HE MURDERED DICK AND JANE

Glenn C. Altschuler and Patrick M. Burns


During a life that spanned most of the twentieth century, Theodore Geisel worked as an illustrator for advertising campaigns, a political cartoonist for the left-wing magazine *PM*, an animator for the United States Army during World War II, a playwright, a documentary film maker, and a teacher. He’s best known, of course, as Dr. Seuss, America’s favorite writer of children’s books. By turns silly, sad, smart, and (some said) subversive, his books—which include *Green Eggs and Ham* (1960), *The Cat in the Hat* (1957), *Horton Hears a Who* (1954), *One fish two fish red fish blue fish* (1960), and *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* (1957)—have been translated into fifteen languages and have sold more than 200 million copies.

When Geisel died in 1991, the *New York Times* eulogized him for meter and language that “were irresistible, especially the Seuss-speak he created when English seemed too skimpy for so rich an imagination.” Columnist Anna Quindlen predicted that he would always be remembered as a man who “took words and juggled them, twirled them, bounced them off the page.” Geisel made reading fun, she added, and deserves credit for a “mercy killing of the highest order”: the murder of Dick and Jane, the didactic, decidedly un-dynamic duo who had dominated children’s literature for decades.1

Seuss lives on. In 1999, the face of The Cat in the Hat appeared on a U.S. stamp. Five years later, the Postal Service issued a stamp with Geisel’s portrait. In 2002, a Dr. Seuss National Memorial opened in Ted’s hometown, Springfield, Massachusetts. And his books just keep on selling.

In *Theodor SEUSS Geisel*, Donald Pease, a professor of English, Comparative Literature, and American Studies at Dartmouth, assesses Geisel’s life and legacy in a brief biography. Recognizing that half a dozen major works, most notably *Dr. Seuss & Mr. Geisel* (1995) by Judith and Neil Morgan, have preceded him, Pease takes Geisel at his word: “Why write about Never-Never Lands that you’ve never seen—when all around—you have a Real Never-Never Land that you know about and understand” (p. 6). He focused instead on the relationship between Geisel’s art and five “decisive turning points” in his life (p. xi).
Pease argues that Geisel did not achieve artistic maturity until he came to terms with his formative—and traumatic—childhood experiences. Owners of the Liberty and Springfield breweries, which sold 300,000 barrels a year, Ted’s family lost their livelihood and social standing when the Eighteenth Amendment became law in 1919. Forced to shut down his business, Mr. Geisel sat for days in the living room, “saying ‘SOB SOB’ over and over—he didn’t know what to do with himself” (p. 157). Prohibition became one of Ted’s “psychic fixations” as well (p. 61). Caught drinking gin just before his graduation from Dartmouth in 1925, Ted was put on probation, removed from his position as editor of *The Jack-O-Lantern*, and barred from contributing to the periodical. Dismayed that his father, “who had been comparably wronged by the injustice of Prohibition” (p. 36), endorsed the decision of the dean, Ted “quite literally” followed the elder Geisel’s “demand that he wipe the blot from his record” (p. 37). He began submitting material under pseudonyms, before signing his own middle name under a cartoon. A “password into the world of make believe,” Pease writes, “Seuss” enabled him to turn “shame and indignation into pleasure by literally making a name for himself” (p. 38). It probably didn’t matter that his classmates voted him “least likely to succeed” (p. 35).

In *The King’s Stilts*, Pease claims, Geisel “cloaked” his anti-Prohibition sentiments in a fairy tale. In helping King Birtram recover his stilts from the wicked Lord Droon, he writes, Eric, the young page, affirms the message “that all work and no play can demoralize a monarchy”—because if a king doesn’t “get wobbly on his stilts at night,” he won’t be able to stand upright and rule during the day (p. 55).

Clearly, Geisel never forgot the injustices of Prohibition. Or, for that matter, the “Kill the Kaiser” epithets and threats of physical violence hurled at him during World War I because of his German name. These themes were, indeed, prominent in the political cartoons of his young adulthood. Pease’s reading of *The King’s Stilts*, however, is a stretch—especially for anyone under the age of ten. Geisel may have “conserved” his “traumatizing memories” in his children’s books; but, it seems to us, there are very few recognizable traces in them (p. 18).

