

## What Do We Do with Dr. Seuss?

Hello everyone, and welcome back to *This is Berthoud*. I am Amie, your local librarian, and this is the show where I get to talk about all of the things that you are talking about so that together we have something new to think about. We've got a short and sweet one for you today, but we're sure you'll have a lot more to think about when we're done.

So, ladies and gentlemen, let's talk about Dr. Seuss. We celebrate Dr. Seuss's birthday every year here at the library, and this year was no different, though the restrictions we're under right now meant that we celebrated virtually instead of throwing a big party this time. Dr. Seuss would have been 117 years old this year, and on March 2<sup>nd</sup> we had a line of people at the door waiting to pick up their Dr. Seuss goodie bags.

Right about that same time, Dr. Seuss Enterprises made an announcement, and boy, oh boy, did it set off a flurry of internet discussion. Unfortunately, the speed of the discussion, if it can actually be called that, meant that fake news spread faster and more widely than actual news, and the basic fear of losing something much – loved from our childhoods blew our common sense and reasoning skills right out of the window and now there are a lot of rumors to be put to rest. Okay, sorry, there was a lot of fluffy language in that last sentence, I apologize, and let me simplify. Don't be scared. Stick with me for a few minutes and I will try to cut through the muck so that you can know exactly what happened, and what didn't. If we're really lucky, we might even understand some of the why.

First let's address some of the fake news. If you read a headline or a tweet that said the Cat in the Hat is canceled, that is false. The Cat in the Hat has not been canceled. If you heard that Dr. Seuss has been banned, that is false. Dr. Seuss books have not been (unilaterally) banned. Those kinds of headlines or statements are great for grabbing people's attention and drawing out an immediate, strong emotional response, but that does not make them true. For more on spotting fakes new, go back and listen to our episode on how to spot fake news, but in the meantime, rest assured that you can still purchase or borrow plenty of Dr. Seuss books, including *The Cat in the Hat* and my personal favorite, *Green Eggs and Ham*.

For some of you that's all you needed to know. And if that's the case, go ahead and turn this episode off. For those of you who are wondering what did happen, listen on.

Dr. Seuss Enterprises owns the copyright for all of Dr. Seuss's works. The ethics of copyright is an entirely different discussion that we won't get into today, but regardless, that business owns the rights. That means no one can print any of the books, use any of the images, or broadcast any of the text without permission from Dr. Seuss Enterprises. This year, Dr. Seuss Enterprises decided that, due to insensitive or downright racist images in 6 of Dr. Seuss's books, no additional copies of those titles will be printed. The 6 books are , "And to Think That I Saw it on Mulberry Street", "If I Ran the Zoo", "McElligot's Pool", "On Beyond Zebra!", "Scrambled Eggs Super!" and "The Cat's Quizzer". That's it – no new copies printed. No one is coming into the library and demanding that they be taken off the shelf, and certainly no one will do a house-to-house search to burn all of the existing copies. There simply won't be any additional copies printed. If that sounds very different than banning these titles, that's because it is.

For many people, though, the question is actually, “Did they do the right thing?” It’s a great question to consider, and as you think it through, let me give you a few things to ponder as you form your own conclusions.

First, realize that the vast majority of the books that have been published over the centuries are, in fact, out of print. Publishers don’t want a warehouse full of books that aren’t selling, because that’s money lost for them, so books go through print runs of however many the publishers believe will be sold and then the books go out of print. Sometimes there’s enough demand for another run – most of the time there isn’t. Arguably we get rid of books here at the library for some of the same reasons – they aren’t in high demand anymore, and we don’t have unlimited space or unlimited funds.

Second, taking a book out of print is not censorship. If it were, then we would have to accuse publisher of censoring every title that has ever gone out of print, which is again almost every title that has ever been published. Censoring happens when existing copies are actively removed or destroyed, and as we discussed before, no one is demanding that libraries or individuals surrender their copies of these books.

Third, this raises the question of what to do with other more historical or older titles that contain offensive words and images. Do preschoolers need to be reading these books? Do we need these books in order to track changes in our society’s history, and if so, who needs to have possession of them? Is it better to be rid of them entirely? Is it better to talk through what we’ve learned as a society about the people or groups that are being portrayed so negatively? Is there some sort of middle ground? Should there be?

All of this, I think, brings us to the larger cultural conversation that is happening right now. How do we, as a society, learn from past mistakes and ensure they don’t happen anymore? Do we need monuments and artifacts from a time when we didn’t treat all people equally? Do we need monuments and artifacts from a time when we didn’t treat all people equally? Do we leave space for people to grow, to admit that they made mistakes and now they’re learning to do better? Does learning to do better erase the consequences of the past decisions, or is there a point at which we say, “Nope, he or she or we should have known better?” Are we holding ourselves to the same standard as we’re holding others? Are we listening to each other?

I’m not pretending we have all of the answers to these questions here at the library. I wish we did-- we could probably, who knows, end poverty, stop wars, and save the planet if we had all the answers. But we’re noticing this theme pop up in conversations here more and more – whether we’re discussing Covid-19 precautions, what a town trustee said at a meeting several months ago, or what items we should remove from the library’s shelves, the questions are largely the same. What did we think? What do we know now? And what should we do with the discrepancy between the two?

Come help us figure it out.

As always, you get information about thinking through information on this show. For any other kind of advice, consult a professional from that field. If you want to talk about this, or any other topic, you can get in touch with me, Amie, by calling the library at 970-532-2757 or emailing [podcast.bcltd@gmail.com](mailto:podcast.bcltd@gmail.com). Come visit us at the library (and check out some Dr. Seuss books), and as always, I’m proud to say this is Berthoud.

