

## **The Seuss Six and Collection Maintenance**

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Like millions of other children around the world, I grew up with books by Theodor Seuss Geisel known as Dr. Seuss. I learned to read with **One Fish Two Fish Red Fish Blue Fish** and **Green Eggs and Ham**.

Back in the 1970s when I took my first Children's Literature course, we discussed issues of sexism and racial stereotyping with several of Dr. Seuss' books. It's surprising to me that this is still a point of discussion. When I weeded my first children's collection in the early 1980s, I removed dozens and dozens of biased, racist, and sexist books from the collections I inherited.

Collection maintenance is "best practice", not censorship.

### **When Missions Collide**

The American Library Association's **Library Bill of Rights** and the **Freedom to Read Statement** stress the importance of free and open access to information. Librarians resist censorship and attempts at suppression. Instead, they make available the widest possible diversity of views and expressions.

However, libraries are also safe spaces that support inclusiveness and respect for diversity. Increasingly, teacher librarians have sought to build collections that foster inclusion, empathy, and tolerance (AASL, 2019).

Recently, these two contrasting missions collided with the announcement that six Dr. Seuss books would no longer be published.

### **The Seuss Six**

On March 2, 2021, Dr. Seuss Enterprises announced their decision to "cease publication and licensing" of six titles including:

And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street (1937)

McElligot's Pool (1947)

If I Ran the Zoo (1950)

Scrambled Eggs Super! (1953)

On Beyond Zebra! (1955)

The Cat's Quizzer (1976)

INSERT FIGURE 1 A-F. The Seuss Six.

Dr. Seuss Enterprises (2021) owns the intellectual property of Theodor Geisel. Working with a panel of experts including educators, they concluded that "these books portray people in ways

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that are hurtful and wrong” and are inconsistent with their mission of supporting children with messages of “hope, inspiration, inclusion, and friendship”.

INSERT FIGURE 2. Dr. Seuss Enterprises Announcement.

This announcement led to a frenzy of social media discussions about the implications of this decision and its impact on larger issues regarding intellectual property rights, selection, censorship, and building collections that respect diverse users.

### **The Intellectual Property of Dr. Seuss**

Theodor Seuss Geisel (1904-1991) wrote more than 60 books as Dr. Seuss that have been enjoyed by audiences around the world for more than 80 years.

INSERT FIGURE 3. Ted Geisel (Dr. Seuss) (1957). Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Early in his career, Geisel was a political cartoonist whose drawings regularly included racist stereotypes. When he started writing for children, some of these racist caricatures made their way into his books. When examining the people of color represented in Dr. Seuss picture books overall, “males of color are only presented in subservient, exotified, or dehumanized roles” and women and girls are mostly absent (Ishizuka & Stephens, 2019). However, he also wrote books containing positive messages about equality and individual differences.

In 1952, Geisel published the article ...But for Grown-Ups Laughing Isn't Any Fun in the New York Times expressing an awareness and concern about social norms of the times that connected conditioned humor with racial or religious stereotypes. Yet, his works for children at this time included stereotypical caricatures of Asian, Middle Eastern, and African people.

In the 1960s and 1970s, interest in avoiding stereotypes and bias in children's literature emerged as a concern for educators and school librarians. The Council on Interracial Books for Children (CIBC) was established in 1965 to “to promote a literature for children that better reflects the realities of a multicultural society.” In the 1970s, they published guidelines to help educators and librarians more effectively select children's literature with diversity in mind.

In a 1979 article, Arthur Applebee (1979, 451) noted that children were “likely to encounter bias and stereotyping in the portrayal... of virtually any group that can be singled out and distinguished from any other... Awareness of such stereotypes has escalated since the early 1960s.”

A 1981 report on ethnic stereotypes in children literature by Elaine Aoki (1981, 9) asked “How much longer will books cause Asian American children to crawl under their desks? How much longer will non-Asian American children formulate misconceptions?”

In the 1980s, Geisel made small changes to several books, but was reluctant to make larger changes to address specific examples of racism and sexism in his works. For instance in 1978,

the phrase “a Chinaman who eats with sticks” was replaced with “A Chinese man Who eats with sticks” and the illustration removed the bright yellow skin and long ponytail found in many of his racist caricatures. However the stereotypical clothing remained.

After his death in 1991, educators and researchers became more critical of specific works by Geisel. One author noted that “their intended audience of preschool children is one which is particularly vulnerable to the shaping influences of popular culture... the Seuss books altered their themes and characters over time to reflect changing cultural beliefs and values” (Lurie, 1990).

