

Theodor Seuss Geisel
1904-1991
Author Study

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Like many children since 1937, Dr. Seuss was a part of my early life with such books as *Green Eggs and Ham*, *The Cat in the Hat*, *And to Think That! Saw It All on Mulberry Street*, *Horton Hatches an Egg*, stories of the Sneetches, and the east-going Grinch's memorable confrontation with the west-going Grinch.

They were fun books to read, certainly more fun and interesting than the books used at school to teach us to read...Dick and Jane were interesting only for the first several months, after which they were so boring that you knew you would never play with them if they ever came by. Not, perhaps, that you would ever really want to play with the Cat in the Hat. After all, how in the world would you tell your parents what happened if the Cat *didn't* put everything right again?

I re-read the books and some of the newer ones when my brother, almost four years my junior, was learning to read. By that time I was off into other books and other interests and, while they were colorful and fun, no longer seemed so entertaining. Despite that, however, I can still easily recall drawings from some of my favorite early Seuss stories.

Several years ago, a book title in a catalog caught my attention: *The Tough Coughs as He Ploughs the Dough*. Working as I then was with many people for whom English was a second language, and trying to deal with creative spelling not only inside the office but on correspondence going out to clients, the often seemingly illogical spelling of words was always simmering in my mind somewhere. I have also always had strong reactions to some words that looked just plain funny sitting there on a piece of paper; there were some words that, spoken or written or pronounced in my head gave me the creeps. When I read that the *Tough Coughs* book was a compilation of Dr. Seuss writings, I thought that it just might suit my frame of mind perfectly. By the time the book came, life had quickened and somehow I never had a chance to do more than flip through it hurriedly now and then.

The book was definitely a compilation of Seuss, but not the Seuss of childhood. Here was an amazing concoction of political commentary, advertising wit, off-the-wall essays on life and living, with an assortment of fantastic creatures and humans. The style of drawings were familiar, the turn of phrase and incredible names, but the topics and subjects were very different. Or so, at the time, it seemed.

This intriguing dichotomy, coupled with my recent re-reading of *The Lorax* and my realization that this wonderful story of greed and environmental destruction was written, not in the politically correct 1990s but when plumbers were making their nocturnal visits to the Watergate, led me to taking a closer look at this man.

What I found was a very complex individual, one who experienced great joy in life and his art and deep lows filled with self-doubt and discomfort in having to deal with those outside his close circle of friends. Here was a man who both made light of his talents but was wounded at not being taken seriously. A man of whimsy who drove others as hard as he drove himself in the production of children's literature. An iconoclast in the area of children's literature and literacy who nonetheless cared little for and was uncomfortable around children...but who made up a daughter to whom books were dedicated, and stories about whom he regaled dinner guests, much to the dismay of his wife who was unable to conceive.

Here, then, is a bit of the biographical journey I went on.

You're wrong as the deuce
And you shouldn't rejoice
If you're calling him Seuss.
He pronounces it Soice.*

*Written by Alexander Liang, a former staff member of *Jack O'Lantern* when under Ted Geisel's leadership, later on faculty at Dartmouth. The German pronunciation, *zoice*, despite the above quatrain published in the *Jack*, gave way to its more American and easier-to-pronounce rhymes-with-Mother-

Goose sound as Ted was talked about with increasing frequency.

HE FIRST SAW IT ALL ON MULBERRY STREET

Theodor Seuss Geisel was born in 1901 in Springfield, Massachusetts. Springfield was a busy city, bursting with commerce and invention. Two hundred trains a day came through the city, serving three different railroad companies. Messrs. Smith and Wesson's thriving business was located there, as were industries churning out toys, bicycles, motorcycles, tires, ice and roller skates, railroad and trolley cars, even gasoline-powered automobiles. The pace and community support fostered eccentrics and inventors and, for many of the 62,000 citizens, tinkering with equipment and invention was a common leisure pastime.

Ted grew up speaking both German and English. Both of his parents were born of German immigrants, and the grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles and cousins all spoke German in the home and outside in the thriving community of German-Americans, and English with the non-German-Americans in the heavily stratified social culture of Springfield.

Words fascinated Ted at an early age, a fascination aided, abetted and incited by his family. His sister, Margaretha, called herself Marnie Mecca Ding Ding Guy. His grandfather owned a brewery with another German immigrant. The brewery name was Kalmbach and Geisel, called Come Back and Guzzle by the locals. Ted's father, an expert competitive marksman who practiced every morning (something which Ted found rather ridiculous), told Ted that he must always strive for excellence, that "if you don't, you end up with schlock."

Ted's father was a park commissioner in charge of a huge park that included within its borders a zoo. This became one of young Ted's favorite haunts, and he loved to hear his father tell stories about the animals. Ted drew the animals that he saw and heard about. His parents encouraged his drawing despite the fact that the animals never quite looked like what they started out to be. One of his mother's favorites, drawn on the wall, was a Wynnmp with ears three yards long.

Ted learned to read while still very young. By six years of age, he was already reading Charles Dickens and Robert Louis Stevenson. His favorite early book, however, was *The Hole*, a riotous book about a gun that is shot in the house whose bullet pierces the water heater and, as the house filled with water, the bullet keeps going, piercing everything in its path, through walls and furniture and doors until, in the kitchen, it hits a cake that was so hard it stops the bullet.

Ted's mother, Nettie, knew that the best way to get Ted to do anything was to bribe him with books. Ted persevered through piano lessons with Nettie seated in the anteroom outside. If he did well, he raced across the street to Johnson's Book Store where he was allowed to chose a book.

