

An Introduction to Dr. Seuss

For baby boomers he was the poet laureate. Into a world of Crayola crayons, construction-paper pilgrims, and asphalt playgrounds, Dr. Seuss introduced an adventure of rhyme and image with the power to alleviate our boredom, challenge our imaginations, and even shape our young lives.

I first made the acquaintance of Dr. Seuss on a dreary afternoon, amidst an unruly crowd of second graders, facing the prospect of a rained-out recess. Typically we greeted the crisis with behavior that bordered on anarchy. Miss Blakemere's futile attempts to calm the fray were unsuccessful until as a last resort she hoisted the white flag of a story hour.

Our wary group, weaned on Superman comics and Burma Shave signs, settled in with trepidation, prepared for another installment of the dreaded "*Once upon a time.*"

*The sun did not shine
It was too wet to play.
So we sat in the house
All that cold, cold, wet day.*

Miss Blakemere paused and looked up, savoring the moment. A sly smile preceded a delightful falsetto:

*We looked!
Then we saw him step in on the mat!
We looked!
And we saw him!
The Cat in the Hat!*

We were hooked. As she paraded up and down the aisles, displaying the illustrations to us as she read, we clamored over one another, vying for a better view. The cat was comically rendered, with a Chaplinesque savoir faire, and his companions, devoid of the traditional cherubic attributes of kiddie-lit characters, looked impish and familiar.

The story captivated us – uninvited cat in a tilted stovepipe hat, who created mayhem as well as magic; goofy little creatures called Thing One and Thing Two, who ransacked the house with aplomb; and the rhyming goldfish, whose Greek-chorus conscience the children warily ignored. It all ended in a breathless race to put everything back in place before mom got home from her errands.

By the time Miss Blakemere closed the book, we were transfixed. Intuitively, she understood what had transpired; a significant moment in our rowdy existence had just passed, and none of us had any inkling of how important that story was to become.

I was, like children everywhere that fall, being introduced to a new and important wonder of the childhood world: an author who neither preached nor conspired against honest-to-gosh childhood whims; a writer-illustrator whose stories addressed the wild and woolly illogic of real kids longing to immerse themselves in books that tickled their boundless fancies and lifted their literacy spirits. It was as if my schoolmates and I had just made the acquaintance of a new and exciting secret playmate; a buddy who, although not always scrupulously well mannered according to tenets of the adult world, could be counted on to provide a fantastic refuge of wacky characters, convoluted logic, and silly vocabulary. And miraculously, grown-ups not only stood by while we reveled in the books, they actually condoned the stuff!

Here, at last was "children's literature" without the timidity and oversentimentality of traditional works yet which conformed to the features of classic picture-book narratives. The stories were replete with action involving wonderfully endearing characters, they contained frequent changes in imaginative and colorful scenery and were sustained by a narrative that led the reader in a comfortably symmetrical literary direction. This, however, was an assessment that I would apply to the works many years later. To me and my childhood lit-mates, first discovering the joys of independent reading, Dr. Seuss immediately became a synonym for lively and fanciful adventures.

To all of us there appeared to be no end to the author's ingenuity: Greeches and Grinches, Sneetches and Whos, an entire universe of nonsense gleefully engaged our minds and expanded our budding vocabularies. The stories, like our lives at that age, were masterworks of appealing improvisation – wonderful flights of ingenuity, humor, and sparkling word play. Logic be damned, the author seemed to suggest, let's just have some fun.

The books were piled in our rooms next to oversized catcher's mitts and the assorted flotsam of youth: dog-eared baseball cards, plastic kachina dolls from Uncle Ellwood's trip to Niagara Falls, Bazooka bubble-gum wrappers. The volumes were splattered with grape juice stains and cookie crumbs, their corners gnawed by the teething puppy, but they were cherished, the first books we ever cared about. We coveted them and bragged about our growing collections.

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"Whaddiya get for Christmas, Calvin? / got a Bozo punching bag, a Howdy Doody wash-mitt, a dart gun, and a coupla' Dr. Seuss books!" Categorizing books in the same treasured universe as sports gear and bubble gum was to us of no small intellectual consequence; in a real, but subtle way Dr. Seuss had become part of our coming of age.

