.

PM was a remarkable anomaly in the publishing world. It refused to accept advertising, included sections devoted to unions, women's issues, and civil rights, and was fervently pro-New Deal. The *PM* staff was filled with radicals, including I.F. Stone, one of the most talented muckraking journalists of the twentieth century. The tabloid paper "was against people who pushed other people around," Geisel explained. "I liked that."

It was at *PM*, where he drew over 400 cartoons during 1941 and 1942, that Geisel sharpened his political views as well as his artistry and his gift for humor. His cartoons viciously but humorously attacked Hitler and Mussolini. He bluntly criticized isolationists who opposed American entry into the war, especially the famed aviator

Dr. Seuss later described The Lorax as "straight propaganda"—a polemic against environmental destruction. Published less than a year after the first Earth Day, the book tells of a greedy manufacturer who regrets having clear-cut a beautiful forest of Truffula trees.



"Mister!" he said with a sawdusty sneeze,
"I am the Lorax. I speak for the trees.
I speak for the trees, for the trees have no tongues.
And I'm asking you, sir, at the top of my lungs"—
he was very upset as he shouted and puffed—
"What's that THING you've made out of my Truffula tuft?"



Theodor Geisel works on a drawing for How the Grinch Stole Christmas.

(and Hitler booster) Charles Lindbergh and right-wing radio priest Father Charles Coughlin—both of whom were anti-Semites—and Senator Gerald Nye of North Dakota, an isolationist leader.

Geisel was one of the few editorial voices to decry the U.S. military's racial segregation policies. He used his cartoons to challenge racism at home against Jews and blacks, union-busting, and corporate greed, which he thought divided the country and hurt the war effort.

Racist WWII-Era Portrayals of Japanese People

DURING WORLD WAR II, AMERICAN NEWSPAPERS WERE, UNDERSTANDABLY, filled with editorials and cartoons using caricature, mockery, and sarcasm to depict Japanese and German leaders and people. But Geisel's cartoons reveal that he was swept up by anti-Japanese hysteria that included blatant racism. He drew a series of cartoons that used familiar stereotypes of Japanese citizens and Japanese Americans, many of whom would be sent to internment camps during the war. As Richard Minear noted in his book, *Dr. Seuss Goes to War: The World War II Editorial Cartoons of Theodor Seuss Geisel*, Geisel's depictions of Hitler are clearly recognizable, drawn with features that give the

German dictator a unique look. In contrast, his cartoons of Emperor Hirohito and General Tojo ignore their distinctive attributes and portray them as Japanese stereotypes with pig snouts, buck teeth, thick glasses, and squinted eyes. Even more troubling is a cartoon published on February 13, 1942, that depicts all Japanese Americans as traitors to the United States. Geisel drew a long line of smiling Japanese Americans, descending down the coast from Washington and Oregon to California, waiting to pick up a package of TNT from a building called "Honorable 5th Column." The caption explains that they are "waiting for the signal from home."

Suggested Reading

Dr. Seuss and Mr. Geisel: A Biography by Judith and Neil Morgan (Da Capo Press, 1996).

Dr. Seuss Goes to War: The World War II Editorial Cartoons of Theodor Seuss Geisel by Richard H. Minear (The New Press, 1999).

"No Matter How Small": The Democratic Imagination of Dr. Seuss" by Henry Jenkins in the anthology *Hop on Pop: The Politics and Pleasures of Popular Culture* (Duke University Press, 2002).

Dr. Seuss: American Icon by Philip Nel (Continuum, 2004).

Parables Against Bigotry, Despotism, and the Red Scare

PROGRESSIVE THEMES SHOW UP LATER IN MANY OF GEISEL'S BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS. Many Dr. Seuss books are about the misuse of power—by despots, kings, and other rulers, including the sometimes arbitrary authority of parents. In a university lecture in 1947—a decade before the Civil Rights Movement—Geisel urged would-be writers to avoid the racist stereotypes common in children's books. America "preaches equality but doesn't always practice it," he noted.