In 1937, when *And To Think I Saw It On Mulberry Street* was published, Johnson's Book Store opened to record crowds, as neighbors and acquaintances stood in line to purchase the book, dreading an exposé. Originally titled *A Story That No One Can Beat*, *Mulberry Street* was Ted's version of *The Hole*, and gleefully read by many as a canny depiction of the tales of embellished truth so artfully invented by children. This theme was to reappear again in such books as *McElligot's Pool*, the first book Ted published after World War II.

SCHOOL DAZE

Ted was a good student and, on the whole, enjoyed school, but he did have his moments with some teachers. In his first (and, subsequently, only) art class, he found that by turning a drawing on which he was working upside down, he could tell whether or not the drawing was balanced. If it was balanced, the drawing would look balanced both ways, right side up and upside down. His art teacher insisted that artists did no such thing, that balance or imbalance could not be determined in such a manner (when, in fact, it can). He was furious that Ted was fooling around. While all of Ted's classmates liked his drawings, his teacher didn't, telling Ted to consider a career other than art.

It was this interaction, if anything, that fueled young Ted's desire to someday be an artist. "The teacher wanted me to draw the world as it is; I wanted to draw things as I saw them." This was an attitude that intensified as Ted went on to college.

At Dartmouth, Ted was fortunate to find another writing teacher who, like his high school teacher, was appreciative of his work--and wit. Ted boasted to his classmates that he could write humorously on any subject. To prove it, he wrote a book review of the Boston & Maine Railroad timetables...only Ted and the professor laughed.

Despite the fact that he had made no overtures to any of the fraternities, Ted was nonetheless surprised to not be invited by any of them to pledge. He realized that it was probably because he was taken to be Jewish, with his last name, Semitic nose and dark hair. This was in counterpoint to the hostile

atmosphere that pervaded Springfield (and all of the U.S.) during the war as all German-Americans were looked at with suspicion by their former friends, business associates and neighbors. Ted felt the isolation during the war years, and found it continuing, though for different (and rather ironic) reasons at Dartmouth. "It took a year and a half before word got around that I wasn't [Jewish]. I think my interest in editing the Dartmouth humor magazine began...that pledge week."

By his junior year at Dartmouth, Ted was editor of the college humor magazine, the *Jack O'Lantern*, and wrote for the school paper. Typical of his cartoons was one of two chimney sweeps perched on a roof. "Should I go first?" asked the first. "Soot yourself," replied the other. Ted's whimsical use of language and artless drawings soon drew a following of students and faculty.

Ted enjoyed the extracurricular activities, including actively managing the soccer team (managing, after all, wasn't *playing*, and Ted continued his detestation of playing sports that started well before high school), arguing politics on the debate team, and partying. His involvement in the latter activity was perhaps more so than the former, so much so that he was named *Least Likely to Succeed* by his classmates. Late in his senior year, an especially raucous party in his rooms resulted in a visit from the police and a trip to the dean of college. There he was told that he had to resign from the school magazine and paper. Theodore Geisel got around this ban by submitting articles with a number of aliases, including L. Burbank, Thomas Mott Osborne (then warden of Sing Sing prison), Ted Seuss, or, merely, Seuss.

THE UNSMILING CLOWN

Ted's high school yearbook highlights the two sides of the man: while he was voted Class Artist and Class Wit, the pictures of him in the year book all show a tall, darkly handsome, unsmiling young man standing in the back row.

In Dartmouth, despite his growing popularity and renown as an astute wit and party man, Ted continued to remain aloof. Said one classmate: "He was not gregarious in the sense of hail-fellow-well-met; there was no sense of self-importance about him. But when he walked into a room it was like magician's act. Birds flew out of his hands, and endless bright scarves and fireworks. Everything became brighter, happier, funnier. And he didn't try. Everything Ted did seemed to be a surprise, even to him."

From where did this bleakness come? The year 1915 saw the sinking of the *Lusitania* by the Germans and the change of public feeling towards German-Americans. While the German-American community in Springfield was close-knit and one fairly well integrated into the social and business structures of the community, the hostility they encountered grew. Ted was shocked to hear from one of his schoolmates that he was being referred to as "the German brewer's kid with the three-legged dog."

Church services had been conducted in German, and German was the first language at homes, many businesses, at the riflery club (where his father was a top marksman) and the Turnverein community hall which sponsored an active and popular young gymnastics group. The gymnastic exhibitions grew so popular with the city at large that they were ultimately held in Courthouse Square, where a fair-like atmosphere surrounded it with German songs, bands and hearty German food. As the anti-German sentiment swept through the city, however, cross-cultural socializing became less frequent. German cultural affairs dwindled as the German-Americans, now calling themselves merely Americans, sought invisibility. They were already well known in the circle of their daily lives, however, with Ted and Marnie suffering through the taunts of schoolmates. This drew them closer together as they supported each other emotionally and worked out ways of coping with their being thrust into the social pale.

During this increasingly sensitive time, the German-American community did its best to show its support of America. The gymnasium sent forty-seven of its strongest and most able youth to war against Germany. The women and daughters spent afternoons knitting socks and afghans for American service men.

In a continuing effort to reduce the tensions, young Ted threw himself into the war effort, collecting tin foil, planting a Victory Garden of potatoes (which he forgot to harvest) and, through his Boy Scout troop, selling Liberty Bonds. Thanks to his grandfather Geisel, Ted, at age 14, ranked in the top ten of Springfield scouts in bond sales. These scouts were recognized publicly in May 1918 in a public ceremony. The awards were passed out by then-Colonel Theodore Roosevelt, with thousands of townspeople thronging the huge Municipal Auditorium. There, each scout was awarded his medal by Col. Roosevelt. When Roosevelt got to Ted at the end of the line he stood perplexed, then yelled over to the scoutmaster "What's this boy doing here?" whereupon Ted was unceremoniously hustled off stage.