Why were these works so important to us? Perhaps because Dr. Seuss accepted for a fact our own youthful artistic openness. We were longing for stories that imposed no limitations on our creativity and imagination. Like us, Dr. Seuss explored a boundless terrain of silliness and logic. It was as if he, like all of us at Albert Einstein Elementary School, continually demanded of the reigning authorities, "Who made up these rules, anyhow?" Dr. Seuss had become in a rare and special way one of us. Without ever meeting him, we knew that here at last was a grown-up who probably hated carrots, napped in the afternoon, doodled in the margins, and secretly sported a skinned knee.

As children who grew up on the white-bread escapades of Dick and Jane, we were utterly at the originality and shimmering spontaneity of these new tales. These were stories told with a sense of inspired nonsense and delicate warmth. The Cat in the Hat was a real and joyful pain in the neck; Horton was a nice old elephant but dreadfully slow on the uptake; the Grinch was every grouchy grown-up we had ever known; and Mulberry Street was all a baby-boomer neighborhood should be.

The books brought our families closer together in ways only shared experiences between parents and children can. They had a downright elixirlike effect on grown-ups. As children, we had grown accustomed to the predictable routine of adults reading to us from our family's private library stock. Dads tended to opt for a few bedtime paragraphs from *Treasure Island*, while moms (this was the fifties, remember) invariably selected another installment of the Oz saga or a few cloying chapters from *The Pony That Kept a Secret*. There was little drama in these renditions, and we usually dozed off, as intended, after only a few sentences.

Dr. Seuss, however, instigated a bedtime revolution. His playful language and captivating story lines turned once formal, mundane readings by our parents into wildly improvisational, side-splitting dramatic presentations. Moms altered their soothing voices to approximate the call of a Lorax; dads made noises like Sneetches and pretended to hatch an elephant egg; and we joined in the silliness, cavorting through those magical moments when all barriers disappeared and grown-ups became playmates and partners in fun.

Left alone, we would cuddle up in a couch or lie on a comfortable stretch of carpet and gaze at the pages for hours. As an illustrator, Dr. Seuss was a self-proclaimed interloper. The man behind the Quick, Henry, the Flit! advertising campaign, he had achieved a kind of cult status among the kids of my neighborhood. To his peers, Dr. Seuss was an artistic eccentric, a position he did little to challenge when he admitted (with what was surely a twinkle in his eye), that he "just never learned to draw." To those of us in the second grade, he was a veritable old master. Like his stories, his text illustrations were a poke in the eye of literary and artistic convention.

His expressive creatures and wondrous locales cascaded pages and seemed to hop over bindings. As readers, we zoomed in and out of scenes and screeched through evolving scenarios. Every page was a new and stimulating visual adventure with an endless variety of amusing creatures and expressionistic sets. Sam-I-Am served platters of green eggs and ham; moss covered, three-handled gredunzas were pursued by a cat in a fedora; Mr. Krinklebein, a talking goldfish, resided in a bowl overseen by wildly coiffed Thing One and Thing Two; and wockets filled our pockets.

There was certainly a moral sense to the books, but it was neither deliberately apparent nor overly pedantic. We got the message nonetheless; characters discovered the nature of racial prejudice, greed, disdain for the unusual, and the perils posed by uninvited guests. Lessons were usually presented in a subtle manner, but the stories avoided piety and solemnity to resolve themselves in a consistently upbeat way.

Today most of us who lived with and loved these stories are voracious readers. Books clutter our homes and offices and weigh down our luggage when we travel. We crowd bookstores and eagerly await reviews of new works. We are unabashedly enthusiastic readers, thanks to our earliest encounters with books that thrilled, entertained, and instructed us; stories filled with ingenious characters, wondrous images, and imaginative language.

Thanks to Dr. Seuss, and a supporting cast of insightful teachers and clever parents, we emerged from our collective childhood with imaginations enhanced, an enduring enjoyment of words, and a sense of visual literacy.

We were lucky to have encountered Dr. Seuss, and, now that I think of it, we were fortunate to have experienced a few rained-out recesses too.

Steven L. Brezzo
Director

San Diego Museum of Art
Introduction from the book - Dr. Seuss from Then to Now
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