Geisel's children's books consistently reveal his sympathy with the weak and the powerless and his fury against bullies and despots. His books teach children to think about how to deal with an unfair world. Rather than instruct them, Geisel invites his young readers to consider what they should do when faced with injustice. Geisel believed children could understand these moral questions, but only rarely did he portray them in overtly political terms. Instead, he wrote, "when we have a moral, we try to tell it sideways."

After the war, Geisel occasionally submitted cartoons to publications, such as a 1947 drawing, published in the *New Republic*, depicting Uncle Sam looking in horror at Americans accusing each other of being communists, a clear statement of Geisel's anger at the nation's right-wing Red Scare hysteria, which soon spiraled into McCarthyism. But Geisel devoted almost all of his post-war career to writing children's books and quickly became a well-known and commercially successful author—thanks in part to the post-war baby boom. He was popular with parents, kids, and critics alike. First came *If I Ran the Zoo* (1950) and *Scrambled Eggs Super!* (1953).

Next came *Horton Hears a Who!* (1954), which was the first of Geisel's politically oriented children's books, written during the McCarthy era. *(continued on page 46)*

DR. SEUSS

(continued from page 30)

It features Horton the Elephant, who befriends tiny creatures (the “Whos”) whom he can’t see, but whom he can hear, thanks to his large ears. Horton rallies his neighbors to protect the endangered Who community. Horton agrees to protect the Whos, observing, in one of Geisel’s most famous lines, “even though you can’t see or hear them at all, a person’s a person, no matter how small.” The other animals ridicule Horton for believing in something that they can’t see or hear, but he remains loyal to the Whos. Horton urges the Whos to join together to make a big enough sound so that the jungle animals can hear them. That can happen, however, only if Jo-Jo, the “smallest of all” the Whos, speaks out. He has a responsibility to add his voice to save the entire community. Eventually he does so, and the Whos survive.

The Cat in the Hat

GEISEL WROTE HIS MOST FAMOUS book, *The Cat in the Hat*, in response to a challenge. In May 1954, *Life* magazine published an article about widespread illiteracy among school children, claiming that they were not learning to read because their books were boring. William Spaulding, an editor at Houghton Mifflin, asked Geisel to write a book using the 225 words that, he believed, all first-graders should be able to recognize. Spaulding challenged Geisel to “bring back a book children can’t put down.”

Within nine months, Geisel produced *The Cat in the Hat*. The book was an immediate success. It was lauded by educators and sold well. Written a decade before the upheavals of the 1960s, it can be seen as endorsing rebellion against authority. The book became the first in a series of Dr. Seuss’ Beginner Books that combined a simple vocabulary,

wonderful drawings, and imaginative stories and bizarre characters (many based on animals). He also continued to write books for older children. In quick succession, he wrote *On Beyond Zebra!* (1955), *If I Ran the Circus* (1956), *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* (1957), and *Green Eggs and Ham* (1960), which used only fifty words.

Burping Down Unjust Rulers, Fighting Anti-Semitism

IN SEVERAL EARLY BOOKS—INCLUDING *The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins* (1938), *The King's Stilts* (1939), and *Bartholomew and the Oobleck* (1949)—Geisel makes fun of the pretensions, foolishness, and arbitrary power of kings. His finest rendition of this theme is in *Yertle the Turtle* (1958). Yertle, king of the pond, stands atop his subjects in order to reach higher than the moon, indifferent to the suffering of those beneath him. In order to be “ruler of all that I see,” Yertle stacks up his subjects so he can reach higher and higher. Mack, the turtle at the very bottom of the pile, says: “Your Majesty, please / I don't like to complain / But down here below / We are feeling great pain / I know up on top / You are seeing great sights / But down at the bottom / We, too, should have rights.” Yertle just tells Mack to shut up. Frustrated and angry, Mack burps, shaking the carefully piled turtles, and Yertle falls into the mud. His rule ends and the turtles celebrate their freedom.

