

Subversive as Hell: Political Satire in the Work of Dr. Seuss

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As an author, Theodor Seuss Geisel always considered himself somewhat of a satirist. In a 1978 article in the *Christian Science Monitor*, Geisel is quoted as saying of his picture books: “There are several levels. Most are satires on satires. I also have the parents in mind.”¹ Despite his major success in children's literature, Geisel always had a certain subversive edge to his work. I would argue that this edge came largely from the immense respect which Geisel had for children, whom he saw as just as intelligent and perceptive as adults.² In general, Geisel's policy when writing his books was not to write for children, but rather to write largely for himself. In a 1960 article in *The New Yorker* Geisel remarks that, “If a book pleases me, it has a chance of pleasing children.”³ The result of this conviction was that, stemming from his early career as a political cartoonist, much of Geisel's work was charged with political and social satire, cleverly dressed up in lilting rhyme and colourful illustrations. His message was then made all the more effective by his history of drawing political cartoons and his intimate understanding of what it means to be an outsider in American society. Individually, Geisel's books may not all have been well-received, but as a whole Geisel's body of work proved to be enormously successful, allowing Geisel to stay true to his vision and to bring his convictions to the nation.

¹ Judith Frutig, “Dr. Seuss’ Green-Eggs-and-Ham World,” in *Of Sneetches and Whos and the Good Dr. Seuss: Essays on the Writings and Life of Theodor Geisel*, ed. Thomas Fensch (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1997), 77–81.

² Peter Bunzel, “The Wacky World of Dr. Seuss Delights the Child - and Adult - Readers of His Books,” in *Of Sneetches and Whos and the Good Dr. Seuss: Essays on the Writings and Life of Theodor Geisel*, ed. Thomas Fensch (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1997), 11–13.

³ E.J. Kahn, “Children’s Friend,” in *Of Sneetches and Whos and the Good Dr. Seuss: Essays on the Writings and Life of Theodor Geisel*, ed. Thomas Fensch (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1997), 17–35.

Early Life

Theodor Geisel, nicknamed Ted, was born on March 2, 1904 in the town of Springfield, Massachusetts.⁴ Geisel's family had strong ties to the German community in Springfield, as his father was the son of a local German brewer, and his mother was the daughter of a German baker.⁵ For the most part Geisel's early childhood was a happy one, filled with time spent with friends and trips to the local zoo with his father. Geisel often credited his mother's love of poetry and of music during this time as having a profound impact on much of his later work.⁶ Often at bedtime, Henrietta Geisel could be heard singing to her children the songs she had invented to sell pies in her father's bakery, and the lilting rhyme from these little ditties would later work their way into Ted Geisel's unique writing style. At the same time, Geisel's parents also worked hard to ensure that from an early age Ted and his sister Marnie, were proud of their German heritage. Geisel later said of his childhood, "In 1905, while Albert Einstein was discovering relativity, I, at the age of one, was going to German clambakes on Sunday afternoons in my diapers."⁷

It was this German heritage, however, which would teach Geisel early on what it felt like to be an outsider. In 1914, the year Geisel turned ten, the outbreak of the First World War brought strong anti-German sentiments to Springfield, and the Geisels soon found themselves the targets of discrimination. During this time Geisel would often find himself accosted by classmates who would hurl insults and rocks at him on his way home from school.⁸ This discrimination was only heightened in January of 1920 when prohibition was officially enacted

⁴ Judith Morgan and Neil Morgan, *Dr. Seuss & Mr. Geisel: A Biography* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1995).

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Quoted in *Ibid.*

⁸ Donald E. Pease, *Theodor Seuss Geisel, Lives and Legacies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

in the United States.⁹ Just one month earlier, Geisel's father had taken over management of the family business, and the subsequent shutting down of the brewery caused the family extreme economic hardship and alienated those few neighbours who were still friendly to the family.¹⁰ By the time Geisel left home to study at Dartmouth, the situation in Springfield was quite grim. These early influences, however, would end up shaping much of Geisel's literary career, as a number of his satires would deal with standing up for the outsider and the little guy on the bottom of the heap.

