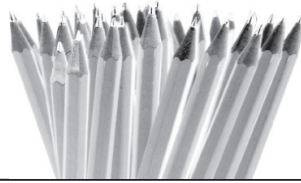


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## (AND TO THINK THAT I SAW) POSTCIVIL SOCIETY ON MULBERRY STREET

JEFFREY R. DI LEO, EDITOR AND PUBLISHER

Dr. Seuss is one of America's favorite children's authors.

So when Penguin Random House put six of Theodor Seuss Geisel's books *Out of Print* because of their inappropriate content for children, opinion was strongly divided as to the rightfulness of this publishing decision.

While advocates of anti-racist literature cheered it as a decision long overdue, proponents of the American tradition of portraying racial and ethnic groups through offensive imagery — think Washington Redskins and Aunt Jemima — jeered it as an attack on freedom of speech.

In *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street* (1937), one of the books put *Out of Print*, there is a character identified as “a Chinaman,” who has lines for eyes, and carries chopsticks and a bowl of rice. While editions from the 1970s changed “a Chinaman” to “a Chinese man,” the racist imagery remained unaltered.

In another put *Out of Print*, *If I Ran a Zoo* (1950), there are two shirtless and shoeless characters from “the African island of Yerka” that are depicted as resembling monkeys.

But these characters are far from Geisel's only production of racist imagery.

From the 1920s through the 1940s, Geisel drew many advertising and political cartoons that utilized racist imagery.

In this work, which can be viewed in collections at the University of California, San Diego library and the Springfield Library and Museum Association, Arabs are portrayed as sultans and camel-riding nomads; Japanese and Japanese-Americans are depicted as buck-toothed and squint-eyed; and Blacks are depicted as savages who live in the tropics and wear grass skirts.

The hateful stereotypes in Geisel's “early” work was done for a number of different employers including the Army Signal Corps, for which he drew political propaganda, and the New York newspaper *PM*, for which he drew political cartoons. It should be noted though that he worked at *PM* from 1941 to 1943, when he was in his late 30s — several years *after* he published *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street* and only seven years before the publication of *If I Ran a Zoo*.

During the war, Geisel defended his racist depictions of Japanese and Japanese-Americans saying, “right now, when the Japs are planting their hatchets in our skulls, it seems like a hell of a time for us to smile and warble.”

However, years later, he expressed regret for his anti-Japanese work to his biographers.

In an effort to keep his more overtly racist imagery away from children, Dr. Seuss Enterprises decided to end the publication and licensing of *McElligot's Pool* (1947), *Scrambled Eggs Super!* (1953), *On Beyond Zebra!* (1955), and *The Cat's Quizzer* (1976) in addition to *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street* and *If I Ran a Zoo*.

“These books portray people in ways that are hurtful and wrong,” said Dr. Seuss Enterprises.

So all are now *Out of Print* — and society is finally protected from Geisel's “hurtful and wrong” portrayals of people. Or is it?



The books put *Out of Print* span forty-one years of Geisel's career. From the early period where he was producing en masse racist imagery for newspapers and the US government to late in his career when he became one of the golden cows of the corporate publishing machine.

If one includes his work from the 1920s, it is fair to say that for half-a century, Geisel produced work that is “hurtful and wrong.”

This is an incredibly long period of time even considering that he received his BA from Dartmouth College in 1925 and lived to be 87.

Though there have been no efforts as of yet to dismiss the work of Geisel in toto, his reputation has taken a big hit of late. So too has the imagery of his worldview.

We need now more than ever authors whose worldview is not tainted by racism. There are plenty of children's authors whose work does not include “hurtful and wrong” imagery and present a different worldview than that of Dr. Seuss.

The argument that his work as a whole is above reproach because generations of children grew up reading his books follows the same logic that kept racist images on a football helmet and a bottle of syrup for far too long. And just as those images have been retired, so too must others.

But is hiding the most egregious examples of this imagery from the kids by putting these books *Out of Print* really the right response to his work?

From the perspective of the corporate publishing machine, where the market is the sole arbiter of justice, this approach makes perfect sense. To protect Dr. Seuss Enterprises and Penguin Random House from profit loss, the product line needs to be continuously managed. Putting some of it *Out of Print* is ultimately about the needs of the corporation. This decision is not about social justice or anti-racism. It is about making sure that Random House does not need to eliminate a high producing product line.

In short, many more now know that the pen of Geisel produced racist imagery. But in a postcivil society where the interests of children are secondary to those of the market, eliminating him from the system is not an option. Rather, this event — putting a few of his books *Out of Print* — provided the perfect opportunity to foreground the ultimate value of the market over

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### American Book Review

Founded 1977 by Ronald Sukenick  
Published at the School of Arts and Sciences,  
University of Houston–Victoria

Publisher: Jeffrey R. Di Leo

Editor: Jeffrey R. Di Leo

Managing Editor: Jeffrey A. Sartain

Assistant Editor: JJ Hernandez

Layout: JJ Hernandez

Subscription Manager: Vikki Fitzpatrick

Cover Image: Hegel in His Study, lithograph by Julius Ludwig Sebbers, 1828

Page 30 Image: © REUTERS  
Alamy Stock Photo  
Image ID: 2CRNMFA

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Email: americanbookreview@uhv.edu

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*American Book Review* appears bimonthly.

*American Book Review* is published by its editors and is made possible, in part, by generous support from the School of Arts and Sciences, University of Houston–Victoria and Friends of *ABR*. This project is also supported in part by awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, which believes a great nation deserves great art, and the Texas Commission on the Arts. *ABR* is also a member of the Council of Literary Magazines and Presses.

Trade distribution by Hudson–RPM, 150 Black River Road, Worcester, MA 01607; and Armadillo, 7310 LaCienaga Blvd., Inglewood, CA 90302. Indexed in Humanities International Complete, Book Review Index, Current Contents/Arts & Humanities, and Arts & Humanities Citation Index.



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