Roosevelt had only been provided with nine medals and the flustered scoutmaster, rather than explaining things, just hustled Ted off stage, leaving psychological scars that would affect Ted for the rest of his life. Although he had never experienced it before, Ted at this point became terribly stage stricken and from that time on became horribly shy of public appearances, his fear of public appearances

bordering on the neurotic.

In Ted's thirteenth year, not only was the possibility of war between U.S. and Germany growing increasingly certain, so too was the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment: Prohibition. The future of the Kalmbach and Geisel Brewery, the largest in New England, faced economic ruin. Many of their Anglo neighbors were prohibitionists, thus worsening the tensions between them. (It was during this time that the Geisel family would engage in one of its elders' pastimes, plotting revenge and wickedness and practical jokes against their neighbors and other prohibitionists and stuffed shirts. The plots generated more laughter within the family than anything else as they were never carried out, but the residue of these family plottings show tell-tail traces in some of Seuss' later works published in *Judge* and other adult humor and general interest magazines.)

PUBLICATION PURSUITS

Ted's first published cartoon was the winner of an advertising contest he entered when he was twelve years old. In high school he became a prolific contributor of 'grinds' (one-liners) and cartoons for the school paper, *The Recorder*. Most of the early works were published under the pseudonym of Peter Pessimist, including this one about his least liked subject: "It'll just be our luck to be in Latin class when they turn back the clocks." As the number of his contributions grew, he adopted a second pseudonym under which work was published. This one he borrowed from his father and was to use it again many years later. His father first used it when playing the numbers as his mother was horrified that he might actually win and people would find out. Ted used it years later when he wrote the text for books that others then illustrated: Theo LeSeig, *Geisel* spelled backwards.

In Dartmouth, and later in Oxford, Ted vacillated between being a college professor, English teacher, writer or artist, exploring his options in Oxford, Corsica and Paris. His wife-to-be, Helen, a classmate at Oxford, completed her studies in England and returned to the U.S. where she taught school in New Jersey.

When Ted, then back in the U.S., finally sold a cartoon to the *Saturday Evening Post*, he was motivated to move from his parent's home in Massachusetts to New York to try his hand as a cartoonist. He finally sold his first cartoon to a humor magazine, *Judge*, and landed a job as staff writer there, as well. Taking this as a sign that things were looking up, he and Helen were married. Still quite poor, they rented a dismal apartment across from a stable in the Hell's Kitchen area of New York. When the stable horses died, they would be pulled out of the stable and dumped off into the middle of the street, there to be left for several days until picked up by the sanitation department. The magazine began having money problems, with staff sometimes being paid in goods given to the magazine by advertisers—one week Ted received 100 cartons of shaving cream; another time, 1,872 Little Gem nail clippers--so the Geisels stayed rather longer than they had anticipated in this particular location.

Ted started doing a regular cartoon column--part fact, part fiction--for *Judge*. To give it an air of professionalism, and wanting to save his own name for the great novel he still hoped to write one day, he signed it "Dr. Theophrastus Seuss." Theophrastus was the name of a beloved stuffed toy dog he had had since early childhood, one which, like the pseudonym itself, would remain with Ted for the rest of his days.

It was one of Ted's off-the-wall Seuss cartoons that landed him a (still above their means) Park Avenue apartment: A weary knight a-bed suddenly finds a dragon in his face. "Darn it all, another dragon! And just after I'd sprayed the whole castle with Flit." The wife of that popular pesticide product kept pestering her husband for two weeks before he finally called Ted, and thus started a popular advertising campaign and phrase, "Quick, Henry! the Flit!" Their new apartment had one benefit over their old digs at Hell's Kitchen: there were fewer dead horses. However, with their phone number one digit away from that of the local fish market, they were not about to make a lot of friends...every time someone called to order fish, Ted drew one on a piece of cardboard and had it delivered, never telling the hungry caller that they had reached a wrong number.

The Geisels themselves ate out regularly. Their lack of interest in things culinary dismayed Ted's mother when she found that the only thing in their refrigerator was the cookbook she had given them for a wedding present. Ted's mother died shortly after he started producing ads for Flit. That, combined with the fact that Flit was a spring and summer product and he was left with little to do the other seven months of the year, caused Ted to grow quite restless. Reviewing his contract with Flit, he found that one of the things he was not prevented from writing was children's books.

In 1927 he wrote his first children's book, an ABC book, that was subsequently rejected by every publisher to whom it was submitted due to Ted's somewhat impractical approach. Ted had recently discovered colored inks and, with three different reds and "about seventeen different blues," each book

would have cost \$150 a copy!

Ted then turned away from children's books, doing more advertising for Flit and Shell Oil as well as continued to write for humor publications. When, by 1938, more than two dozen publishers had rejected his second children's book manuscript, entitled *A Story That Can't Be Beat*, Ted was depressed and fed up. After an editor claimed there was "no moral or message" to be found in the book, nothing to "transform...children into good citizens," Ted fumed to Helen: "What's wrong with kids having fun reading without being preached at!"

Striding down the street after being rejected for the twenty-eighth time, crumpled *Story* manuscript jammed under his arm, he was on his way home to burn it when he bumped into an old Dartmouth classmate, Mike McClintock. Mike had, just three hours earlier, been appointed Children's Book Editor by Vanguard Press and was in a bind. Having sold himself to Vanguard as having many connections, he in fact had no manuscript to submit. They ran into each other, the manuscript changed hands, and several months later, U.S. children met a new doctor. (Ted was able to return the favor years later when, as one of Beginner Books' offerings in 1958, McClintock's *A Fly Went By* was published.)

