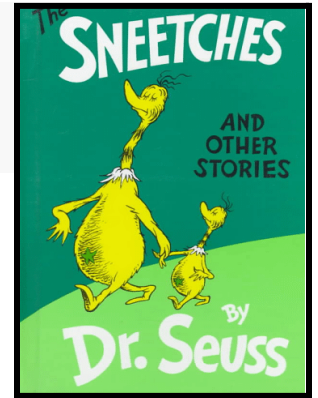


Dr. Seuss and Propaganda



Childhood



Yes, there really was a Dr. Seuss. He was not an official doctor, but his prescription for fun has delighted readers for more than 60 years. Theodor Seuss Geisel (“Ted”) was born on March 2, 1904, in Springfield, Massachusetts. His father, Theodor Robert, and grandfather were brewmasters and enjoyed great financial success for many years. Coupling the continual threats of Prohibition and World War I, the German-immigrant Geisels were targets for many slurs, particularly with regard to their heritage and livelihoods. In response, they were active participants in the pro-America campaign of World War I. Thus, Ted and his sister Marnie overcame such ridicule and became popular teenagers involved in many different activities. Despite some financial hardship due to Prohibition, Ted enjoyed a fairly happy childhood.

His parents were strict, but very loving. His mother, Henrietta Seuss Geisel, had worked in her father’s bakery before marrying Ted’s father, often memorizing the names of the pies that were on special each day and ‘chanting’ them to her customers. If Ted had difficulty getting to sleep, she would often recall her ‘pie-selling chants’. As an adult, Ted credited his mother “for the rhythms in which I write and the urgency with which I do it” (Morgan, p. 7).

World War II



While Ted was not an advocate of war, he knew that war against Japan and Germany was imminent. Ted contributed anywhere from 3-5 urgent political cartoons each week to *PM Magazine*, considered by many to be a liberal publication. Despite the steady work from *PM*, however, Ted wanted to contribute more to the war effort.

At 38, Ted was too old for the draft, so he sought a commission with naval intelligence. Instead, he wound up serving in Frank Capra’s Signal Corps (U.S. Army) making movies relative to the war effort. He was introduced to the art of animation and developed a series of animated training films, which featured a trainee called Private Snafu. At first, many balked at the idea of a “cartoon” training series, but the younger recruits really responded to them. The Private Snafu assignments that Ted oversaw included scripts set to rhyme (Morgan, p. 109).

Ted also contributed to two Academy Award-winning films during his stint as a soldier. Few copies of the films under their original titles remain (*Your Job in Germany* and *Your Job in Japan*), and it is unknown as to whether any copies of the Oscar-winning remakes, *Hitler Lives* and *Design for Death*, respectively, exist. (Morgan, pp. 118–120, and Cohen).

Publishing



Ted was still contributing to *Life*, *Vanity Fair*, *Judge*, etc., when an editor at Viking Press offered him a contract to illustrate a collection of children’s sayings called *Boners*. While the book received bland reviews, Ted’s illustrations were championed; he considered the opportunity his first, official “big break” in children’s literature (Morgan, p. 72), and another turning point in his career.

By this time, there was no question that Ted could make a living as an illustrator and cartoonist—but he also enjoyed writing. While traveling on the luxury liner *Kungsholm*, Ted became bothered by the rhythm of its engines. At Helen’s urging, he applied the incessant rhythm to his first children’s book, *And To Think That I Saw It On Mulberry Street*.

Though *Mulberry Street* is a delightful peek into the vivid imagination of a child, publishers in 1937 were not receptive; in fact, Ted presented his manuscript to 27 publishing houses and received 27 rejections. Discouraged, Ted literally bumped into an old Dartmouth friend who happened to work at Vanguard Press, a division of Houghton Mifflin. His friend offered to take the manuscript and illustrations to show them to key decision-makers. Vanguard wound up publishing *Mulberry Street*, which was well received by librarians and reviewers.

His next career turning point was in response to Rudolf Flesch’s book and John Hersey’s article, both entitled *Why Johnny Can’t Read*; the premise for both article and book was that children’s books were boring. Hersey was outraged with the current primers, calling them “antiseptic” and the children in them “unnaturally clean.” He called for illustrations “that widen rather than narrow the associative richness the children give to the words,” and concluded that the work of artists like Geisel and Walt Disney would be more appropriate (Morgan, pp.153-54).

So in an unusual act of “sharing” an author, Houghton Mifflin and Random House asked Ted to write a children’s primer using 220 new-reader vocabulary words; the end result was *The Cat in the Hat*. Houghton Mifflin reserved textbook rights and Random House reserved retail/trade rights. While schools were hesitant to adopt it as an “official” primer, children and parents swarmed for copies. Though Ted’s road to children’s books had many twists and turns, *The Cat in the Hat* catapulted him from pioneer in children’s literature to definitive children’s book author/illustrator, a position he has held unofficially for many decades since.



Issues/opinions/inspirations

Like most works of merit, the work of Dr. Seuss has been over-analyzed; many a frustrated pseudo-scholar has found devices where there are truly none to be found. For the most part, Ted enjoyed writing entertaining books that encourage children to read. There are several—his later books, in particular—that were, in fact, inspired by current events or his own personal concerns.