Regardless of whether the racial stereotyping in Geisel’s illustrations was purposeful or not, it has made some of his works problematic for school libraries. With so many books for young readers that provide accurate, positive representatives of diverse characters, do the “Seuss Six” belong in a quality school library collection?

ALA’s Code of Ethics (2008) states that “we respect intellectual property rights and advocate balance between the interests of information users and rights holders.” In the case of the Seuss Six, even the intellectual property owners have concluded that these items are “harmful and wrong”.

### **Selection vs Censorship**

Teacher librarians have a long tradition of careful selection practices and take steps to avoid censorship.

Lester Asheim (1953) noted that a key difference between selection and censorship is motivation. Librarians will suggest that a book is withdrawn to keep the collection strong rather than to prevent access to the item. However, the result is the same. The book is no longer part of the collection. As such, librarians must be careful about their intentions, particularly when removing items from the collection.

Asheim concludes that “selection seeks to protect the right of the reader to read; censorship seeks to protect – not the right – but the reader himself from the fancied effects of his reading.” This difference is important when considering the mission of a school library. The school librarian must consider their role in nurturing children as part of the collection development process by balancing a child’s right to read with the student’s evolving understanding of the content of the books they read.

### **Collection Maintenance**

The school library provides a wide range of high quality resources to support teaching and learning. The librarian encourages independent reading and assists learners in becoming fluent information users.

Effective librarians ensure that the collection meets the evolving needs of their users. This includes removing outdated materials and items that no longer meet the selection criteria.

Harmful anachronisms such as those found in the Seuss Six are commonly removed from children's collections. According to the American Library Association (ALA, 2018), "an optimal library collection is one that is reviewed on a consistent basis for accuracy, currency, usage, diversity, and subject area gaps."

In many ways, collection maintenance is more difficult than the initial selection process.

Since 1976, the CREW Method has been the "go-to" approach for weeding library collections. Jeanette Larson (2012, 25) points out that "a written weeding and discarding policy is a powerful and necessary defense against possible controversy." She warns against keeping older titles for "sentimental reasons".

One of the criteria for removal of an item is "poor content" including "material that contains biased, racist, or sexist terminology or views" (Larson, 2012, 17).

A book that meets the criteria for removal may be discarded or relocated. Books by well-known authors, award winners, or items that might be useful for research or as a teaching tool may be relocated. Larson (2012, 85) notes that a book containing "outdated information, stereotypes, and such may be useful for a museum or history center that focuses on the population or topic".

In the case of the Seuss Six, multiple collection maintenance policies may come into play. Katie Ishizuka-Stephens (2017) conducted a critical analysis of race in 50 Dr. Seuss books. Her study identified whether characters of color were portrayed through the themes of subservience, dehumanization, exotification, stereotypes, or caricature. Each of the Seuss Six contain several of these themes. For instance *The Cat's Quizzer* includes an image reflecting a stereotype, exotification, and caricature. In *Scrambled Eggs Super!*, the two people of color wear turbans and are "fetching" an egg for a white male child demonstrating subservience, exotification, and stereotypes.

All six titles meet the CREW criteria for removal based on their use of racial stereotypes. For instance, Asian characters are shown wearing stereotypical "rice paddy" head coverings in several of the books. And to *Think I Saw it on Mulberry Street* contains eight characters of color who are all represented through subservience, stereotypes, exotification, and caricature.

Arguably the most objectionable image comes from *If I Ran the Zoo*. This book tells the story of a young white male who dreams of being in charge of a zoo. He imagines the unusual creatures he might find in locations around the world and directs his "helpers" who are stereotypical caricatures of people from Africa, the Middle East, and Asian to bring their animals to his zoo. For instance, three archaic, stereotypical Asian characters described as "helpers" carry a cage above their heads while a white male child sits atop the cage holding a gun clearly representing the overall subservient role of the people of color found throughout the book. The child in the story also suggests that a "chieftain" wearing a turban should be included in the zoo along with

the creature he rides. In the same book, two African characters are portrayed with simian, dehumanizing features similar to Seuss's racist political cartoons. The caricatures are shirtless, shoeless, and wearing grass skirts.

INSERT FIGURE 4. Excerpt from *If I Ran the Zoo*.

(I'm not sure about the use of interior images. If we need permission, this image can be omitted)

Exotification can be found in the storylines related to people of Middle Eastern and Indian descent. On *Beyond Zebra!* and *To Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street* depict male characters wearing turbans and sometimes wearing curled-toe slippers. These people aren't associated with a particular culture, but appear to be a conglomeration of features from India and the Middle East region. They are shown in subservient roles such as pulling a cart.