Political Cartoons

Before making a name for himself in children's literature, Ted Geisel was a political cartoonist. His first cartoons were published while he was studying at Dartmouth, at which time he also worked to become the editor of the school's satirical newspaper, *The Jack-o-Lantern*.¹¹ Many of his first cartoons were meant to lambast the various staff and students at the college, but no one was safe from Geisel's relentless humour, including revered literary and political figures.¹² It was at Dartmouth where Geisel discovered his love of Swift and of Voltaire,¹³ figures who he would later cite as being his chief inspiration in much of his own satire (particularly Swift).¹⁴ Geisel's Dartmouth days also led to the creation of his now-famous pseudonym, Dr. Seuss. After an incident in which he was caught with alcohol on campus during prohibition, Geisel was removed from the editorship of *Jack-o-Lantern* and banned from publishing his cartoons in the paper. However, being the subversive character that he was, Geisel

⁹ Morgan and Morgan, *Dr. Seuss & Mr. Geisel*.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Pease, *Theodor Seuss Geisel*.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ "Dr. Seuss on Dr. Seuss," *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*, September 26, 1991, sec. Orange County.

began publishing under his mother's maiden name of Seuss in order to avoid arousing the suspicions of the Dean.¹⁵

Later Geisel would turn his attention to political cartoons on an international level, working a twenty-one-month contract for the magazine *PM* during the Second World War.¹⁶ During this time the two most common targets of Geisel's attacks were American isolationism and the rise of Hitler to power. With regards to the former, Geisel was not necessarily in favour of going to war, but with the political situation internationally growing more heated, he saw war with Germany as being inevitable.¹⁷ With the latter, Geisel often portrayed Hitler as immature and prone to tantrums and outbursts, even going so far as to portray him as a baby in the Mein Early Kampf series.¹⁸

These cartoons became extremely influential in Geisel's later work, as many of the characteristics of the Hitler parodies can be found in other tyrannical or despotic leaders in Geisel's picture books, including King Derwin (*Bartholomew and the Oobleck* 1949) and Yertle the Turtle (*Yertle the Turtle and other stories* 1958).¹⁹ Writing for *PM* also made Geisel more aware of the international political situation, and his later fears of a third world war would inspire a number of his satirical picture books.

In the end, Geisel's early career had a profound impact on his children's literature. His experience creating political satire made Geisel more aware of the international political scene, and the success he experienced taught him not to fear speaking his mind, regardless of the forum.

¹⁵ Pease, *Theodor Seuss Geisel*.

¹⁶ Philip Nel, *Dr. Seuss: American Icon* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc., 2004).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Yertle the Turtle

It was not until 1958 that Geisel first attempted to bring together his political satire and his children's literature. *Yertle the Turtle and other stories* became Geisel's first critique of government policy within the confines of a picture book, with the subject at hand being the dangers of totalitarianism. In the title story, the character of Yertle is king of the Turtles on the island of Sala-ma-sond, who lives by the policy that his dominion includes everything which lies within his line of sight. Being unsatisfied with the size of his kingdom, however, Yertle begins to command his subjects to climb on top of one another in order to build him a bigger throne. As his sightline, and consequently his kingdom, grows, Yertle begins to get greedy and orders more and more turtles to climb onto the stack and increase the height of his throne. His pride causes him to ignore the pleas of the turtle Mack at the bottom of the stack, who has “pains in [his] back and [his] shoulders and knees,” and wants to know, “How long must we stand here, Your Majesty, please?”²⁰ Ignoring the needs of his subjects becomes Yertle's downfall, as when his throne reaches a height of 5,307 turtles, Mack gives out a burp and topples the stack, leaving Yertle dethroned and stuck in the mud. The story ends with the positive message that, “. . . the turtles, of course . . . all the turtles are free / As turtles and, maybe, all creatures should be.”²¹

Although it is not overtly obvious from the outset, being published just thirteen years after the Second World War, Geisel intended Yertle to be a facsimile of Adolf Hitler, and a warning against the dangers of absolute power. Decades later, in a 1989 interview alongside Maurice Sendak, Geisel was asked whether any of his characters were meant to represent particular historical figures. He responded, “Not in their actual form. Yertle the Turtle is Adolf

²⁰ Dr. Seuss, “Yertle the Turtle,” in *Yertle the Turtle* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1986), 2–30.

²¹ *Ibid.*

Hitler . . . The other historical characters, I don't know about.”²² This fact did not surprise Geisel's contemporaries, as journalist Peter Bunzel noted in a 1959 article in *Life* magazine that, “despotism gets the works in *Yertle the Turtle*.”²³ Visually the correlation is not difficult to see. Throughout the illustrations in the book, Yertle is presented as a near mirror image to the pose which Geisel often gave Hitler in his many political cartoons during the war. Beyond appearances, Yertle exhibits many of the traits which would be expected of a tyrant, including disregard for the needs of his subjects, an insatiable hunger for power, and an ever-growing sense of self-importance.

