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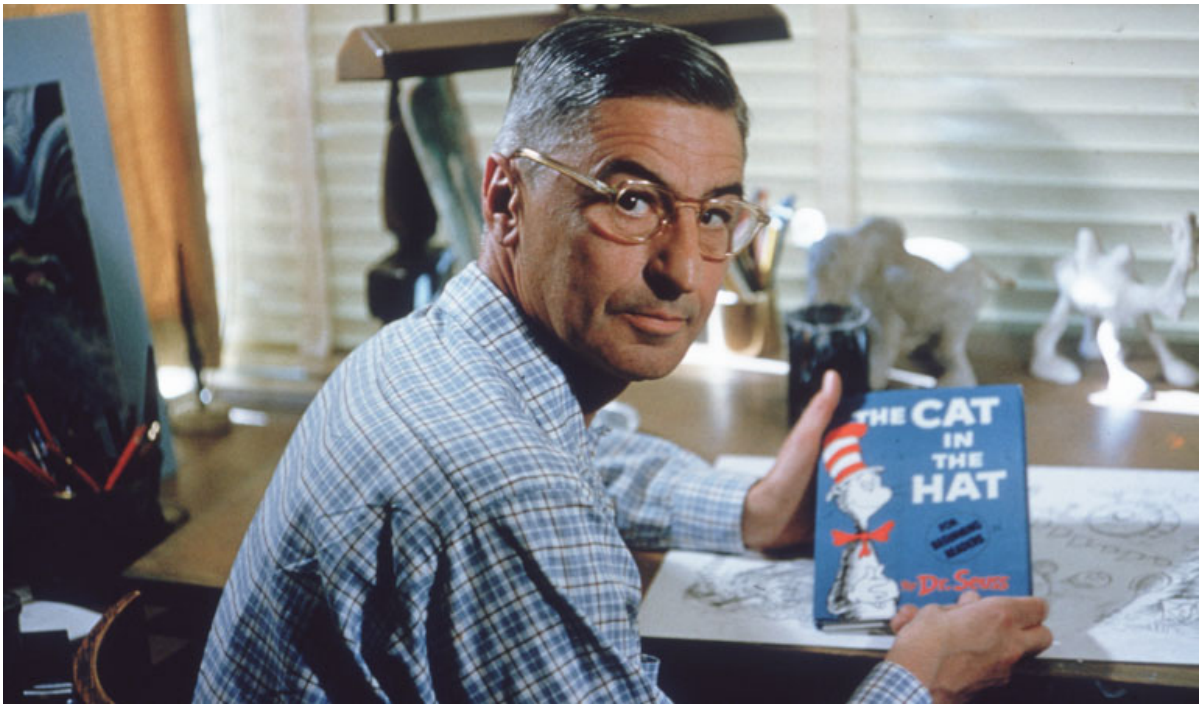
ARTICLE

It's Time to Talk About Dr. Seuss

In light of a new study revealing stereotyped characters across Dr. Seuss's children's books, published just before Read Across America Day, how can educators engage older students in a critical discussion of this canonical author?

|March 4, 2019By Gabriel Smith



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Topic: Bullying & Bias

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Until recently, Read Across America Day was—in everything but title—National Dr. Seuss Day. It's even celebrated on March 2, his birthday. If you're like me, you remember teachers wearing the iconic Cat in the Hat top hat/tie combo. You might recall school librarians or administrators dressing up as Thing One and Thing Two or a school lunch when Green Eggs and Ham were served. This is America, and it's probably not much of a stretch to guess that you probably have a favorite Dr. Seuss book (mine is probably *Hop on Pop*).

You may have noticed that Read Across America has looked a little different for the last few years. Rather than exclusively celebrate the works of Dr. Seuss, as it had done since 1998, in 2017 the NEA shifted its focus to "Celebrating a Nation of Diverse Readers." They began prominently featuring titles focused on diverse American experiences.

This year, Read Across America Day was preceded by the publication of a new study. Researchers Katie Ishizuka and Ramón Stephens examined 50 children's books and 2,200 characters created over Theodore Seuss Geisel's nearly 70-year career "to evaluate the claims that his children's books are anti-racist." Their findings were shocking.

I get it. You grew up on Dr. Seuss. I did too! It's probably safe to assume that most people did and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. But we have to recognize that two things can be true at the same time:

"Dr. Seuss is a prolific children's book author and global icon. And Dr. Seuss has a history of racial baggage that educators should understand when introducing his writing to their students."

If you're thinking you need to burn your favorite copy of *The Sneetches* or *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back*, I'd really rather that you didn't—we're all about environmental safety here. If you're thinking you need to have some important conversations with your students? You're absolutely right.