Keep in mind that a children's collection is different from an adult collection. Students are unlikely to consider the publication date and historical context of a picture book.

## **Relocation**

Teacher librarians need to use caution when relocating materials. The establishment of restricted shelves or closed collections discourages free and open access to information. However, many schools maintain an archive or professional library that can be used for scholarly research or teaching. Relocating the *Seuss Six* to a more suitable collection is an option, however the items must meet the criteria for inclusion in this collection.

In addition to historic documents, a school archive may include a children's literature section. By examining the past, teachers and students are able to gain insight into the human experience connected to a particular time and place. This may be useful if the *Seuss Six* have a particular connection to this school.

Children's literature may also be part of the school's professional collection. For instance, *If I Ran the Zoo* (1950) could be used by teachers to discuss issues of racial stereotyping and white supremacy in children's literature. Or, *McElligot's Pool* (1947) and *Scrambled Eggs Super!* (1953) could be used to discuss dated or offensive terminology and representation of indigenous people. A teacher librarian might ask children to examine *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street* (1936) for examples of racial stereotyping and discuss how the book reflects the time period it was written.

Collection maintenance can be used as a learning experience for children and young adults. *This Is Your Brain on Stereotypes: How Science is Tackling Unconscious Bias* (2020) by Tanya Lloyd Kyi is a work of nonfiction for middle grade and young adult readers. It explores how the brain is wired for bias and explores how stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination emerge in children. The racist imagery in the works by Dr. Seuss are used as examples. Readers are encouraged to identify and address their own biases.

INSERT FIGURE 5. This Is Your Brain on Stereotypes: How Science is Tackling Unconscious Bias.

### **Cultural Authenticity and the Quest for Diversity**

The racially and culturally insensitive depictions found in the Seuss Six have fueled the ongoing debate about the content of school libraries. Many children's books from the 19th and 20th centuries such as *Little Black Sambo* (1899) by Helen Bannerman and *The Five Chinese Brothers* (1939) by Claire Huchet Bishop contain what are considered in the 21st century to contain archaic and outdated racial stereotypes.

“A long history of research shows that text accompanied with imagery, such as books with pictures, shapes children's racial attitudes. When children's books center Whiteness, erase people of color and other oppressed groups, or present people of color in stereotypical, dehumanizing, or subordinate ways, they both ingrain and reinforce internalized racism and White supremacy” (Ishizuka & Stephens, 2019).

Young children acquire implicit race attitudes early in life and children's picture books make lasting impressions. Students may not be aware of biased representations such as racist, sexist, or stereotypical messages found in their reading material until they become information fluent (Santora, 2013).

Through the leadership of non-profit organizations like We Need Diverse Books, many teacher librarians are selecting more books that reflect and honor the lives of all young readers. At the same time, books that no longer meet students needs are being deselected.

This combination of selection and deselect allows teacher librarians to address the need for cultural authenticity in their collections. Cultural authenticity is “the absence of stereotypes but also the presence of values consistent with a particular culture and the accuracy of cultural details in text and illustrations” (Yoo-Lee, 2014, 326). According to Ivy Haoyin Hsieh (2018, 216), cultural authenticity allows our students the chance “to see a reflection of real experiences within a book instead of seeing stereotypes or misrepresentations.”

The 21st century has seen a dramatic change in attitudes toward discrimination and prejudice. The research is showing notable improvements in the cultural and racial diversity found in recently published children's literature (Rodriguez & Kim, 2018).

### **Professional Duty**

ALAs Code of Ethics describes the importance of distinguishing between personal convictions and professional duties. Regardless of how you feel about Dr. Seuss and his books, professional librarians are obligated to set aside their personal beliefs and follow the policies and procedures established by the profession and their information institutions. While it's time to retire the Seuss

Six, children will continue to enjoy *The Lorax*, *Green Eggs and Ham*, and dozens of other popular books by Dr. Seuss.

Seuss Enterprises' decision to cease publication of six titles is just the final step in a series of events that have focused attention on the many "hurtful and wrong" representations in children's literature.

The conflict between the value of free expression and the value of tolerance and inclusion is never-ending. With so many outstanding children's books now available that reflect and honor the diversity of our population, it's time to put collection maintenance on the forefront to ensure these rich options can easily be found by our students.

## Resources

AASL (2019). *Developing inclusive learners and citizens: An activity guide*.

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