Despite being an expensive book for its day (\$1), *Mulberry Street* quickly sold 10,000 copies, and Ted found that not only did he enjoy writing children's books, children enjoyed reading them. Vanguard made the same discovery, and thus a relationship was born. From that time on, Ted published at a rate of almost one book a year. After *Mulberry Street* came *The 500 Hats Of Bartholemew Cubbins* in 1938, *The King's Stilts (and The Seven Lady Godivas*, an adult book) in 1939, and *Horton Hatches an Egg* in 1940, the latter books published by Ted's new editor at Random House. During these years, with the world at odds and the U.S.'s carefully preserved neutrality crumbling, he became increasingly active in producing political cartoons for *PM*, a noted political magazine.

FILM, FRATERNIZATION AND FRANCE

In 1940, Ted accepted an offer to join the army and was assigned to Fort Fox, the army's instructional film unit based in Hollywood. There, Ted reported for work, in his custom-tailored-by-Brooks Brothers uniform, to make instructional and training films for soldiers. His boss, Frank Capra, and Jack Jones, the animator responsible for such American characters as Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck, taught Ted to edit a script and bring film to life by leaving much behind on the editing room floor. His work won awards, including two Academy awards for the film, *Hitler Lives* in 1946 and a documentary on Japan in 1947. Ted credited both Capra and Jones for teaching him the conciseness which brought so much to his later children's writing.

Ted came face to face with his dislike for authority and his German heritage when he wrote and edited *Hitler Lives*. It was this film which outlined the military's new "no fraternization" policy. "The Nazi party," Ted wrote, "may be gone, but Nazi thinking, Nazi training and Nazi trickery remain. The German lust for conquest is not dead...trickery remains. You will not argue with them. You will not be friendly...There must be no fraternization with any of the German people." Although Ted wrote and produced the film, and was required to hand-carry it throughout the European theatre to obtain the personal approval from every general behind the lines and at the front, this policy made him uncomfortable, not the least of which was due to heritage. He later worked to rescind this policy, joking with colleagues in the service, "Just be a good soldier. Leave the bungling to the State Department!"

One of his side trips through the war zone was planned by former *PM* boss Ralph Ingersoll. He drew a map route to get Ted and his military police escort around the fighting at Bastogne, but they took a wrong turn somewhere, ending up ten miles behind the enemy line the morning of the evening that the Battle of the Bulge erupted. They remained trapped in enemy territory until rescued by British troops three days later. In Seussian rhythms, Ted recounted "The retreat we beat was accomplished with a speed that will never be beat."

Ted was in France on the first New Year's after the Allied forces occupation. Subdued despite the celebrations going on all around him, he walked through the rain down the Champs-Élysée to the Tomb of the Unknown soldier, scrawling on a piece of scrap paper a poem which began:

If he had lived, he'd probably have been 45 or so
And he might have been standing here, saluting too
At the grave of
The Unknown Soldier...

The joy all felt as the war ended was marred for Ted with word that his sister, Marnie, had died at home of coronary thrombosis after fighting years of depression and living reclusively.

The war brought other changes for the Geisels. Ted decided that he liked living where he could do

some early morning gardening in his pajamas, and Helen had begun writing books for Disney. They decided to move permanently to California, eventually buying a dilapidated look-out tower in the hills overlooking the tiny community of La Jolla. Ted wrote of this place: "All the enlightened members of this community know about my books...but nobody in Southern California seems to keep 'em in stock... I gotta go out now and fight rattlesnakes, bees and man-eating rabbits in the patio..." In 1948, the tower was mostly graffiti-filled with hearts and had closets full of beer bottles. They got rid of the beer bottles and most of the hearts, and the uppermost levels became Ted's hideaway office, nicknamed "the bone pile," his term for all the sheets of discarded paper from his work on new books, each drawing done three or four times before inking the final drawing on heavy stock paper for the publisher.

LOVE AND MARRIAGE

Helen Palmer Geisel was the driving force in their relationship, keeping everything together in the background while Ted worked. She was also instrumental in the creative process, being his strongest editor and severest critic, biggest champion and the buffer between Ted and publishers and editors. She not only kept up her own writing career writing for Disney and Golden Books, she was intimately involved with Beginner Books, screening manuscripts, working with artists and authors, and trying to smooth the choppy waters when Ted butted heads with writers and the rest of the Random House staff.

When Helen was struck with complete paralysis and hospitalized for months, Ted was lost in many ways. He had once complained "All I want to do is to *write* books, and everybody's forever nagging at me to *keep* them," Unable to even make entries in their check book, bills went unpaid as he drifted from day to day, spending much of his time beside the silent Helen as she lay encased in a heart-lung machine, rigging up Seussian contraptions (a continuing reflection of his fascination with Rube Goldberg's fantastic contraptions) of mirrors so that she could see their dog outside. Whether he was truly absent minded or cunningly simple, he had through the years abrogated the business and household affairs side of their life together completely to Helen.

Though Helen recovered, she was never out of pain and never was able to work again at her former speed and strength. She continued to strongly support Ted, helped run Beginner Books, traveled to different places around the world with Ted, and made her own contributions to children's literature (under her maiden name), but the pain, fatigue and despair grew worse, even after their hiring an assistant to work with them at the Tower in La Jolla. Their close and loving relationship began to deteriorate as Helen could no longer provide the support, nurturing and protection Ted required to be able to freely create. Finally, in an act that niece Peggy said was done "out of absolute love for Ted," Helen committed suicide by overdose in the fall of 1967.