As an image of Hitler, however, Yertle was meant as a warning to all Americans against the dangers of absolute power. The 1950s in America were a time of extreme anti-Communism and fear of the rising power of the USSR. Up until his death in 1953, Joseph Stalin had ruled the Soviet Union with an iron fist for nearly two and a half decades, employing many of the same control tactics as Russia's most brutal czar, Ivan the Terrible.²⁴ Even after Stalin was no longer in control, he still left behind the vestiges of a dictatorship which had the potential to threaten world politics. In his book *Stalin*, biographer T.H. Rigby says of Stalin's legacy: “The governmental system as Stalin left it might be described as an elaborate, completely centralized bureaucratic mechanism for the command and control of society.”²⁵ For Geisel, this centralized power system brought back memories of the rise of Hitler to power, and reawakened old fears of a possible third world war. His reaction was to publish “Yertle the Turtle,” which followed in the footsteps of his earlier political work, and which attempted to warn Americans of the potential

²² Glenn Edward Sadler, “Maurice Sendak and Dr. Seuss: A Conversation,” in *Of Sneetches and Whos and the Good Dr. Seuss: Essays on the Writings and Life of Theodor Geisel*, ed. Thomas Fensch (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1997), 135–40.

²³ Bunzel, “The Wacky World of Dr. Seuss.”

²⁴ T.H. Rigby, ed., *Stalin*, Great Lives Observed (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1966).

²⁵ Ibid.

international political implications of the Soviet dictatorship. Although this story was intended for a child audience, the subject matter strikes out at an issue which at the time was very real in the adult world.

One thing that “Yertle the Turtle” does, however, is present this political critique in a nicely framed package with a satisfying ending, in which the tyrant gets what he deserves and the turtles lives happily ever after. Because of this tidy ending and the clear morals, the story shares, in general, *Yertle the Turtle and other stories* garnered positive reviews from critics. In May of 1958 a writer for the *Chicago Tribune* describes the collection of stories as, “Three shining examples of Dr. Seuss' unique art . . . pointing little morals for our delight and profit,” as well as “A hilarious addition to the Dr. Seuss shelf.”²⁶ The same day this review was published, David Dempsey of the *NY Times* wrote of “Yertle the Turtle:”

This overthrow of the mighty by the lowly is a favorite [*sic*] motif of Geisel's, and has a warm appeal for children, who of necessity identify themselves with the ruled rather than the rulers. It suggests that there is an instinctive wisdom in rebellion, or at least in showing up one's betters.²⁷

Yertle was well-received, perhaps because his message and moral were one with which the American public could identify. Coming out of WWII, the concept of a tyrant overthrown and an end to a totalitarian regime would have been a popular one, and the fact that Yertle addresses this concept, critiquing absolutism with a comfortable and satisfying ending served to put him on the top of the best-seller lists for nearly six months in 1958.²⁸

The Sneetches

Published in 1961, *The Sneetches and other stories* contained one of Geisel's softest social satires, a commentary on race relations and prejudice. “The Sneetches” is the story of a

²⁶ P. G., “Dr. Seuss Points Some Morals,” *Chicago Daily Tribune (1923-1963)*, May 11, 1958, sec. Part 4.

²⁷ David Dempsey, “The Significance of Dr. Seuss,” *New York Times*, May 11, 1958.

²⁸ “Children’s Best Seller,” *New York Times*, November 2, 1958, sec. Book Review.

race of creatures who inhabit unnamed beaches, and who are a divided society based on belly-markings. The story opens with the simple explanation that, “Now, the Star-Belly Sneetches / Had bellies with stars. / The Plain-Belly Sneetches / Had none upon thars.”²⁹ These stars quickly become a source of division amongst the Sneetches, as the star-bellied Sneetches consider themselves better than the plain-bellied Sneetches, and so exclude them from all beach activities. All this changes when a character by the name of Sylvester McMonkey McBean arrives and offers to add stars to the bellies of plain-bellied Sneetches for a small fee. When the star-bellied Sneetches become angry at the fact that they can no longer distinguish themselves as superior, McBean then offers to divide the Sneetches again by removing stars from bellies for a slightly larger fee. Eventually the Sneetches get caught up in an endless cycle of adding and removing stars, the result of which is no one can remember who was originally plain and who was starred, and McBean makes away with all their money. The story ends on a note of hope, however, as “The Sneetches got really quite smart on that day, / The day they decided that Sneetches are Sneetches / And no kind of Sneetch is the best on the beaches.”³⁰ Much like Yertle, this story has a comfortable moral and a simple resolution to the problems of the Sneetches.