How do we talk about this with students?

One way to start could be sharing the conversation scholars themselves are having. For context: Geisel biographers and historians are (you might want to sit down for this one) virtually 100 percent white. The researchers behind the new study are people of color, and more specifically they're from groups that were often on the receiving end of racial attacks in Geisel's early work and in some of his children's books.

Biographers, scholars and historians have always recognized the racist, Orientalist ideas in Geisel's early work; they're impossible to miss. But they have tended to argue that the problematic parts of his career were limited to his time as a cartoonist and ad man, years before he wrote children's books as Dr. Seuss.

Apologists tend to make two arguments about why this early bigotry doesn't matter: The first is that Geisel was merely reflecting the humor of his day. The second is that his multi-decade career as Dr. Seuss would essentially make up for his early public bigotry.

With older students, you can address these arguments directly, discussing the degree to which cultural norms excuse biased language or actions, how harmful stereotypical representations can be and whether—and how—a person can make up for hurtful mistakes. And you can and should talk with them and with other educators about how we can have a deeper understanding of the ways racism shows up in places and people we'd least expect.

So how bad were the results of the study? They couldn't have been that bad, right?

It's actually pretty bad. The researchers behind this study set out to address "a gap in Seuss literature by revealing how racism spans across the entire Seuss collection." Responding to the idea that Geisel was simply a product of his time, they disagree. "[N]ot all White people 'of his time' engaged in overt racism or used their platforms to disseminate racist narratives and images nationally and globally, as he did," they argue. "There are White people throughout history, and of his generation, who actively resisted racism and risked their lives and careers to stand up against it."

Their main focus, however, is pushing back against the idea that his children's books are free from bigotry. The researchers surveyed 50 Dr. Seuss books and concluded that, "of the 2,240 (identified) human characters, there are forty-five characters of color representing 2% of the total number of human characters." Of the 45 characters, 43 exhibited behaviors and appearances that align with harmful and stereotypical Orientalist tropes. The remaining two human characters "are identified in

the text as 'African' and both align with the theme of anti-Blackness." It's also important to note that each of the non-white characters is male and that they are all "presented in subservient, exotified, or dehumanized roles," especially in their relation to white characters.

But what about *The Sneetches*?

In light of this new information, you may wonder about Dr. Seuss books featuring non-human characters. At Teaching Tolerance, we've even featured anti-racist activities built around the Dr. Seuss book *The Sneetches*. But when we re-evaluated, we found that the story is actually not as "anti-racist" as we once thought. And it has some pretty intricate layers you and your students might consider, too.

The solution to the story's conflict is that the Plain-Belly Sneetches and Star-Bellied Sneetches simply get confused as to who is oppressed. As a result, they accept one another. This message of "acceptance" does not acknowledge structural power imbalances. It doesn't address the idea that historical narratives impact present-day power structures. And instead of encouraging young readers to recognize and take action against injustice, the story promotes a race-neutral approach.

Any recommendations for what I can teach instead?

An excellent example of what educators should do can be found in NEA and Read Across America Day's response to this subject. When presented with this research from Ishikuza and Stephens, they made a choice to shift the focus of Read Across America Day from Dr. Seuss and his works to the diverse voices and experiences that help create America's diverse democracy. You, too, can choose to bring a microphone to those voices that have historically been undermined and unheard.

Another thing you can do is actually read the report and research the claims yourself, with colleagues or students, and put them to the test as a community. Not only is the report informative about the text it studies; it also might expose you to blind spots you may not realize you have in regard to what voices you give power to in your practice and in the books you share with students.

As with any critical conversation, accept that there may not be a neat and clean conclusion. Critical conversations can range from illuminating and informative to a little tense and even upsetting. They can be difficult, but being prepared for them by doing this work internally *before* you bring it to your community of colleagues and learners will ensure you're ready for wherever the conversation takes you.

You don't have to burn your favorite Thing One shirt or get rid of all of your Dr. Seuss books or cut Green Eggs and Ham from your diet (unless you just really want to). However, we all need to be willing to explore the things that shape the young minds of our students—and be willing to change our own minds when presented with new truths, even if they might not always be comfortable to process.

As Geisel scholar Philip Nel writes, the work of Dr. Seuss "contains both much to admire and much to oppose." Yet, it is up to each of us to follow Seuss's own advice from *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* "Face up to your problems / whatever they are.'" And we should do so, even if that means Geisel and Seuss' works themselves are at the center of some of those problems.

Smith is a program associate with Teaching Tolerance.

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