Ted was not to remain alone for long. In August of the following year, he told a colleague "My best friend is being divorced and I'm going to Reno to comfort his wife." Earlier in the spring of 1968, Audrey Stone Dimond told her husband, Grey, that she planned to leave him and marry Ted. The Geisels and the Dimonds had long been close friends, often entertaining with each other, attending numerous social events, going boating and vacationing together. Upon Audrey's announcement, Grey stood still, thinking it over a bit.

"Who," he asked finally, "is going to do the driving?"

"Why, I guess I will," Audrey replied, astonished.

"Good," he said. "I don't want any wife of mine marrying a man who drives the way Ted does."

Audrey, like Helen, handled Ted with gentle humor and patience. When Walter Retan, friend, kindred spirit from Random House and houseguest, had trouble one morning turning off the lights in the guest bathroom, he sought Ted's assistance. Ted came in and started flipping switches but to no avail. Shrugging, finally, Ted called for Audrey. Audrey came in, pointed up to the skylight, laughed, and said "You're trying to turn off the sun!"

Ted constantly struggled against public appearances, often backing out at the last minute. Audrey, as did Helen before her, cajoled and connived and did her best to get Ted out before the public. This became even more important as Ted's health began to decline. One such time, Audrey and old Dartmouth classmate Kenneth Montgomery conspired, not telling Ted that he was the commencement speaker at Lake Forest College's graduation until he was in the car on the way to the college. He scribbled notes on the way, this time writing in verse as it came more easily to him than prose. His talk was a huge success and verse became his formula for dealing with such commencements, awards dinners and other events.

Later that spring, to an American Booksellers Association meeting in Atlanta, Ted recited:

As everyone present undoubtedly knows...

Due to a prenatal defect in my nose...
 (Which seems to get worse the longer it grows)
 I am completely incapable of speaking in prose...
 If I could speak prose...
 You would be in a fix.
 I'd harangue you poor people till a quarter to six about Watergate memoirs and Richard
 the Nix. But I can't because Richard and poetry don't mix...
 I've come to convey
 In a most humble way
 The thanks of all authors to the ABA
 Were it not for our friends in the old ABA,
 Every one of us authors, I vouch safe to say,
 Would be engaged in the dry cleaning business today...

WRITING INFLUENCES, INSPIRATIONS

Ted's mother, with all the reading and encouragement to read and create she gave Ted, was his first literary influence. The sounds and absurdities of language, from both the German spoken at home and the English spoken outside the home, were also sources of inspiration for many of Ted's flights of fantasy.

In high school, Ted's literary ventures were fed by Edwin "Red" Smith, his young English teacher. Considered fun and unpretentious, Smith made a great impression on much of Central High School's students, encouraging many to apply to college, especially to Dartmouth, his recent *alma mater*. Through Smith, Ted discovered the French-born English author Hillaire Belloc and grew to love the rhythm of Belloc's verses, including:

As a Friend to the children, commend me the Yak.
 You will find it exactly the thing:
 It will carry and fetch, you can ride on its back,
 Or lead it about with a string.

In interviews as well as casual encounters, Ted often joked about where he got his inspiration, regaling listeners with tales of travel to the Arizona desert to pick ideas from the heads of retired thunderbirds (though admittedly with no idea as to where the thunderbirds got them), the reality was often less, or more, strange. While at home, he would resort to putting on one of his many hats. When out doing errands or traveling around the world, chance encounters, even sounds, were enough to start the creative process. Staring at the back of a man wearing a bowler on a train was the genesis for *The 500 Hats of Bartholemew Cubbins*; the sound of the laboring engines of a ship fighting stormy seas sounded, to Ted's ears, like *And to Think That I Saw it on Mulberry Street*. The amiable complaint of a water-logged and very muddled soldier of "Why is it always rain? Why can't anything else come down" eventually became *Bartholemew and the Oobleck*. (Oobleck apparently struck a chord with children through the years, making a frequent appearance in the form of the green slime that regularly hits characters on some of the children's shows produced for the Nickelodeon channel.)

Character names were also of interesting origin. Some were words that came naturally from his childhood; between the "Come back and guzzle" brewery and a sister self-named Marnie Mecca Ding Ding Guy, it should be no wonder that one of his first creations was named the Wynnmp. The Grinch, However, was so named because, as Ted said, "I just drew him and looked at him, and it was obvious to me who he was."

In a 1957 issue of *Life Magazine*, writer John Hershey criticized the "Dick and Jane" readers, saying that Dr. Seuss could write better beginning readers for kids. Whether he was serious or not, Ted took it seriously enough to contact his publisher and got a list of 223 easy-to-read words. His first book, *The Cat in the Hat* came about because *cat* and *hat* were the first two words on the list that rhymed.

Ted thought it would be a simple matter to turn out a book, but seven months and much throwing of the manuscript across the room [another "thinking cap" technique] later, the book was sent off to the publisher. While it did not sell well at schools, it was a hit in the bookstores. *The New York Herald* literary review wrote: "We were afraid that the limitations Dr. Seuss put upon himself might have shackled his marvelous inventiveness. Quite the contrary. Restricting his vocabulary...and shortening the verse story has given a certain riotous unity...that is pleasing." *Green Eggs and Ham* had similar literary origins, with Ted's Random House editor and friend, Bennett Cerf, setting Ted another literary challenge, betting him

\$50 that he couldn't write a book using only fifty simple words. The success of these books led to Random House creating a whole new division of books. Ted was hired as the president of this new venture, called Beginner Books, whose logo was the Cat in the Hat.