The story is clearly about Hitler's thirst for power, a topic that inspired some of Geisel's most powerful cartoons during his stint with *PM*. But Geisel is also saying that ordinary people can overthrow unjust rulers if they understand their own power. The story's final line reflects Geisel's democratic and anti-authoritarian political outlook: “And turtles, of course ... all the turtles are free / As turtles, and maybe, all creatures should be.”

The Sneetches (1961), inspired by the Protestant Geisel's opposition to anti-Semitism, exposes the absurdity of racial and religious bigotry. Sneetches are yellow bird-like creatures. Some Sneetches have a green star on their belly. They are

the “in” crowd and they look down on Sneetches who lack a green star, who are the outcasts. One day a “fix-it-up” chap named McBean appears with some strange machines. He offers the star-less Sneetches an opportunity to get a star by going through his “star on” machine, for three dollars each. This angers the star-bellied Sneetches, who no longer have a way to display their superiority. But McBean tells them that for ten dollars, they can use his “star off” machine, ridding themselves of their stars and thus, once again, differentiating themselves from the outcast group.

The competition escalates as McBean persuades each Sneetch group to run from one machine to the other, “until neither the Plain nor the Star-Bellies knew / Whether this one was that one or that one was this one / Or which one was what one or what one was who.” Eventually both groups of Sneetches run out of money. After McBean leaves, all the Sneetches realize that neither the plain-belly nor the star-belly Sneetch is superior. The story is an obvious allegory about racism and discrimination, clearly inspired by the yellow stars that the Nazis required Jews to wear on their clothing to identify them as Jewish.

Environmental Consciousness

THE LORAX (1971) APPEARED AS THE environmental movement was just emerging, less than a year after the first Earth Day. Geisel later called it “straight propaganda”—a polemic against pollution—but it also contains some of Geisel's most creative made-up words, like “crufulous croak” and “smogulous smoke.” The book opens with a small boy listening to the Once-ler tell the story of how the area was once full of Truffula trees and Bar-ba-loots and was home to the Lorax. But the greedy Once-ler—clearly a symbol of business—cuts down all the trees to make thneeds, which “everyone, everyone needs.” The lakes and the air become polluted, there is no food for the animals, and it becomes an unlivable place. The fuzzy yellow Lorax (who speaks for the trees, “for the trees have no tongues”) warns the Once-ler about the devastation he's causing, but his words are ignored.

The Once-ler cares only about making more things and more money. “Business is business! / And business must grow,” he says. At the end, surveying the devastation he has caused, the Once-ler shows some remorse, telling the boy: “Unless someone like you / cares a whole awful lot / nothing is going to get better / It's not.” The book attacks corporate greed and excessive consumerism, themes that remind some readers of *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. *The Lorax* was once banned by a California school district because of its obvious opposition to clear-cutting by the powerful logging industry.

Geisel Takes on the Arms Race

IN 1984, GEISEL PRODUCED *THE BUTTER BATTLE BOOK*, another strong statement about a pending catastrophe, in this case the nuclear arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union, fueled by President Reagan's Cold War rhetoric. “I'm not anti-military,” Geisel told a friend at the time, “I'm just anti-crazy.” It is a parable about the dangers of the political strategy of “mutually assured destruction” brought on by the escalation of nuclear weapons.

In this book, Geisel's satirical gifts are on full display. The cause of the senseless war is a trivial conflict over toast. The battle is between the Yooks and the Zooks, who don't realize that they are more alike than different, because they live on opposite sides of a long wall. The Yooks eat their bread with the butter-side up, while the Zooks eat their bread with the butter-side down. They compete to make bigger and better weapons until both sides invent a destructive bomb (the “Bitsy Big-Boy Boomeroo”) that, if used, will kill both sides. Like *The Lorax*, there is no happy ending or resolution. As the story ends, the generals on both sides of the wall are poised to drop their bombs. It is hard for even the youngest reader to miss Geisel's point.

Like the Passover Seder story, Geisel's point is one that bears retelling again and again, from generation to generation. Thanks to the ongoing popularity of Dr. Seuss books, it will. ■