

# The Great Dr. Seuss Hysteria of 2021 shows how silly and unimaginative adults can be

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## FULL TEXT

Now that beloved children's-book author Dr. Seuss is an "outlaw," per House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.), and conservative pundit Ben Shapiro is stockpiling strategic reserves of "If I Ran the Zoo," parents across the land face a desperate conundrum. What can they possibly read to their children?

If that paragraph makes no sense, good for you: The Great Seuss Hysteria of 2021 is a faux controversy if there ever were one, worth following only for what it reveals about children's literature and the limits of adults' imaginations. The short, sensible summary is as follows. Dr. Seuss Enterprises, which controls Theodor Geisel's copyrights, decided not to print more copies of six works that contain racist imagery. This ought to be relatively uncontroversial. The books won't be pulled from public consumption, as Disney did with "Song of the South," or edited to comport with different values. No one proposes treating Dr. Seuss like Woody Allen, a figure whose alleged transgressions render his work untouchable. Everyone seems comfortable with the other 90 percent of Dr. Seuss's books. But because conservatives don't do much except fight the culture wars these days, they inflated an act of corporate image-burnishing into a catastrophic book-burning, and the rest of the story is predictable.

Amid this thicket of dishonest outrage, however, it's useful to recognize two things that are actually true. First, some Dr. Seuss books for children contain depictions of people of color that, like his cartoons of Japanese people during World War II, are repulsive. Second, insisting that Dr. Seuss books are the alpha and omega of children's literature shows a tiresome lack of imagination.

As the parent of a toddler, I've been recently reacquainted with the Seussian canon: "Green Eggs and Ham" and "Happy Birthday to You!" are in heavy rotation in our home —and their limitations are clear.

The wordplay can be fun, but its cleverness is undercut by Geisel's penchant for invented words, which is a kind of cheat. Anyone can stick a rhyme scheme or invent a clever rhythm if they don't confine themselves to the English language. Political fables like "The Lorax" and "Yertle the Turtle" are all well and good, if a little dated in their scolding tone. And the Cat in the Hat, perhaps Seuss's most famous character, is more frenetic than emotionally engaging. Were I to assemble a canonical list of children's-book authors, Dr. Seuss would rank below, say, Peter Spier, the Dutch-American illustrator whose gorgeous picture books were a staple of my childhood and now are vital reading again a generation later.

"People," his compendium of the variety of human society, is a lovely introduction to the world for any young person; it is also proof that even 40 years ago artists could look at difference with excitement, not viciousness. "Bored —Nothing to Do," about two brothers who occupy themselves by building a propeller plane, and "Oh, Were They Ever Happy!," which follows three children as they decide to paint the house while their parents are out, are charming tributes to youthful ingenuity and imagination.

I'd also list the husband-and-wife team of Alice and Martin Provensen, and the writer and illustrator Barbara Cooney. Among the former's accomplishments are "Our Animal Friends at Maple Hill Farm" and "A Year at Maple Hill Farm," which depict a world that is more bravely engaged with the realities of life, death and idiosyncrasy than the one Dr. Seuss's characters occupied. And in books such as "Miss Rumphius" and "Hattie and the Wild Waves," Cooney offered readers, particularly girls, glimpses of life that are unconventional but graspable.

And at risk of letting a list of past masters dominate this column, let us turn to the present. What a gift it is to have Mo

Willems's help in probing the complex emotions and everyday dilemmas of childhood in, among other books, his Elephant & Piggie series. During a year of isolation, Raúl the Third's Little Lobo books have transported our family to the markets and lucha libre rings of a Mexican border town. And as much as "Please, Baby, Please" has inspired our child to new heights of misbehavior, it's a pure delight to have an artist as remarkable as Kadir Nelson making work for the very youngest readers.

Cooney famously said, "Children in this country need a more robust literary diet than they are getting ... It does not hurt them to read about good and evil, love and hate, life and death. Nor do I think they should read only about things that they understand ... a man's reach should exceed his grasp. So should a child's."

No, Dr. Seuss has not been canceled. But if the only author we think to reach for is Dr. Seuss, our children's literary worlds will be smaller and poorer for our lack of curiosity.

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