

## Book review

Philip Nel: *Dr. Seuss: American Icon*. New York: Continuum Books, 2003. 301 pp. \$27.95.

Anyone interested in Dr. Seuss—from the standpoint of cultural and literary criticism, humor studies, or childhood studies—will find Philip Nel's *Dr. Seuss: American Icon* absolutely essential reading. Critical works of its thoroughness and rigor rarely are for everyone. But that does not stop Nel from trying. He has composed his study with the aim of reaching a broad audience of both scholars and non-specialists alike. Such a goal, while laudable, is risky. In aiming to reach both, one usually reaches neither. But with only a few exceptions, Nel manages expertly, and this fact sets his book apart from most works that attempt to engage such a diverse readership. Poetry scholars may find the chart rehearsing the basics of prosody on page 17 a little too familiar, just as scholars in general may find Nel's conclusion a tad too sweet. Yet despite these momentary—but ultimately populist—lapses, Nel's book is a marvel of scholarship; interested, complete, and nuanced.

Nel's book has two main arguments threading through its pages, one explicit, one implicit. The first maintains that the talented and often critically undervalued Seuss is an American icon who, through the trickster's slight-of-hand, manages simultaneously to be an iconoclast. And the second implies that it is not necessary for academics to write only for academics, that one can argue an original, stimulating thesis in such a way that it broadens the critical discourse while remaining intelligible to an audience of non-specialists. In both respects he convinces. The body of the text is comprised of an introduction, six chapters, and an epilogue. Yet the real treat lies at the end of the text: an annotated Seuss bibliography of unprecedented thoroughness and authority. Divided into two

main sections, primary and secondary texts, this bibliography will prove invaluable to future Seuss scholars. The bibliography serves to buttress Nel's primary thesis by showing how prolific Seuss was (whether writing or illustrating under the name Theodore Seuss Geisel, Theo LeSieg, Rossetta Stone, or Dr. Seuss) and reminding us just how much ink was spilled reviewing and interpreting his works and expounding upon his life.

Each entry is glossed, testifying to the breadth of Nel's research. Although some of the glosses are quite brief, they provide enough information to situate the piece in the context of Seuss studies, helping researchers pinpoint writings of particular importance to their inquiry. (One entry in the Literary Criticism section is sure to interest readers of *Humor* and members of the International Society of Humor Studies: Don L. F. Nilsen's [1977] piece "Dr. Seuss as Grammar Consultant.") Nel's tone throughout the bibliography is gracious, respectful, and modest, his modesty coming through most noticeably in the introduction to the bibliography, in which he notes that "Geisel was so tremendously prolific a writer and illustrator that I must have missed some [of his non-advertising work]" (212). He then provides his e-mail address, asking readers who "find something not included here," whether primary or secondary, to "please contact me" (212). Additionally, he gives a web address (<http://www.ksu.edu/english/nelp/seuss/bib.html>) where he will collect new entries until such time as a second edition is printed (there are two new pieces of literary criticism listed on this site as of the writing of this review). The bibliography alone is worth the cost of the book.

Overall, the book is a primer on the various discourses in contemporary literary and cultural studies. As Nel writes in his introduction:

I have allowed the analytical method of each chapter to develop from its particular approach. No chapter draws exclusively on a single methodology, but the dominant method in each is as follows: Chapter One (Formalism), Two (Historicism), Three (Art History), Four (Biographical Criticism), Five (Cultural Studies), and Six (American Studies). (14)

These multiple approaches, coupled with his lucid prose style, make Nel's *Dr. Seuss: American Icon* an ideal text for college students, whether in a children's literature course or an introduction to literary studies. Although all the chapters are strong, three are of particular interest to the readers of *Humor*: Chapter 1, which treats the Dr.'s nonsense; Chapter 2, which examines his political satire in the context of his work for children;

and Chapter 4, which explores, among other issues, Seuss' adolescent sense of humor and the political dimensions of that humor.

The first chapter, "U.S. Laureate of Nonsense: A Seussian Poetics," strives to recuperate Seuss' reputation as a poet, and, on the whole, succeeds. Placing him in a "newer generation of nonsense-writers who popularized and developed the form for twentieth-century readers" (22), a generation including the likes of James Thurber, Ogden Nash, Walt Kelly, Spike Milligan, and others, Nel makes the point that Seuss' reliance on the anapest, with its close relationship to the limerick, has much to do with "why Seuss is rarely studied as a poet" (20). Unlike, say, the sonnet, the limerick is "the punch line of poetic forms," and as such, lines like "And to think that I saw it on Mulberry Street" are often viewed (and dismissed) as doggerel. Through several close readings of texts like *The Cat in the Hat* and *Yertle the Turtle*, Nel shows how attention to Seuss' versification illuminates the poetry. As Nel writes, "to examine the poetics [of Dr. Seuss] is to understand that meter matters," (31) yet another reason *Dr. Seuss: American Icon* would make a good text for undergraduate students.