Even the illustrations in this particular story tend to give off the impression of a more light-hearted tone when discussing a serious moral issue. Moving away from the greens and blues, which dominate the illustrations in *Yertle the Turtle and other stories*, the illustrations in “The Sneetches” are characterized by bright colours and animated characters. These bright colours feature prominently in some of the most discriminatory moment in the story, as the

²⁹ Dr. Seuss, “The Sneetches,” in *The Sneetches and Other Stories*, Party Edition (New York: Random House Children’s Books, 1989), 2–25.

³⁰ Ibid.

yellow creatures stand out vividly against the white of the beach and the light blue of the water, giving an overall light-heartedness to the image.

The softness of the social critique, when combined with the playful illustrations, tended to give critics reviewing “The Sneetches” a more positive impression of the moralizing intent of the story. In November 1961, George W. Woods of the *NY Times* wrote of the collection of stories, “When it comes to fun, Dr. Seuss is still number one.”³¹ Woods goes on to describe the stories as “mostly moralistic tales all filled with drawings of his [Seuss'] crazy creations,” while “The Sneetches” itself is described as, “the riotous title story.”³² Writing with similar sentiments, Joan Beck of the *Chicago Daily Tribune* refers to the collection as “parables on prejudice, stubbornness, and fear of the unknown, thumpingly told in the famous Dr. Seuss style that starts with the absurd and the preposterous and goes from there.”³³

These critiques seem somewhat ironic considering the supposed subject matter of the piece, and the gravity with which Geisel approached the subject when writing the book. “The Sneetches” was originally published as a short story in the magazine *Redbook* in July 1953,³⁴ and in a 1983 interview in which he reflected back on his work over the previous decades, Geisel claims that “The Sneetches” “was inspired by my opposition to anti-Semitism.”³⁵ The story was then republished in 1961, amidst growing racial tensions in the United States leading up to the Civil Rights Movement. Following the results of the case *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, in which the Supreme Court struck down the laws pertaining to segregation in schools, rioting

³¹ George A. Woods, “To Travel, to Travel, With Many a Wonderful Port-of-Call: -- for the Very Young, That Is,” *New York Times*, November 12, 1961, sec. Book Review.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Joan Beck, “Picture Fun,” *Chicago Daily Tribune (1923-1963)*, November 12, 1961, sec. Part 4 Section 2.

³⁴ Philip Nel, “Was the Cat in the Hat Black?: Exploring Dr. Seuss’s Racial Imagination,” *Children’s Literature* 42 (2014): 71–98.

³⁵ Jonathan Cott, “The Good Dr. Seuss,” in *Of Sneetches and Whos and the Good Dr. Seuss: Essays on the Writings and Life of Theodor Geisel*, ed. Thomas Fensch (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1997), 99–123.

began at schools across the country as local politicians worked to actively resist this ruling.³⁶ Understanding the plight of the outsider because of his own background, Geisel's republication of "The Sneetches" represents a deliberate move to defend those people who were fighting so hard against discrimination, and to direct public attention to the fact that, like the Sneetches, all Americans are alike and deserve equal treatment. Somehow, though, the gravity of this message did not seem to come across to critics, or if it did, then it was glossed over in favour of bright illustrations and lilting rhyme. The result was a story which was widely accepted and enjoyed by the American public as a softly moralistic tale about love and acceptance.

The Lorax

Beginning with the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962, the American environmental movement began to pick up steam throughout the 1960s.³⁷ By the time Geisel published *The Lorax* in 1971, the movement was coming into its peak, a peak which would last until the Reagan administration came into power in 1980.³⁸ Ironically, however, unlike Yertle and the Sneetches, *The Lorax* was not nearly so appreciated for its overt moralizing and critique of big business. In fact, this story did not even become a best seller until nearly a decade later when the environmental movement became threatened and needed a friendly mascot like the Lorax to carry it through the 1980s.³⁹ Opening in a vague location, "At the far end of town / where the Grickle-grass grows / and the wind smells slow-and-sour when it blows / and no birds ever sing excepting old crows . . ." the story takes the child reader into a desolate world where clearly an extreme amount of damage has been done to the environment, begging the question as

³⁶ David L. Kirp, "Retreat into Legalism: The Little Rock School Desegregation Case in Historic Perspective," in *The American Civil Rights Movement: Readings and Interpretations* (United States of America: McGraw-Hill/Dushkin, 2001), 271–76.

