Do Liberals Care if Books Disappear?

The Dr. Seuss cancellation illustrates all the problems that they used to have with censorship.

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/06/opinion/dr-seuss-books-liberalism.html>

From the idealistic liberalism of my high school English teachers, I learned that to try to get rid of offensive literature is the great sin of easily triggered rubes. A special horror at *banning books*, which usually meant removing them from the curriculum in some rural school district, pervaded our libraries and classrooms. And a particular shame seemed to throb in my teachers’ breasts when they admitted that some books were even targeted — “The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,” say — for misguided *progressive* reasons.

This week I learned from a different kind of liberalism that only easily triggered rubes care when offensive books are made to disappear. It was mildly creepy to hear that the custodians of Theodor Geisel’s estate, Dr. Seuss Enterprises, consulted with a “panel of experts” and decided to cease publishing six Seuss titles because they “portray people in ways that are hurtful and wrong.” But it was much creepier that so few people notionally in the free-expression business, so few liberal journalists and critics, seemed troubled by the move.

There were exceptions — Substack exiles with their free-speech absolutism, the occasional [libertarian contrarian](https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/03/03/dr-seuss-publishing-problematic-racism-473373). But often the Seuss cancellation was dismissed as a boob bait for Fox News viewers and a move to which only someone sunk in white anxiety could possibly object.

Plus, we were told, it’s only six books. And is Seuss so great anyway? “The vast, vast majority of his books, the ones without racist images or references,” wrote Philip Bump of the Washington Post, “will still be sold.” And if “Dr. Seuss’s profile wanes a bit … to whom is harm being done?” In The Guardian, Lili Wilkinson [noted](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/mar/05/dr-seusss-legacy-of-kindness-has-only-been-bolstered-by-his-estates-decision) dismissively that “the six books in question were far from being bestsellers,” while Bump’s colleague, the usually perspicacious critic Alyssa Rosenberg, took the cancellation as an occasion [to complain](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/03/03/dr-seuss-hysteria-2021-shows-how-silly-unimaginative-adults-can-be/) about “the tiresome lack of imagination” of people who obsess over Seuss but not, say, Peter Spier.

Now I love Peter Spier, but this is still a censor’s argument. *Upset that you can’t get a copy of* Ulysses*? You can still read* Dubliners*, which is better anyway. Also, plenty of other Irish authors out there.*

Maybe that’s sound logic; as a Catholic I have a certain nostalgia for the Index of Forbidden Books. But it’s seriously strange logic coming from liberal writers and liberal publications.

In fact the Seuss cancellations illustrate exactly the problems with censoriousness that liberals normally invoke. First, you have a nonspecific justification attributed to unnamed “experts” and “educators” that sweeps up a range of books and illustrations. The indubitably racist depiction of ape-like Africans in “If I Ran the Zoo,” the canceled Seuss that most deserves it, gets the same treatment as “On Beyond Zebra!*,”* whose apparent crime is a Seussian picture of an Arab-looking man on a camel-like beast. And a single problematic image seems to be enough to make an entire book disappear: One chopstick-wielding Chinese man in “And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street,” apparently, means the first major work of an American master can’t be published anymore.

Second, the vagueness of the new standard offers openings for further disappearances. The anti-racist left is already ready with a critique of Seuss’s larger oeuvre, taking on everything from the alleged minstrel-show element in “The Cat in the Hat” to the complacent [colorblindness](https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/its-time-to-talk-about-dr-seuss) of “The Sneetches.” And the principle established by this auto-cancellation could have applications well beyond Seuss-land.

For perfectly consistent reasons, too. Western children’s literature really has been influenced by imperialism and racism. The Babar books have obvious colonialist undertones. Ditto the Man in the Yellow Hat. And as kids get older — well, “The Lord of the Rings” is waiting, with its Greco-Roman Gondorians besieged by darker races from the south and east.

I am not being dismissive here: Tolkien’s chauvinism is a real moral and artistic flaw. But it’s a flaw in a work of genius, just as colonialist subtext in Babar is a complication in a brilliant series of books. In a free society that appreciates greatness, these flaws are good reasons to develop a diverse canon — but terrible reasons to make the works of important artists disappear.

The Seuss cancellations also illustrate how a disappearance can happen without a legal “ban” being literally imposed. One day, the Seuss estate decides to self-censor; the next, that decision becomes the justification for eBay to [delist](https://www.wsj.com/articles/dr-seuss-books-deemed-offensive-will-be-delisted-from-ebay-11614884201) used copies of the books. In a cultural landscape dominated by a few big companies with politically uniform management, you don’t need state censorship for books to swiftly vanish.

Yes, Amazon, the power that controls [half of U.S. new book sales](https://www.wsj.com/articles/they-own-the-system-amazon-rewrites-book-industry-by-turning-into-a-publisher-11547655267) and around 80 percent of the e-book market, is still selling the used Seuss. But maybe not forever. Just a few weeks ago the Amazonian giant decided to simply delete, without real explanation, a 2018 book by Ryan Anderson, a Catholic scholar and the head of the Ethics and Public Policy Center, called “When Harry Became Sally: Responding to the Transgender Moment.”

As with Seuss, the Anderson deletion has mostly been a conservative cause célèbre. I’ve seen little liberal concern over the dominant player in the book business playing censor in culture-war debates.

But that case is particularly interesting because it’s not exactly that liberals are failing the hard test of defending a book they find bigoted or transphobic. For some that’s true, but I live and work among highly educated liberals, and I know that more than a few of them actually *agree* with the critiques of current transgender theory Anderson presents. They’re skeptical about the widespread use of puberty blockers for gender dysphoria. They’re wary about the implications for women’s spaces, women’s sports. They don’t share Anderson’s Catholic presuppositions, but they are, at least, [J.K. Rowling liberals](https://www.jkrowling.com/opinions/j-k-rowling-writes-about-her-reasons-for-speaking-out-on-sex-and-gender-issues/).

In the last stages of the same-sex marriage debate, I never encountered a flicker of private doubt from liberal friends. But in the gender-identity debate, there are pervasive liberal doubts about the current activist position. Yet without liberal objection, that position appears to set rules for what Amazon will sell.

What does this say about the condition of liberalism? Something not so great, I think. I don’t expect “The Cat in the Hat” to be unpublished or my own tracts to swiftly vanish. But it was a good thing when liberalism, as a dominant cultural force in a diverse society, included a strong tendency to police even *itself* for censoriousness — the ACLU tendency, the don’t-ban-Twain tendency, the free-speech piety of the high school English teacher.

Now liberal cultural power has increased, the ACLU [doesn’t seem very interested](https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-aclu-retreats-from-free-expression-1529533065) in the liberties of [non-progressives](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/24/us/smith-college-race.html) anymore, and Dr. Seuss sells as pricey samizdat.

I don’t know what awaits beyond this particular Zebra, and I’d rather not find out.