Chapter 1 ends with Seuss' words about the political import of humor: "Nonsense wakes up the brain cells. And it helps develop a sense of humor, which is awfully important in this day and age. Humor has a tremendous place in this sordid world. It's more than just a matter of laughing. If you can see things out of whack, then you can see how things can be in whack" (38). This quotation is a perfect segue into the second chapter, "Dr. Seuss vs. Adolf Hitler: A Political Education," which discusses Seuss' political use of humor and how that humor—political satire—fits into the context of his more popular and well-known texts for children. Though Seuss himself thought his early cartoon work at "the left-leaning" New York newspaper *PM* was "intemperate, un-humorous," Nel thinks otherwise, explicating this confrontational humor and, most important to Seuss studies, correlating it directly to Seuss' "message-books" such as *The Lorax* and *The Butter Battle Book* (46). In this respect "Dr. Seuss vs. Adolf Hitler" trumps (or at least complements) Richard H. Minear's (1999) excellent *Dr. Seuss Goes to War*, a collection of 200 of Dr. Seuss' war cartoons. Written by a historian, *Dr. Seuss Goes to War* fails to explore these links, concentrating instead on historical context. As a scholar of children's literature (and an active member of the Children's Literature Association), Nel's focus rarely leaves the books that made Seuss famous.

Nel also sensitively investigates the racist humor found in Seuss' early political cartoons, painting a picture of a dynamic Seuss whose views on race shift. In a compelling, historically-situated close reading of *Horton Hears a Who!*, Nel illustrates Seuss' enlightened "understanding of racism and xenophobia," charting his progression from the blatantly racist depiction of the Japanese found in his early *PM* cartoons to the more sensitive works produced by an author who removed from later editions a yellow, pigtailed "Chinaman" who appeared in his 1937 *And to Think that I Saw It on Mulberry Street*. (About the change, Seuss says, "I had a gentleman with a pigtail. I colored him yellow and called him a Chinaman. That's the way things were fifty years ago. In later editions I refer to him as a Chinese man. I have taken the color out of the gentleman and removed the pigtail and now he looks like an Irishman" [58]). No longer using racist humor to make political points, the later Seuss, in such texts as *The Sneetches*, instead used humor to challenge racism.

Chapter 4, "The 5,000 Fingers of Dr. S," is particularly fruitful, addressing Seuss' views on women, children, and outsiders (confidence men in particular), placing both the Grinch and the Cat in the Hat in the tradition of con men. The topic most relevant to humor studies, however, concerns Seuss' adolescent sense of humor. The chapter's title comes from Nel's insightful reading of *The 5,000 Fingers of Dr. T*, which features a despotic adult who enslaves children. The protagonist, Bart Collins, sings, "You have no right to push and shove us little kids around." Throughout the book Nel foregrounds Seuss' distaste for bullies (for instance, Seuss worked for years cartooning for *PM*, whose slogan was "*PM* is against people who push other people around"). Dr. Seuss' work (and humor) develops from "the subversiveness of adolescence" (98). One has but to read Judith Morgan and Neil Morgan's (1995) authoritative biography *Dr. Seuss and Mr. Geisel* to understand how this adolescent subversiveness bubbled up in the form of practical jokes (one of my favorites involves Seuss' signing dirty inscriptions in library books). Yet this subversiveness also materialized in Seuss' politically-edged satires and parodies, works that feature children, like Bart Collins, "who protest the powerlessness of childhood" (128). Nel suggests that Dr. Seuss is so loved by children because he takes their side and speaks to them like equals. However, Seuss did hold his humor in check, peppering drafts of children's books with sexual rhymes and dirty jokes only to remove them before publication. For example, in a draft of *Dr. Seuss's ABC*, we find a well-endowed woman accompanied by this rhyme: "Big X, little x. X, X,

X. / Someday, kiddies, you will learn about SEX.” Though he would inevitably “clean up” his children’s books (101), he never removed his distaste for despots and oppressors, nor his joy in the unconventional and resistant. (Aptly capturing Seuss’ iconoclastic, rebellious nature, Nel has chosen Seuss’ self-portrait for his book’s cover art. The portrait is Seuss’ famous amalgam of his own, good-natured face and his Cat-in-the-Hat’s somewhat cagier visage. As Nel discusses in Chapter 5, “The Disneyfication of Dr. Seuss: Faithful to Profit, One Hundred Percent?” the Cat, both a corporate logo and a wily trickster, perfectly embodies Seuss the iconoclastic icon.)

Ultimately, I think *Dr. Seuss: American Icon* would appeal to its namesake. Like *The Cat in the Hat*, which can be enjoyed by both parents and children, lay people and scholars, Nel’s book neither forgets nor talks down to its audience. A fine example of scholarship, *Dr. Seuss: American Icon* will be equally at home on the researcher’s bookshelf or the Seuss fan’s coffee table. Well-written, well-argued, and well-conceived, Nel’s good-humored book teaches a lesson of which Dr. Seuss would approve: good scholarship, like good literature, can be both rich and accessible. It’s a lesson from which we might all learn.

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