³⁷ Benjamin Kline, *First Along the River: A Brief History of the U.S. Environmental Movement*, Third Edition (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007).

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Pease, *Theodor Seuss Geisel*.

to what has occurred to create such a wasteland.⁴⁰ The answer comes in the tale of the Lorax himself, a small orange guardian who claims to “speak for the trees” and sees himself as the environmental protector of the truffula tree forest in which he lives.⁴¹ Throughout the book the Lorax finds himself in conflict with the Once-ler, a mysterious character who insists upon continually chopping down the truffula trees in order to manufacture a product he calls a thneed, which is “a Fine-Something-That-All-People-Need!”⁴² As the Once-ler continues to “bigger and bigger” his business, the Lorax is forced to send away all the animal inhabitants of the forest in order to ensure their survival, as the by-products of the Once-ler's factory have made the forest unlivable.⁴³ Finally, the Once-ler learns his lesson about sustainability when the last truffula tree is chopped down and he can no longer produce the thneeds his business so depends upon. The book ends with the sombre polemic that “UNLESS someone like you [the reader] / cares a whole awful lot, / nothing is going to get better. / It's not.”⁴⁴ This ending is far from the happy endings of many of Geisel's earlier works, and while the characters in this story certainly do learn their lesson by the end, there is a certain sense that it is too late for the Once-ler to change his ways, and what little hope remains rests in the slim chance that the child reader will do better next time.

In order to better make his point about just how bleak Geisel saw the environmental situation becoming, in *The Lorax* the author also chose to stray from his typical colour palette in the illustrations. While most Seuss books are characteristically known for their bright colours and whimsical characters, *The Lorax* opens on a scene filled with dark and dismal colours, washed with grey and punctuated with a dark purple. In contrast with the bright and cheerful

⁴⁰ Dr. Seuss, *The Lorax* (New York: Random House, 1971).

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

colours of the truffula forest, these bleak colours serve to emphasize the desolation of the landscape as caused by the Once-ler's greed, and underscore Geisel's dramatic warning about the potential harm of failing to respect the environment.

Unfortunately, the dark colours and harsh message presented in *The Lorax* seemed to have turned away many potential readers. In her biography titled *Dr. Seuss*, author Ruth K. MacDonald point out, "That the book [The Lorax] was not as commercially successful as other Seuss titles may indicate that the obvious moralizing here was not so popular with the children's book-buying public, since this is not a simple amusing book that aims primarily to teach children to read."⁴⁵ Prior to *The Lorax*, Geisel had been building an empire on whimsy and light-heartedness, and most of his social critiques were buried deep within pleasant morals and happy endings, and the book-buying public did not respond well. The book certainly received reviews that were, if not critical, then certainly tempered. In November of 1971 a reviewer for the *Christian Science Monitor* wrote of *The Lorax*, "The master of nonsense turning his deft pen to such serious subjects as ecological disaster? Nonsense . . . though not really *vintage* Seussiana."⁴⁶ This review somewhat echoed a piece published *LA Times* reporter Ursula Vils in August of the same year, in which Vils also remarks that, "The new book [the Lorax] features such typical Seussisms as 'Grickle-grass,' 'Truffula tree,' 'Thneeds' and, of course, the Lorax, 'who speaks for the trees.' Yet it seems more an adult book than one for children. Its message is serious: Clean up the environment before it's too late."⁴⁷ Most critics, it would seem, were wary

⁴⁵ Ruth K. MacDonald, ed., *Dr. Seuss*, Twayne's United States Authors Series: Children's Literature (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1988).

⁴⁶ J.F.S., "Under the Shade of the Truffula Trees," *The Christian Science Monitor (1908-Current File)*, November 11, 1971, sec. Children's Books.

⁴⁷ Ursula Vils, "Dr. Seuss: A Message for Adults: Dr. Seuss Books," *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*, August 30, 1971, sec. Part IV.

of the strong message sent by *The Lorax*, and this wariness was reflected in the book's popularity throughout the 1970s.