The inspiration for one book needed no explanation amongst Ted's friends and associates. In 1985, invigorated by his reception by the graduating class at Princeton, he went back home and started *You're Only Old Once!*, a book which helped exorcise his health care demons by portraying the medical field and age from his unique perspective. A fragment of his writing for this, his forty-fifth book, illustrates the way he wrote in general, with a slapdash, fill-in-the-blanks sort of approach that nonetheless took hours, even months, until Ted would be satisfied with the effect:

I remember hearing my grandfather speak of a (blank) that is old at the end of one week
 And a Nutchworm that's old at the end of an hour
 And after three minutes a (something) feels sour
 (BLANK BLANK something)...reckoned
 There were some germs who get ancient in only one second

Ted wrote another book on a dare, one that was published not by a book publisher but in Art Buchwald's column. Buchwald sent Ted a copy of his book, *I Never Danced At The White House*, and dared him to write a political book. Ted grabbed a copy of *Marvin K. Mooney, Will You Please Go Now!* and, knowing the fireworks were already going off at Random House, Ted told Buchwald to go ahead and run it anyway. On August 8, 1974, Buchwald's syndicated column thus began:

Richard M. Nixon, will you please go now!
 The time has come.
 The time is now.
 Just go.
 Go.
 Go!
 I don't care how.
 You can go by foot.
 You can go by cow.
 Richard M. Nixon, will you please go now!
 You can go on skates.
 You can go on skis.
 You can go in a hat.
 But
 Please go.
 Please!...

Nine days later, Nixon announced his resignation. Buchwald claimed credit, Ted claimed intent, and both bemoaned the fact that they hadn't collaborated sooner.

In later years, Ted took a philosophical view of his time at Dartmouth. "English and writing was my major," he said, "but I think that's a mistake for anybody. That's teaching you the mechanics of getting water out of a well that may not exist." It was, however, while at Dartmouth that Ted made the discovery that writing and drawing were two sides of the same coin: "I began to get it through my skull that words and pictures were Yin and Yang...that, married, [they] might produce a progeny more interesting than either parent. It took me almost a quarter of a century to find the proper way [to do it]. At Dartmouth, I couldn't even get them engaged."

IF IT LOOKS LIKE A DUCK

In Ted's case, it was probably a goat. Calling his drawing "exaggerated mistakes", Ted once said that he drew the way he did because he couldn't draw. Ted submitted drawings for a billboard that included, as requested, the image of a goat. The advertising executive stared at it, puzzled, and said that it looked more like a duck. So Ted drew a duck, resubmitted it – and the ad exec thought it was a great goat.

"Kids exaggerate the same way I do. They overlook things they can't draw, their pencils slip, and they get funny effects. I've learned to incorporate my pencil slips into my style." A child's idea of art, Ted

believed, was “pen-and-ink outlines filled in with flat color, with no modulation or subtlety...that’s the way kids see things.” One of Ted’s favorite comments about his work was by art critic and poet Karla Kuskin, who wrote that Ted’s characters all have “slightly batty, oval eyes and a smile you might find on the Mona Lisa after her first martini.”

While many praised Ted’s illustration, others put them down as mere ‘cartoonery.’ Chuck Jones was awed by Ted’s imagery and use of color and line and the complexity of his drawings, calling him the “children’s M.C. Escher.” Though Ted once put down his art work as a “sort of psychosis deterrent...to keep from going batty,” he tried to divorce himself from critical review by not selling his works. No sales meant no critics or patrons to judge them. It was only after Ted had been seriously ill for a number of years that he felt the press of time and a deepened desire for critical acclaim and so agreed to a retrospective of his work which was initially staged at the Museum of Art in San Diego.

Ted was an iconoclast, a stiff breeze blowing through the staid halls of children’s literature. With drawings more cartoon- or comic book-like than what had been considered “illustrations,” Ted was also among the first to put drawings on equal par with the text. His books enabled both readers and nonreaders to follow the action and the story.

In 1949, Ted was invited to lecture at a writer’s conference. Contrary to his nervousness at such events, he launched himself into it with enthusiasm. Ted spent weeks researching the subject, making, for him, a scholarly effort at defining the structure of his beliefs. He felt classical mythology was “lost on children,” leaving them only with the vivid images making up such myths. *Aesop* was “too cold, too abstract, too mathematical and intellectual,” while the *Illiad* was “too complicated.” *The Odyssey* was exciting, *Robin Hood* rewarding for its great trickery, and *Robinson Crusoe* fulfilled what Ted identified as children’s seven basic needs: love, security, belonging to, to achieve, to know, to change, and aesthetics. He found particularly appealing the Victorian era tales by Hans Christian Anderson, Robert Louis Stevenson and the “flesh and blood” characters of Mark Twain.

Most of the time, Ted never even thought of himself as a children’s author. He simply did what he did: drew pictures and wrote rhymes. Honing his style with his first books, driving himself (and the other authors writing for Beginning Books) to mercilessly high quality standards, his style remained essentially unchanged through the years. Other than his brief stint at research in 1949, Ted basically never considered that he was writing for children. He was happy that adults and children loved and bought his books, but he wrote and drew to amuse himself. No matter the many changes he went through, his books, for all their boisterous and subversive trickery, were comfortably constant in some basics: “Might never makes right; the meek shall inherit the earth; and pride frequently goeth before a fall.”

Ted was frequently horrified, appalled, and outraged at the volumes of often pretentious scholarly print dedicated to his writing, the theses, dissertations and book chapters written about his children’s books. Only one captured his heart and support. Terry Cronan, a psychology professor, had developed a literacy program using African-American and Hispanic students as tutors. The tutors visited low-income families, brought them Seuss books, and helped them build a book case in which the books were housed, with them often being the only books in the house. Cronan favored Ted’s books, she said, because of their rhythms and repetition and their asexual and ethnic-free characters. Ted’s British publisher had much the same feeling, observing that Ted’s books were popular in British adult literacy programs.

