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The Wily Imagination Of Dr. Seuss

By Nicola Smith
Valley News Staff Writer

He was a crafty one, that Dr. Seuss. Under the guise of making children laugh, his comical, absurdist books have helped children the world over learn to read. The pop-eyed, rubbery-faced creatures that march through books like *The Cat in the Hat*, *Horton Hears a Who* and *How The Grinch Stole Christmas* appeal to children because they are silly, funny and speak in rhyme. They speak also to a child's innate sense of justice: Indignation at the capriciousness of the adult world is part of the Seuss universe.

The distinctive drawing and writing style that we take for granted expressed Seuss' searching social conscience and his conviction that children's joys and fears were to be taken as seriously as those of adults. His books may not strike readers as subversive, but in their own good-humored, pointed way they are. He didn't rap readers on the knuckles with a stern homily at a book's end, like 18th- and 19th-century primers in which naughty children meet terrible ends, but his principles of non-violence and creative collaboration come through clearly nonetheless.

A new book by Donald E. Pease, a professor of English at Dartmouth College and director of the Future of American Studies Institute, takes a look at Seuss as an artist and writer, placing him within the context of his life and times. "Most books about (Dr. Seuss) focus either on his life or his work, but not the relationship between



Dartmouth professor Donald E. Pease has written a book about the author Theodor Seuss Geisel, better known as Dr. Seuss. (Valley News — James M. Patterson)

them,” Pease said in an interview at his office at the college. “He was asking for that imaginative bridge to be constructed.”

Titled *Theodor SEUSS Geisel*, the book is part of the Lives and Legacies series published by Oxford University Press. The word “biography” tends to evoke the image of a hefty tome but the Oxford biographies are known for their pith: They’re interpretive biographies rather than the cradle-to-grave litany of minutiae that can weigh down the more standard biography.

We may think of Seuss primarily as a writer of books for children, but his work and worldview are far more complex, said Pease, who has taught American literature and drama at the college for 37 years. Students coming into his classes read Melville, Poe, Whitman, the Transcendentalists and others.

So how did Pease make the jump from the sonorous, classical prose of Ralph Waldo Emerson to the uninhibited, frequently anarchic world of Dr. Seuss? The leap is not as far as you might think, said Pease, who speaks rapidly and with an intensity that suggests that words themselves have the power to take flight, or spontaneously combust.

“I think there is a way to take the imagination of Emerson, who was writing mostly for adults, and trying to inspire adults, by teaching them how to live above a world grounded in antagonisms,” and look at Seuss in a similar light, Pease said. “(Seuss) was the Ralph Waldo Emerson for children.”

Pease never met Geisel, who was a Dartmouth alumnus (Class of 1925), but he did read books like *Green Eggs and Ham* and *The Sneetches* to his siblings when they were young. But it wasn't until Pease was a graduate student at the University of Chicago, where he heard the writer Norman Maclean -- author of *A River Runs Through It* and *Young Men and Fire*, and a Dartmouth friend of Geisel's -- give a talk about Dr. Seuss's work that Pease began to consider Seuss more as a literary figure, not just a diverting entertainer of children.

In 1990, the year Geisel died, Pease was the recipient of the Ted and Helen Geisel Third Century Professorship in the Humanities, an award given to Dartmouth faculty to spur further research in their fields.

After appearing as a commentator in the 2005 PBS documentary, *The Political Dr. Seuss*, Pease was approached by an editor at Oxford University Press asking whether he would consider writing a Lives and Legacy biography. He didn't hesitate, he said.

“I'd become deeply interested in the relationship between his life and his work,” Pease said. These are the three stages of Dr. Seuss: the ad man on Madison Avenue, conjuring up catchy slogans; the maker of animated cartoons; and, finally, the artist and writer. “What I found most challenging was to bring together the three facets of his life,” Pease said. “He could have had a career on Madison Avenue at \$500,000 a year, but he gave it all up to do children's books at \$5,000 a year. ... Why did he do it?”

Why an artist takes the direction she or he does can be an elusive thing to unravel. In the end, the work speaks in ways that biography can't always pin down or clarify. Like most of us, Geisel was deeply affected by the experiences of his childhood, and it was those reserves of memory and feeling that fueled his art.