Readers and book critics were not the only groups concerned with the strong message which *The Lorax* presented. In early 1972, the book was adapted to a short television special to be aired on CBS. However, fearing that the book's overt critique of big business would offend the network's sponsors, CBS chose to soften the environmental message of the piece so as to make it more palatable.⁴⁸ The result was a half-hour animated special which did more to dazzle the eyes with its wide colour palette than to critique big business and petition for the saving of the environment.

Perhaps the biggest scandal created by *The Lorax*, however, occurred not in the early 1970s, but nearly two decades after the book's initial publication, when it was nearly banned from a school in Northern California. In September of 1989 a number of prominent logging families in the town of Laytonville, California launched a protest to ban *The Lorax* from the required reading list for second-graders in their local school.⁴⁹ The chief complaint presented by the protestors was the fact that they saw the environmental message presented in *The Lorax* as fundamentally attacking the logging industry, which supported the town. The controversy began with children who, having read the book, began to question the morality of the logging industry in which many of their parents worked.⁵⁰ However, the issue quickly spiralled out of control when the protestors brought their complaints above the heads of the school representatives to the members of the school board itself. Eventually the book was saved, as the school board voted to

⁴⁸ Morgan and Morgan, *Dr. Seuss & Mr. Geisel*.

⁴⁹ "Town's Loggers Want 'The Lorax' Axed," *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*, September 14, 1989.

⁵⁰ John M. Glionna, Times Staff Writer, "Timber Town Split to Roots: Child's Tale by Dr. Seuss Lays Bare Tensions That Threaten to Topple Reign of Loggers," *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*, September 18, 1989, sec. San Diego County.

keep it on the second-grade required reading list.⁵¹ The controversy, however, shed a spotlight on long-held tensions within the town itself, where the failing lumber industry felt itself under attack by an influx of environmentally-conscious outsiders.⁵² In the end, the protest lasted a full month, and Laytonville found itself forced to make a choice on whether economics or freedom of speech was more important to the struggling community.⁵³ This incident, more than any other I would argue, demonstrates the subversive power of children's literature and picture books.

Ironically, despite its bad reviews and controversial reception (or perhaps because of them), after 1971, Geisel maintained that *The Lorax* was his personal favourite amongst all his Seuss books.⁵⁴

The Butter Battle Book

Following the subdued public reaction to *The Lorax*, Geisel for the most part went back to writing his more whimsical works, churning out such titles as *There's a Wocket in my Pocket* (1974), *Please Try to Remember the First of October* (1977), and *I Can Read with My Eyes Shut!* (1978).⁵⁵ However, in 1984 Geisel again shocked readers with what would become the most controversial Seuss book of all time, *The Butter Battle Book*. As the name would imply, this book narrates the story of two warring races, known as the Yooks and the Zooks, who cannot agree on how best to butter their bread. This disagreement over whether bread should be buttered on top or underneath soon creates conflict between the two races, conflict which then

⁵¹ John M. Glionna, Times Staff Writer, "Lumber Town's School Board Spares 'The Lorax,'" *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*, October 7, 1989, sec. San Diego County.

⁵² Writer, "Timber Town Split to Roots."

⁵³ John M. Glionna, Times Staff Writer, "'Lorax' Survives Ax, Still on Reading List: Audience Cheers Laytonville School Board Decision to Keep Book," *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*, October 7, 1989.

⁵⁴ Mary Stofflet, *Dr. Seuss From Then to Now: A Catalogue of the Retrospective Exhibition* (San Diego: The San Diego Museum of Art, 1986).

⁵⁵ Thomas Fensch, ed., *Of Sneetches and Whos and the Good Dr. Seuss: Essays on the Writings and Life of Theodor Geisel* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1997).

escalates into a sort of arms race as Yooks and Zooks attempt to outdo one another in advanced weaponry. To be sure, the “Boys in the Back Room” tend to provide the Yook narrator with such zany and wacky weapons as the “Triple-Sling Jigger,” the “Utterly Sputter” and the “Kick-a-Poo Kid / which they loaded with powerful Poo-a-Doo Powder / and ants' eggs and bees' legs / and dried-fried clam chowder.”⁵⁶ Nevertheless the real-world parallels are quite obvious, and the open ending of the book leaves the reader with a certain unsettling feeling which is not typically associated with children's literature. The story ends with the Yook narrator facing off against his Zook rival, each holding a weapon known as the “Bitsy Big-Boy Boomeroo,” each threatening to drop this weapon on the other, effectively wiping out the rival nation.⁵⁷ The final words of the book, spoken by the grandson of the narrator Yook:

“Grandpa!” I shouted. “Be careful! Oh, gee!
Who's going to drop it?
Will *you* . . . ? Or will *he* . . . ?”
“Be patient,” said Grandpa. “We'll see.
We will see . . .”⁵⁸

Immediately opposite this chilling final statement is a blank white page, leaving the reader to question what the inevitable outcome of this conflict must be. This open ending to the story was entirely intentional on Geisel's part. When questioned about why he did not give the book a tidy or satisfying ending, one which would reassure the fears of his young readers, Geisel argued that his book could not have a tidy ending because it was meant to mimic real life, which does not have an easy solution, and to give it one would be to create a piece of propaganda.⁵⁹

With all this in mind, *The Butter Battle Book* certainly did paint a chilling picture of the dangers of the nuclear arms race, as seen through the twentieth century. By the time Geisel was

⁵⁶ Dr. Seuss, *The Butter Battle Book* (New York: Random House, 1984).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ MacDonald, *Dr. Seuss.*

writing this book, the arms race was reaching a peak in terms of its potential to bring about the end of the world. The world was introduced to the neutron bomb under the Carter administration in 1978, a weapon which had the potential to kill people on the same scale as the atom bomb, but which left buildings and property untouched.⁶⁰ The Soviet response to this weapon, and to the growing arsenal of nuclear weapons in Europe, was to introduce systems to destabilize their weapons system and make it more difficult to control.⁶¹ In his book *At the Borderline of Armageddon*, former U.S. Diplomat James E. Goodby explained the reasoning behind the arms race as follows:

Comparisons to nineteenth-century conventional means of warfare are completely misplaced in the nuclear age. Nuclear weapons are orders of magnitude more powerful than any explosive that has gone before, not to mention the effects of firestorm and radiation. In the 1970s, the implications of that fact . . . were set aside on the theory that deterrence could only be maintained if U.S. nuclear forces were designed to fight a war in stages, with the United States holding the advantage at the end of the war. "Escalation dominance" had been applied to strategic nuclear wars.⁶²

Although the Reagan administration would attempt to curb this threat through the 1980s with strategic arms control, in the eyes of the American public these attempts were not exceedingly clear at the start of the decade. Reagan's hard anti-Communist stance, combined with Soviet leader Andropov's speech in 1983 denouncing Reagan's call to peace, led Americans to fear that Reagan would continue the arms race in order to best the Soviets.⁶³ Writing alongside public opinion, and also expressing his own renewed fears of a third world war, Geisel created *The Butter Battle Book* as a response to this crisis, and perhaps a call to government to take a firmer stand on strategic arms control.

⁶⁰ James E. Goodby, *At the Borderline of Armageddon: How American Presidents Managed the Atom Bomb* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006).

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

Naturally, however, with its difficult themes and open ending, *The Butter Battle Book* was not received well by critics. Eden Ross Lipton of the *NY Times* referred to *The Butter Battle Book* as “Dr. Seuss' Bleak Polemic,” a story which “has no happy ending.”⁶⁴ Kathy Hacker of the *Hartford Courant* noted, “This is heavy-handed stuff for a man who, before 'Butter Battle,' cooked up no worse a plague than the slimy green Oobleck that rained on Bartholomew Cubbins.”⁶⁵ Gloria Goodale of the *Christian Science Monitor* suggested that, “What Geisel rather disparagingly calls 'a happy ending' may in fact be the ray of hope that children need when learning about adult troubles.”⁶⁶ In a desperate plea, Michael Dirda of the *Washington Post* noted that, “The characters too are so ludicrous, amusing, and likable . . . that they can't be doing these horrible things to each other. But they are. They really are.”⁶⁷ Finally, with perhaps the most damning critique of all, Betty Jean Lifton (also of the *NY Times*) wrote:

But dear Dr. Seuss, we want to protest – you can't leave us hanging like this. Can't the Boys in the Back Room come up with some equally clever peace machines, or the Cat in the Hat come back to save the day, if not the world? No use. Our concerned doctor – much like our real Dr. Spock – offers no placebos this time.⁶⁸

Only on one front did Geisel back off from creating a perfect parallel with real life, in that neither the Yooks nor the Zooks are meant to identify with a particular race or nation. Throughout the book, both races are visually represented as essentially the same. As Geisel once said, “what I was trying to say was that the Yooks and the Zooks were intrinsically the same. The more I made them different, the more I was defeating the story.”⁶⁹ However, despite this

⁶⁴ Eden Ross Lipson, “Dr. Seuss' Bleak Polemic,” *New York Times*, February 26, 1984, sec. Book Review.