Ted’s relationship with his young readers was instinctive. Some critics, pointing out his revolutionary style, his sometimes antiauthoritarian writing, and his wildly disorderly yet personable style, said that he took the side of children. Ted confirmed this in an interview, stating: “I’m subversive as hell! I’ve always had a mistrust of adults. [And] one reason I dropped out of Oxford and the Sorbonne was that I thought they were taking life too damn seriously.”

Ted was as hard on other writers as he was himself. This often caused problems at Beginner Books as he took writers to task. He laid down strict standards (only one illustration on a page, text should not describe anything that wasn’t pictured so that children could work out the story from the illustrations themselves; each pair of interfacing pages had to work as an interlocking unit). Books, said Ted, were an art form that grew increasingly complex as it was directed to younger and younger audiences. Many authors complained that Ted and Helen wanted all books to look like Ted’s; none did and many authors left for other publishing houses. One team of writers did stick it out and, through a love-hate relationship with Ted as their editor, turned out a not inconsiderable body of work that Ted, despite his dislike for series, himself named the Berenstain Bears.

In an interview around his seventy-fifth birthday, Ted told the writer for *the Los Angeles Times Book Review* “I tend to basically exaggerate in life, and in writing, it’s fine to exaggerate. I really enjoy overstating for the purpose of getting a laugh. It’s very flattering, that laugh, and at the same time it gives pleasure to the audience and accomplishes more than writing very serious things. For another thing,

writing is easier than digging ditches. Well, actually *that's* an exaggeration. It isn't."

OH, THE THINKS YOU CAN THINK!

In an interview in *Time*, Ted said that if "[you don't] get imagination as a child, you probably never will." He also told the interviewer that he regarded the word lists that he once used to write *The Cat in the Hat* and *Green Eggs and Ham* as "hogwash" as children's vocabularies had now far surpassed those limited lists due to the influences of television and such programs as *Sesame Street*.

Ted and Maurice Sendak appeared at an art exhibition of Sendak's work at the Museum of Art in San Diego. It was the first time the men had met. When asked if they liked their characters, both responded quite negatively. "If my characters gave me a dinner party, I wouldn't show up," Ted answered. "If we lived with them," said Sendak, "we'd be in the madhouse...Writing is a way to exorcise them."

Joan Knight worked as Ted's part time secretary from 1971-1973 during which time she answered his fan mail. Readers wrote him, "treating him like a philosopher, trying to interpret what he wrote, trying to get him to say he was preaching some unsaid message, but he never would. All he wanted was for people to read." One exception to this was *The Lorax*, the first book in which he purposely set out to write to convey a message. He wanted it unlike what he felt to be the heavy-handed books already in existence about conservation and the environment. *The Lorax*, with the Truffula trees inspired by the trees dotting the African landscape that he looked upon while penning the book in Kenya, was the first book he set out to write to communicate a deeply felt philosophy. Despite his claim, however, many readers do find the stories dealing subtly with racial prejudice, greed, fear of the unknown, integrity, and, of course, the perils of uninvited guests.

In 1984, Ted's cancer worsened. As he perceived the world about him heading once again into dangerous waters, he began *The Butter Battle Book*, taking a controversial position in the age of Reaganomics and Star Wars defense systems. Some protested the brainwashing, others the ambiguous ending. In response to such a letter, Ted's secretary responded: "If there was a happy ending in reality, then there would have been no need to write this book...The book tells the truth and the truth is our only hope... [it] is the most important contribution Dr. Seuss has made in his many years of giving children something to think about." The book took off in the U.S. and in Britain, and soon foreign editions appeared, first in Japan, then in Israel. Only after its popularity was assured, however, did Random House agree to print Maurice Sendak's endorsement on the cover of subsequent editions:

"Surprisingly, wonderfully, the case for total disarmament has been brilliantly made by our acknowledged master of nonsense, Dr. Seuss. . . Only a genius of the ridiculous could possibly deal with the cosmic and lethal madness of the nuclear arms race.. .He has done the world a great service."

In late 1990, Ted's biographers asked if, after all that he had said in his books, there was anything left unsaid. Several days later, Ted handed them a sheet of paper on which he had written:

"Any message or slogan? Whenever things go a bit sour in a job I'm doing, I always tell myself, "You can do better than this."

The best slogan I can think of to leave with the kids of the U.S.A. would be: "We can...and we've got to...do better than this."

With all his words and pleas for sanity, his opposition to the arms race, illiteracy, prejudice, pollution and greed, Ted was speaking to everyone, not just children.

"AM I DEAD YET"

First Helen, then Audrey, tried repeatedly to get Ted to stop smoking. Fighting this ever losing battle, Ted resorted to bribes and trickery, going so far as to linger in the dining room after the other guests had left so he could sneak the cigarettes off the table, secreting them for later. Slipping friend Duke Johnson some money while out to dinner one night, asking him to get a pack of cigarettes, Duke refused. "I thought you were my friend," Ted snapped. "That's the point," said Duke, "I am."

The occasion of Ted's seventy-fifth birthday set off a round of interviews, exhibitions, and library celebrations. Smoking incessantly throughout the interviews, Ted nonetheless quickly snubbed out the cigarettes for photo sessions because, he said, "children's book authors never smoke." As little as Ted cared to be around children, he was still acutely aware of their observations and strove to maintain his naturally nurturing and avuncular appearance for them.

The year 1975 saw the start of a five-year battle with glaucoma, cataracts, and transient blindness as the condition waxed and waned and Ted underwent numerous surgeries. His prior years of intense involvement in the publishing of his books stood him in good stead. Though he could no longer see, he was still able to be quite specific about the colors to be used in the illustrations of the book waiting to be published: he had long ago memorized the color charts and so could specify color numbers and the modifications made to the colors to attain the exact hues and tones he wanted.