Citing Geisel’s comment that political education “might more productively start at childhood” (p. 75), Pease views Seuss stories as a “quasi-utopian space in which belief in peace, social equality, and democratic participation could be re-animated” (p. 78). He demonstrates that Geisel was more interested in protecting children from arbitrary adult power than in indoctrinating them in any particular orthodoxy. *Thidwick the Big-Hearted Moose* (1947) and *Bartholomew and the Oobleck* (1949), for example, turn on World War II “realities of assault from the air and territorial occupation” (p. 81)—to make the point that no one, not even a king, has the right to place his “imperial desires above the earthly life he shares with his subjects” (p. 82).
The same theme, Pease points out, dominated the books Geisel wrote during the Cold War. In *Yertle the Turtle and Other Stories* (1958), the king commands the turtles on the island of Salama-Sond to stand on one another’s backs so that he can extend his empire vertically. When one of them protests—and then burps—the stack comes crashing down, underscoring two preoccupations of Dr. Seuss’ beast books: the reversibility of power and the need for communal interdependence.” (p 118). In *Horton Hears A Who* (1954), Horton hears the faint voices of people who live atop a dandelion and tries desperately to persuade his friends and neighbors that they exist. For his troubles, he’s banished from his jungle home. In the end, Horton demonstrates that the Whos can—and must—be heard. His maxim “a person’s a person no matter how small” extends membership into the community to the least socialized and most “minoritized.”

Pease’s eminently plausible readings of these stories are, it’s worth repeating, adult readings. He does not examine what might have attracted adults to his books initially, or the possibility that they responded to the “content” far more than their kids did. Nor does he adequately examine how (and why) children accept, resist, or miss the lessons lurking in literature. Instead he seems to endorse, at times uncritically, Geisel’s principal premises. Boys and girls, Seuss asserted, possess an innate sense of fairness and justice. They know when you’re kidding, and they are immune to propaganda. They will accept any set of “givens,” however implausible, as long as they are applied consistently. They’ll understand that through animals, interiorized human emotions can be turned into “objects for conscious deliberation” (p. 94): Horton the elephant’s concern, Thidwick the moose’s hospitality, Yertle the turtle’s arrogance. And when the story ends, boys and girls will return to the real world, adding these “as if dimensions to what the world as is lacks” (p. 104).

Pease seems to acknowledge, however, that the popularity of Geisel’s books can be attributed as much or more to his creation of comic devices to turn learning about language into a source of pleasure than to the political or moral content of his stories. Here again, Pease does not appear to have consulted the vast literature on reading strategies. Nonetheless, the best moments in *Theodor Seuss Geisel* explain how Seuss bridged the short attention span of six-year-olds. He used internal rhyme, onomatopoeia, assonance, consonance, and alliteration, Pease writes, to “intensify the presence and absence of meaning” (p. 128) and make linguistic fun. As in: “The spots on a Glotz/are about the same size/as the dots on a Klotz” (p. 127). Seuss switched, more or less at random, from numbers to colors in the title of *One fish two fish red fish blue fish* to help kids keep track of the different fish. And he juxtaposed bones in fishbones, wishbones, and trombones for “verbal entertainment as well as extralinguistic meaning” (p. 126).
In an excellent analysis of *The Cat in the Hat* as the “cornerstone and linchpin” of his technique (p. 111), Pease illuminates Geisel’s intuitive understanding that reading differed from looking at something “because it includes the reflexive knowledge of what is perceived.” When the cat says “Look at me now/With a cup and a cake/On the top of my hat!/I can hold up TWO books!/I can hold up the fish!/And a little toy ship!/And some milk on a dish/,” he is “urgently drawing the children to an immediate perception.” The cat is at once “an image, a series of activities, a way of speaking that does what he says, and a way of correlating the words that he says with the illustrations of him doing what he says” (p. 109). Each time he repeats the phrase, “Look at me now,” he is making the pictured things “at once audible and legible” (p. 110).

Pease reminds us that, after Helen Palmer Geisel, his wife and collaborator for almost forty years, committed suicide in 1967, Geisel began writing books aimed at adults as well as children. The critics weren’t always kind. Reviewing *The Butter Battle Book* (1984), a story about the Yooks and the Zooks, who go to war over differences about how to butter bread, Charles Osgood of CBS television opined, “The Butter Battle of Dr. Seuss/Is much too much like the Evening Neuss” (p. 147). But it didn’t—and doesn’t—really matter. For reasons Donald Pease helps us comprehend, children continue to delight in the company of Dr. Seuss—and the prospect of a plausibly implausible visual and linguistic adventure.

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