

## Seuss' politics would not, could not, be put in a box



**BARB GUY**

The reclusive Theodor Geisel, known as Dr. Seuss, made it to age 73 before being asked to deliver a commencement address. Then Lake Forest called, giving him a year's notice. Worried, Seuss told a friend, "Kids hate these addresses; they've finished four years of work and they want to get out and party. They don't want to hear from some old poop. So I'll give the shortest speech ever, but damn it, it's gotta have a point to it."

Finally, after months of tinkering, he called his friend and crowed, "I've got it down to a minute and 14 seconds and it still has a point." Seuss' speech was ostensibly about eating popovers. It concluded, "Do a lot of spitting out the hot air and be careful what you swallow."

That story comes from "The Political Dr. Seuss," by independent film producer Ron

Lamothe. It's not in theaters, but the nonprofit SLC Film Center will lend you a copy on a smile and a handshake.

Even if you already know that *The Lorax* is a rant on the dangers of deforestation, industrial pollution and corporate greed, and that Yertle the Turtle is Adolph Hitler, there's plenty left to learn about the motivations and messages of Dr. Seuss.

For one thing, he couldn't stand pompous people. Lamothe says, "He was an idealist/curmudgeon. He had a keen eye for hypocrites, bullies and demagogues. He spent a lifetime on political and social change. He attacked racism, worked for literacy, fought for the environment and ridiculed the arms race, with such humor and finesse that few realized he was being political at all."

When Seuss was in the Army, a superior officer approving his promotion wrote, "Geisel is a personable zealot." The oxymorons continued throughout his life. Biographer Judith Morgan said, "He believed in goodness, honesty, and mischief."

Ted, as he was known, was born into a German-American family in Massachusetts in 1904. In high school, during World War I, he was voted Class Artist and Class Wit, but he also felt the

sting of being different when anti-German feeling swept the country. Biographer Neil Morgan says, "Ted became permanently marked when he felt [the effects of] prejudice. It certainly helped make him a crusader and a liberal and a muckraker."

Ted graduated from Dartmouth and studied at Oxford where he showed his Seussian doodlings to a student, Helen Palmer, who encouraged him to be an artist. A painful lecture on the punctuation in *King Lear* did the trick. Seuss left Oxford, and on the strength of the sale for \$25 of a single cartoon to the *Saturday Evening Post* (after four months of rejection), he and Helen married and moved to New York City. He was soon publishing stories and cartoons in the finest magazines.

At 23, when he mentioned a brand of bug spray in a cartoon, the company gave him \$12,000 - a dizzying sum in 1928 - and he spent the next 17 years in advertising.

In a similarly backward way, he made his entrée into children's literature. He was weathering a bout of seasickness in an ocean liner's bar when the rhythmic wheezing of the ship's engines drove an endless refrain into his head: *And To Think That I Saw It On Mulberry Street*. The ensuing book was rejected 27 times, but

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by the age of 36, he was a successful author living on Park Avenue.

Angered over Nazi activities in Europe, he began drawing political cartoons, eventually crafting more than 400 for the left-wing daily *PM*. Then Seuss took an Army commission in Hollywood with filmmaker Frank Capra, producing military films.

The post-war Seuss wrote *Horton Hears a Who*, the sweet story of a kindly elephant who saves a settlement of creatures living on a speck of dust. Some see it as Seuss' apology to Japanese-Americans, whom he had viciously stereotyped during the war and toward whom he was most repentant.

*Life* magazine in 1954 decried the bland, sleepy "Dick and Jane" milieu, blaming it for the declining child literacy rate and asking, Why not have Dr. Seuss illustrate these books?

Seuss took up the challenge and the revolutionary *The Cat in the Hat* became the best-selling children's reader of all time. Its message? Paraphrased by historian Elaine May: "Make a little trouble, have a little fun, be who you are, express yourself."

*The Cat in the Hat* made Seuss rich, but he didn't care about the money. Neil Morgan says, "Ted would rather have a good letter from his editor than a royalty check."

My favorite story concerns "Marvin K. Mooney Will You Please Go Now!" During Watergate, nationally syndicated columnist Art Buchwald ran Seuss' poem word for word, only changing the name of Marvin K. Mooney to Richard M. Nixon. Nine days later, Nixon resigned.

Seuss wrote to Buchwald, "We should have collaborated sooner!"

The poem is read aloud, one line by each of the experts in the film: Seuss' publisher, editor, widow, biographers, historians and Buchwald.

Geisel's biographers, the Morgans, asked a few weeks before he died, "What else would you like to say?" His response, given with George H. W. Bush in the White House: "The best slogan I can think of to leave with the U.S.A. would be: We can and we've got to do better than this."

The late Dr. Seuss' 101st birthday was Tuesday. He'd probably be horrified to find George W. Bush in the White House, especially for a second time, and he missed the Clinton years, which he surely would have enjoyed.

But where Dr. Seuss' literary legacy is political, it is not particularly partisan. It is, rather, a ringing, rhyming endorsement of the basic values of democracy, equality, openness, tolerance and respect for diversity.

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*Barb Guy is a regular contributor to these pages.* © Salt Lake Tribune.