In the summer of 1981, as Ted began work on *Bunches of Hunches*, Ted and Audry attended a dinner party. Audry had previously arranged with their hostess to ban smoking at the table. Ted picked up the *no smoking* card from his table, set it afire, and sent it to the hostess on a tray.

The next day he awoke with indigestion. Audry, a former nurse, checked his blood pressure. When he complained of the same ill feeling the next day, she had him admitted to the hospital where he was found to have had a minor heart attack. Always healthy and fit, Ted's doctor made only one recommendation for reform in Ted's lifestyle: no more smoking.

Ted resurrected his old pipe, filled it with radish seeds and sphagnum moss, and whenever he wanted a cigarette, he watered his pipe with an eyedropper. The most difficult time, he said, was not being able to light up a cigarette when he answered the phone, thus having no crutch with which "to ease the embarrassment of talking to someone."

In 1983, during a routine dental appointment, a small lesion was found at the base of his tongue; it was later confirmed to be a malignancy of a type linked to smoking and drinking. Thus began a series of surgeries to remove great masses of tongue, tissue and muscle following a sickening course of chemo- and radiation therapy. Typical of Ted, very few in the inner circle of friends and associates knew about what was happening for some time. Thus began years of surgeries, illness, and waning strength.

On Sept 24, 1991, Ted died at home in his studio, steps away from his drawing board and color charts, stubs of pencils and pots of ink and his closet full of hats, Audrey and Theophrastus by his side.

CLOSING

In a perceptive review that both charmed and startled Ted, critic Clifton Fadiman wrote that Ted provided "ingenious and uniquely witty solutions to the standing problem of the juvenile fantasy writer: how to find, not another Alice, but another rabbit hole. . .He may have a complete set of private despairs he fondles lovingly in the dark.. .he may have a dandy buried life...[but] it is not reflected in any of the delightful children's books he has written...he is not using his books for any purpose beyond entertaining himself and his readers..."

Fadiman did not have the benefit of reading Ted's biography, compiled during the last years of his life. As I read through some of these books, it is clear to me, at least, that Ted Geisel did play out in writing some of the themes of his life and worked through, if not completely exorcised, many of the demons that fired and inspired his life, art, philosophy, and writing. *The Lorax*, *The Butter Battle Book*, and *You're Only Old Once!* Are but three of the most obvious of these books; with his attempt to wake up the children, if not their parents, to the needs to preserve the ear and our sanity, and to rail against old age and the fears that accompany the betrayal of the body.

Searching deep in darkened places,
Reaching into vacant spaces,
I touch only shadow faces...
Where are you?
Empty caves in endless mountains,
Dusty, dry deserted fountains...
Pathless, groping, I move hoping
Where are you?
Past songless birds on lifeless trees
Cross waveless oceans, silent seas,
Through fumbling nights that find no day,
I move and try to find my way.

Theodor Seuss Geisel, 1990.

1937 And to Think That I Saw It All on Mulberry Street
1938 The 500 Hats of Bartholemew Cubbins

- 1939 The Seven Lady Godivas* The King's Stilts
 1940 Horton Hatches an Egg
 1941-1946 *WWII hiatus*
 1947 McElligot's Pool (Caldicott Honor Book)
 1948 Thidwick and The Big-Hearted Moose
 1949 Bartholemew and the Oobleck (Caldicott Honor Book)
 1950 If I Ran the Zoo (Caldicott Honor Book)
 1951 Gerald McBoing-Boing (animated film)
 1953 The 5,000 Fingers of Dr. T Scrambled Egg Super!
 1954 Horton HearsaWho
 1955 On Beyond Zebra
 If I ran the Circus
 1957 The Cat in the Hat
 How the Grinch Who Stole Christmas 1958 Yertle the Trurtle and Other Stories
 The Cat in the Hat Came Back
 Happy Birthday to You
 1960 One Fish Two Fish Red Fish Blue Fish Green Eggs and Ham
 1961 The Sneetches and Other Stories Ten Apples Up On Top~
 1962 Dr. Seuss's Sleep Book
 1963 Hop on Pop
 Dr. Seuss's ABC Book
 1964 The Cat in the Hat Dictionary*
 1965 Fox in Socks
 I Had Trouble Getting to Solla Sollew
 I Wish that I had Duck Feet**
 1967 The Cat in the Hat Songbook*
 1968 The Foot Book
 The Hand Book
 The Eye Book**
 1969 I Can Lick 30 Tigers Today! and Other Stories
 I Can Draw It Myself!
 Mr. Brown Can Moo! Can You?
 My Book About Me*
 1971 The Lorax (NCSS Notable Children's Trade Book)
 I Can Write!: A Book by Me, Myself**
 1972 In a People House**
 Marvin K. Mooney, Will You Please Go Now!
 1974 The Shape of Me and Other Stuff
 There's a Wocket in My Pocket
 Did I Ever Tell You How Lucky You Are?
 The Many Mice of Mr. Brice**
 Wacky Wednesday**
 Great Day for Up!*
 1975 Oh, The Thinks You Can Think!
 Would You Rather Be A Bullfrog?***
 1976 The Cat's Quizzer
 1978 I Can Read With My Eyes Shut!
 1979 Oh, Say Can You Say?
 1982 Hunches in Bunches
 1984 The Butter Battle Book
 1986 You're Only Old Once
 1987 I Am Not Going To Get Up Today!
 1989 Oh, The Places You'll Go!

* Written by Dr. Seuss

** Written by Theo. LeSeig

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