⁶⁵ Kathy Hacker, “Seuss: Serious Questions On a Disturbing Subject,” *The Hartford Courant (1923-1991)*, April 11, 1984.

⁶⁶ Gloria Goodale, “From Dr. Seuss, an Arms Race Allegory about Yooks and Zooks: BOOKS,” *The Christian Science Monitor (1908-Current File)*, March 2, 1984, sec. Ideas.

⁶⁷ Michael Dirda, “Review 1 -- No Title,” *The Washington Post (1974-Current File)*, March 11, 1984, sec. Book World.

⁶⁸ Betty Jean Lifton, “The Butter Battle Book. By Dr. Seuss. Unpaged. Illustrated. New York: Random House. \$6.95.,” *New York Times*, February 26, 1984, sec. Book Review.

⁶⁹ Quoted in MacDonald, *Dr. Seuss*.

portrayal of sameness, many critics seemed unwilling to accept the fact that the two sides could identify with one another, instead choosing to see the Yooks as representing the Americans, and the Zooks the USSR.⁷⁰ This, in tandem with attempts to identify the ridiculous weaponry in the book with existing military technology,⁷¹ led Charles Osgood of CBS News to report that, “*The Butter Battle Book* of Dr. Seuss / is too much like the Evening Neuss.”⁷²

Clearly not popular with critics, nevertheless *The Butter Battle Book* did remarkably well in sales when it was first released, remaining on the *NY Times* best-seller list for three months.⁷³ The book also sold well internationally, selling more copies in Great Britain than any other Seuss book,⁷⁴ and being translated into more languages worldwide than any of its counterparts.⁷⁵ Sales would indicate that *The Butter Battle Book* was one of the most popular Seuss books of all time. It is important to note, however, that overwhelmingly parents expressed concern over the mature themes covered in the book, writing to Geisel with complaints about the inconclusive and unsettling ending. One California mother even wrote to Geisel to inform him of her efforts to have his book banned from her child's school after having read the story.⁷⁶ Arguably, sales of *The Butter Battle Book* were driven not by the book itself, but by Seuss' reputation as a whimsical poet, and by tackling such a difficult subject, Geisel shocked the nation into response.

Conclusion

With his unique brand of whimsical humour and immense respect for the intelligence of children, Theodor Seuss Geisel made a career of publishing political and social satire in the form

⁷⁰ John M. Weinstein, “Fortunately, The Yooks and Zooks Are Not Alike,” *The Washington Post (1974-Current File)*, May 5, 1984.

⁷¹ “The Big-Boy Boomeroo Race: Michael Kilian,” *Chicago Tribune (1963-Current File)*, May 1, 1984.

⁷² Quoted in Pease, *Theodor Seuss Geisel*.

⁷³ “Oct. 7, 1984 The New York Times Book Review Best Sellers,” *New York Times*, October 7, 1984, sec. Book Review.

⁷⁴ Morgan and Morgan, *Dr. Seuss & Mr. Geisel*.

⁷⁵ Pease, *Theodor Seuss Geisel*.

⁷⁶ Morgan and Morgan, *Dr. Seuss & Mr. Geisel*.

of children's literature. Being well versed in subversive literature, having been a political cartoonist through WWII, Geisel was unafraid to tackle challenging subjects in his picture books. At the same time, previous experience in being an outsider amongst his peers made Geisel acutely aware of social injustices and the damaging effects of discrimination. While the success of these books depended largely on how they were packaged and what sort of ending the story presented, Geisel remained true to his vision throughout his career.

Perhaps the best example of this perfect marriage between political satire and children's literature, however, can be found in a short anecdote which Geisel was fond of sharing. In 1974, Geisel was given a challenge by his friend, political satirist Art Buchwald. Buchwald had recently mailed Geisel an autographed copy of his latest political novel, and with the novel he dared Geisel to write something political himself. In response to the dare, Geisel took a copy of his latest book *Marvin K. Mooney, Will You Please Go Now!* and crossed out the name Marvin K. Mooney each time it appeared, replacing it with the name Richard M. Nixon. Buchwald then printed the revised version in his newspaper column, and nine days later Nixon resigned.⁷⁷ This was the man who was never afraid to speak his mind, and in doing so, captured the imaginations of millions.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

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