

“Keep Your Butter Side Up”: Reconciling Dr. Seuss and His Politics

Works of art (and artists) often have the strange capacity to be interpreted in ways that result in diametrically opposed conclusions. This is particularly true when the art (or artist) achieves great cultural or economic success and persists in the spotlight of the American consciousness for many years and, thus, is interpreted through contemporary (often ahistorical) lenses. Children’s literature is potentially one of the richest arenas in which this phenomenon can be observed—we need only think of C.S. Lewis’ *Chronicles of Narnia* or J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series to see how these texts can simultaneously be interpreted as blasphemous (talking animals and witchcraft!) and religious (Christian symbolism?!). The problem (if it is a problem at all) is only exacerbated when the text’s author has a complicated or potentially unscrupulous, and not “child friendly,” past—think Shel Silverstein or Theodore Geisel (the subject of this presentation).

Interpretations of a work and the intersection of the artist and their art become potentially even more fraught with ideological clashes when the work takes an overt or, more likely, metaphorical political stance. Over the last few years, controversies surrounding the works of an “American Icon” (Dr. Seuss) have taken center stage in the debate about how, or if, we teach children about the author behind the work, or if we should continue to buy, recommend, or shelve the books at all, since their author has a lengthy history of harmful racial stereotypes. The question of how we reconcile the unsettling reality of the author with the desire to value their work is not new. However, analyzing one of Seuss’s most political books, *The Butter Battle Book*, the controversies surrounding Dr. Seuss, his WWII propaganda, and his advertisements provides a timely opportunity to examine how we reconcile the artist and their art and how children’s literature, in particular, is politicized.