“He kept the child in himself all his life,” Pease observed. Until his death, for example, Seuss kept near his drafting table a stuffed brown dog, named Theophrastus, that his mother had given him when he was a boy; he bequeathed the dog to one of his stepdaughters, asking her to take good care of it after he was gone.

He was born Theodor Seuss Geisel in 1904 to German-American parents in Springfield, Mass., which was then a flourishing industrial and commercial center.

His father, Theodor Robert Geisel, was a businessman and brewer; his mother, Henrietta Seuss Geisel was the first person to recognize and push her son's talents, and she was, Pease said, perhaps the most influential of the women in Geisel's life, who acted as muses to him and gave him the kind of unstinting love and approval that he wanted and needed.

When the young Geisel drew fantastical, amusing cartoons on his bedroom walls, his disapproving father wanted to erase them. “Don't you dare!” Pease reported Henrietta Geisel as saying to her husband. “They'll be famous one day.”

She was proved right, but the unique talent we know as Dr. Seuss transformed himself a number of times before he became established later in his career as the driving force behind his How to Read books. Pease calls him a “mutable figure.”

Geisel was particularly pained by the discrimination he experienced as an adolescent during World War I, when to be a German-American was to be on the receiving end of hateful rhetoric, taunting or worse. That theme of discrimination endured and overcome would play out over and over in his later books. Characters must combat prejudice, both their own and the biases of others, to arrive at a better understanding of the worlds in which they live.

Geisel started out at Dartmouth drawing cartoons for the college humor magazine, the *Jack-O-Lantern*. After graduation, he studied at Oxford University in England, where he met his first wife, Marian Helen Palmer. They married and moved to New York, where Geisel began submitting his drawings to various magazines. It was during the late 1920s that he gave himself the name, Dr. Seuss: Seuss from his middle name, and the Dr. for the honorary doctorate that he joked Oxford hadn't given him.

Like his character Bartholomew Cubbins, Seuss wore many hats in his life. He drew cartoons, wrote and illustrated books and during World War II, worked on a propaganda unit drawing crude caricatures of the Germans and the Japanese, which he later renounced for their racial and ethnic stereotyping. We think of him now as an industry unto himself, but he didn't achieve financial success until the late 1950s when *The Cat in the Hat* was published.

There was much anxiety nationwide then (as there is now) about children's acquisition of reading skills, and their apparent disinterest in reading in general. An editor at Houghton-Mifflin urged Dr. Seuss to write a book that would help teach children to read. The book was to consist of no more than 225 words from a vocabulary list of 348 words.

Seuss worked obsessively for more than a year and a half on it. For every paragraph he included, he threw out 200. He called his process of working “meticulous,” Pease said. “He wouldn't stop until he got it right. ... He could go shut himself in a room for hours until he felt he had what he needed to create.”

Pease describes the cat in the hat as the mediator between pictures and sound. “He becomes the figure through which children marry word and image,” Pease said. Once *The Cat in the Hat* became a hit, “it worked retroactively to make his earlier books hits,” Pease continued. “It was a linchpin to his success.”

As he aged, Dr. Seuss began to incorporate more obviously his concerns about social justice and thinking about war and peace into such books as *The Lorax*, *The Butter Battle Book* and *The Sneetches*.

Because he framed his arguments not as ideological screeds but as pointed spoofs on the inconsistencies of human behavior, he reached many more people than he might have if he'd written for, say, *Partisan Review* or *The New York Review of Books*.

“He had a way of transposing his enemies into his most friendly readers,” Pease said. “If he hadn't written those books that way, he would have been caught up in the Cold War antagonisms...that he instructed us to abandon.” What Pease learned from researching the biography was that Dr. Seuss went beyond the rhetoric of “isms.”

“What I discovered was that Geisel wanted to move away from the war mentality altogether, he wanted to recover the possibility for children to live in a world of peace. It's a deeply moving story, and an American story that is unlike most of the stories that emerged during the Cold War.”

Dr. Seuss didn't condescend to children with saccharine goop; but neither did he view them as mini-adults who should be expected to behave like their elders.

What draws children to his books is his respect and concern for them and the issues that preoccupy them -- and his empathy for the weaker and powerless among us.

“He brought a voice to children's literature that resonates through all the self-doubt a child can know,” Pease said.

Nicola Smith can be reached at nsmith@vnews.com.