

Dr. Seuss: The children's radical

By Chris Kromm

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When Lucille Ball died in the spring of 1989, not a soul could be found in the press that didn't "Love Lucy." They didn't mention, though, how much they loved her membership in the Communist Party. The obituaries of Fall 1991 praised the musical genius of composer Leonard Bernstein: but not his socialist politics, or a famous dinner party he threw for the Black Panthers in 1970.

So it was predictable that, when the life of Theodor Geisel, better known as Dr. Seuss, came to an end last September, an entire life of refusal and resistance was going to be edited away into "human interest" oblivion.

Eulogies to Dr. Seuss treated him as either hopelessly naive or oddball.

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Naive, because he had "the eyes of a child," he was a "child at heart," on and on — as if adults weren't supposed to have a sense of imagination.

But mostly, the media just thought of Dr. Seuss as a little weird. The *New York Times* was typical in thinking that "zany animal characters, names and book titles were the Dr. Seuss trademarks." It was only in old age, America's paper of record said, that he turned his eyes to society: "Among his later books were some on serious topics."

Dr. Seuss was always taking on "serious topics," he just used the subtle tools of strangeness and pure fun — which were also, of course, part of the message. He openly hated Jack and Jill, most of all because they embodied the deadening conformity all too common in the 1950s, when his storybook career took off.

Forget climbing to the top of the hill, or the corporate ladder, for that matter: the boys and girls in his books just wanted to cook the best scrambled egg (*Scrambled Eggs Super*), or run their own circus (*If I Ran the Circus*). In constant amazement, these children were forever learning from their experiences, which happened to include encounters with "sneetches," "yops," and other wild, deformed creatures.

The point was quite simple, but an important one: never let life grow dull



DR. SEUSS 1904-1991

and grey. For kids, this meant: to keep life interesting, be a holy terror. *The Cat in the Hat* — the first book written with the sole intention of being read by kids themselves, another one of Dr. Seuss' revolutionary ideas — was a primer in delinquency. When the parental unit leaves the house, let a big, talking feline, with his lunatic friends Thing 1 and Thing 2, come in and tear the place up.

And Dr. Seuss doesn't recommend a confession: as long as you clean up afterwards, what mom doesn't know can't hurt her. He leaves the child to consider: if you were in the rowdy kids' shoes, would you tell? Hell no. Leave it to Beaver to be goodie-two-shoes.

This was a challenge to convention, a vision of a world beyond stereotypical behaviour, forced boredom, and mindless obedience. It was a glimpse of a world that, to be realized, also required a fundamental social and political change, which he argued

for in storybooks all through his life.

While doing work on his Academy Award-winning film *Hitler Lives* (1946), Geisel learned about the workings of the Nazi authoritarian regime, and it created in him a permanent hatred for all abuses of authority.

If Dr. Seuss distrusted the abuses of the State, he was even more critical of injustices caused by the culture of greed and corporate empires. Probably his best known work (outside of *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, which attacked the commercialism of the winter holidays) is the *Lorax*, written a year after Earth Day 1970 to protest the death of the planet at the hands of profit-hungry business.

Page one takes us to a wasteland, where "the wind smells slow-and-sour when it blows, and no birds ever sing except old crows. This moon-cape of a town could be Love Canal, NY; Bhopal, India; Los Angeles, CA.

How did it get this way? Well, the narrator — named the "Once-ler" — explains, it used to be Eden: a place where Swomee-Swans sang, Truffula Trees bore fruit, Brown Bar-ba-loots frisked around, and Humming Fish hummed.

But then somebody (the Once-ler himself) got the idea to chop down the trees and use the leaves to make thneeds, a product that, like most of the junk that lines shopping aisles today, is utterly useless (advertised as a "fine-something-that-all-people-need!").

Enter the Lorax, a magical creature who "speaks for the trees," telling the Once-ler he's greedy and destructive. Of course, the Once-ler ignores the Lorax (crazy environmentalist) and continues to enlarge his business until it becomes a vast mechanized clear-cutting conglomerate.

Eden was destroyed, and Dr. Seuss gives a little ecology lesson in showing how. The Barb-a-loots starved from lack of Truffula Fruit once the trees went, the Humming Fish were poisoned by Gluppity-Glupp and Schloppity-Schlopp — much more descriptive words than "pollution" and "effluents" — dumped by the Thneeds factory.

But Dr. Seuss not only had his ecology down — he knew his radical politics, too. He doesn't just blame the aesthetic and ecological catastrophe on the greed of the Once-ler; instead, Dr. Seuss is pointing us to

capitalism itself, in which businesses have to "grow or die" in the competitive market. The Once-ler's confession of why he continues to plunder is like Marx's treatise on capital accumulation put into politics:

"I meant no harm. I truly did not. But I had to grow bigger. So bigger I got. I went right on biggering... selling more Thneeds. And I biggered my money, which everyone needs."

Heartless competition, mindless conspire to end paradise; the indictment of capitalism is clear and powerful. But Dr. Seuss does not leave you in despair, and the revolution he calls for is a one-man show.

The Once-ler gives the last Truffula seed to a boy, with the ominous warning:

"Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot. Nothing is going to

get better. It's not."

A lot of weight to put on any child's shoulders. But the words are heavy and empowering at the same time, unlike the concluding tone of one of Dr. Seuss' last stories, the *Butter Battle Book*. The story was penned in 1984, at the height of Reagan's effort to "win" the arms race.

In this book, the competing super-powers aren't Commies and Americans, but Yooks and Zooks, the chief difference being that Yooks put butter on top of their toast, Zooks on the bottom. The ensuing clash of ideologies has led to a long-standing feud between the two.

All aspects of a war-driven society are brought to light: the Yook and Zook people line up behind their leaders, not with "support the troops" ribbons, but with equally ridiculous fanfare like the "Butter Up Band."

But the finale is disturbing, more so than any other book Dr. Seuss would write. Both the Yooks and Zooks develop tiny bombs that will blow them both to pieces. On the last page, we are left with both generals, poised atop a Berlin-like wall to drop their military might.

"Who's going to drop it," a boy asks, and the General for the Yooks can only answer "We'll see, we'll see." This is the stuff nightmares are made of.

In some way, all of Dr. Seuss' books were a call to a different world: one with more imagination, more tolerance, more compassion. His books were also a call for the social transformation that would allow children to develop these qualities.

Dr. Seuss knew how to do more than mesh politics and art; he knew how to speak radicalism in a different language — funny, simple, and warm-hearted. Celebrating diversity, doing your own thing, and standing up to social injustice went hand-in-hand.

Maybe the media didn't get his message. But it's reassuring to think that probably many children did, and will continue to. Dr. Seuss knew it would be that way. As he once said, "I'll rather write for kids. They're more appreciative; adults are obsolete children, and the hell with them."

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