For example, Ted was upset about the billboards and construction that threatened his tranquil community of La Jolla. On a broader spectrum, however, Ted was concerned about the environment as a whole; he wanted manufacturers, businesses, and individuals to take responsibility for their actions. *The Lorax*, published in 1971, weaves a familiar tale of a good thing gone wrong: the irresponsible, ambitious Once-ler builds a huge, thriving business at the expense of Truffula trees and the creatures who depend on them. Remaining true to the Seussian style, Ted still managed to shame the current generation and challenge the next generation by demonstrating the pitfalls of progress . . . “unless” (*The Lorax*, p.58).

The Butter Battle Book, perhaps the most controversial of all his books, was written in response to the arms buildup and nuclear war threat during the Reagan administration. Published in 1984, *Butter Battle* sheds light on the growing threat of war between the Yooks and the Zooks. The threat stems solely from the way Yooks and Zooks choose to eat their bread: butter-side up and butter-side down, respectively. The story ends with a blank page, leaving a cliffhanger ending that is open to interpretation. When Ted presented this particular project, Random House saw red flags!

For the first time in decades, editors and art directors questioned Dr. Seuss—the cover, the ending, the verb tenses, even the title itself went through several changes. Never one to initiate confrontation, Ted suddenly found himself defending every element in question. Ted remained as true to the original as possible because the book itself represented the truth about the arms buildup. Ultimately, few changes were made.

For six months, *Butter Battle* remained on *The New York Times*’ Bestseller List . . . for **adults**. In 1990, when the televised version of *The Butter Battle Book* was shown in the U.S.S.R., Ted bragged that the country began “falling apart.” Indeed, the Soviet Union was crumbling at that time, but Ted’s message reached a much broader spectrum—and challenged readers to answer the question, how does it all end? (Morgan, p. 255)

Incidentally, the question Ted dreaded most was the question he was asked most often: “where do you get your ideas?” He usually responded with some sort of quip, most often “*Uber Gletch*.” This was Ted’s own private joke—Uber Gletch was actually the Swiss town where he traveled annually to have his cuckoo clock repaired.

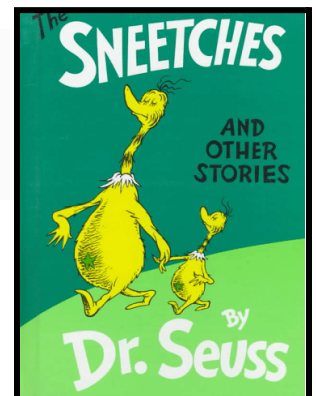
Honors/tributes



Many honors and awards were bestowed upon Ted, including an honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters from his alma mater, Dartmouth. In addition to six other honorary doctorates, some of Ted’s more notable awards include an Oscar for *Gerald McBoing-Boing* (Best Cartoon, 1951); two Emmys for *Halloween is Grinch Night* and *The Grinch Grinches the Cat in the Hat* (Best Children’s Special, 1977 and 1982, respectively); a Pulitzer Prize (1984); a Peabody for the animated specials *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!* and *Horton Hears a Who!* (1971); and a New York Library Literary Lion (1986). Three of his books received Caldecott Honor Awards: *McElligot’s Pool* (1947), *Bartholomew and the Oobleck* (1949), and *If I Ran the Zoo* (1950). In 1980, the American Library Association (the same organization responsible for the prestigious Newbery and Caldecott Awards) honored Ted with a Laura Ingalls Wilder Award. This special award is given to an author or illustrator whose books—having been published in the United States—have made a substantial contribution and lasting impact to children’s literature.

In 1986 the San Diego Museum of Art, under the watchful eye of Ted himself, featured a retrospective dedicated to his life and work. Several of his paintings and early sketches were included in the mix. The show was well-received by the public, and traveled to many locations throughout the United States. The show was catalogued and put into book format as *Dr. Seuss from Then to Now: A Catalogue of the Retrospective Exhibition*. The book is no longer in print, but offers a breathtaking array of 60 years of Ted’s work. While the show was a hit among patrons, Ted himself wasn’t satisfied that it qualified his painting and position as a true artist (Morgan, p. 267).

Propaganda has been used by many **ultranationalist** regimes to indoctrinate (brainwash) people and spread fear and hatred towards minorities within a nation. Adolf Hitler and his Nazi regime are perhaps the best example of this, but we can see similar examples when we look at Benito Mussolini’s Italy, Kim Jong Il in North Korea and Saddam Hussein in Iraq.



Look at a variety of propaganda material from the ultranationalist examples mentioned above and complete the tasks that follow.

TASK ONE:

Read Dr. Zeuss' story called '*The Sneetches*' and respond to the following questions:

- *What is the moral of the story? Explain.*

- *Can you see any historical parallels to the story? Explain.*

TASK TWO:

In an attempt to be politically correct we are going to be using the *Sneetches* from Dr. Zeuss' story as the target of our propaganda. Your government wants to rid the country of the *Sneetches*. Your task will be to design a piece of propaganda that emulates the ultranationalist fervour of the regimes mentioned above. Your *anti-Sneetch* propaganda can take form in one of the following formats:

- poster
- video clip / short movie
- radio broadcast (podcast)
- speech
- song

Your propaganda should meet the following criteria:

- The propaganda is engaging and attention grabbing
- The propaganda message is clear
- The propaganda message is persuasive

Although the assignment is asking you to replicate something that is very serious, you are encouraged to have fun and be creative with your work. You can find ideas from examples of real historical propaganda.

You will have to identify what message you want to communicate.

What is it about the Sneetches that you don't like (be creative)?

Why are the Sneetches causing problems in your nation?

Brainstorm some ideas about what you might want to do....