

3-1-2014

# The Origin: Opening Remarks to Exploring Civil Society Through the Writings of Dr. Seuss

Tamara C. Belinfanti

*New York Law School*, tamara.belinfanti@nyls.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.nyls.edu/fac\\_articles\\_chapters](http://digitalcommons.nyls.edu/fac_articles_chapters)

---

## Recommended Citation

58 N.Y.L. Sch. L. Rev. 3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Scholarship at DigitalCommons@NYLS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articles & Chapters by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@NYLS.

TAMARA C. BELINFANTI

The Origin: Opening Remarks to *Exploring  
Civil Society Through the Writings of Dr. Seuss*

58 N.Y.L. SCH. L. REV. 501 (2013–2014)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Associate Professor, New York Law School; Aspen Ideas Scholar; J.D., *cum laude*, Harvard Law School. The author would like to thank her symposium co-organizer, Professor Richard Chused, and the fantastic group of symposium panelists and moderators. She would also like to thank the keynote speaker, Professor Donald Pease, who is the Ted and Helen Geisel Third Century Professor in the Humanities at Dartmouth College, and author of *THEODOR SEUSS GEISEL* (Random House 2010).

EDITOR'S NOTE: This article is an edited version of Professor Belinfanti's introductory remarks at a symposium held at New York Law School on March 1, 2013, and sponsored by the *New York Law School Law Review* and the New York Law School Racial Justice Project. A video recording of her remarks is available at <http://youtu.be/1GmDjtMPm4o?t=8m30s>.

On March 1, 1957, exactly fifty-six years before the date of this symposium, the world was introduced to a “cat wearing a hat” who entertains two children with all kinds of preposterous acts, while all the time being admonished by a disdainful fish who warns the children that this cat in the hat is up to no good and they should put him out.<sup>1</sup> Through rhythmic cadences and linguistic antics, children and adults fell in love with this cat and with Dr. Seuss.

*The Cat in the Hat* was my first entrée into the world of Seuss, but among friends I will admit that I have always been a little afraid and distrustful of the Cat. Yet I am drawn in by him, and maybe that is the point. Seuss invites you inside the world of his characters and, if you submit to that world, you are taken on an enchanting ride through fanciful places, some of which you would want to visit, like:

The Jungle of Nool<sup>2</sup> or McElligot’s Pool,<sup>3</sup>

Like Mulberry Street,<sup>4</sup> New York, or Palm Beach,

Like Seuss’s Weehawken,<sup>5</sup> Who-ville,<sup>6</sup> or the Prairie of Prax,<sup>7</sup>

Or even the Street of the Lifted Lorax.<sup>8</sup>

Then there are other places which, quite frankly, you would rather avoid, like that dreaded Field of Snide<sup>9</sup> or that awful Waiting Place.<sup>10</sup> But in all of these places you are introduced to a world of various creatures and characters that defy convention, push boundaries, question positions, turn you right side up and inside out, or stand so immovable in their tracks that they force you to question: Under what circumstances will *you* not be moved? When you emerge from these places at the end of a Seuss book, you cannot help but be somewhat transformed.

Now, while I like all of Seuss’s creatures, the one who occupies a special place in my heart is the Lorax. As we all know, he “speaks for the trees.”<sup>11</sup> And he does this because, in his words, “the trees have no tongues.”<sup>12</sup> I think he would describe himself

---

1. See generally DR. SEUSS, *THE CAT IN THE HAT* (1957).  
 2. See generally DR. SEUSS, *HORTON HEARS A WHO!* (1954).  
 3. See generally DR. SEUSS, *McELLIOT’S POOL* (1947).  
 4. See generally DR. SEUSS, *AND TO THINK THAT I SAW IT ON MULBERRY STREET* (1937).  
 5. See, e.g., DR. SEUSS, *THE LORAX* (1971).  
 6. See, e.g., *HORTON HEARS A WHO!*, *supra* note 2.  
 7. See generally DR. SEUSS, *The Sneetches*, in *THE SNEETCHES AND OTHER STORIES* (1961).  
 8. See generally *THE LORAX*, *supra* note 5.  
 9. See generally DR. SEUSS, *WHAT WAS I SCARED OF? A GLOW-IN-THE-DARK-ENCOUNTER* (2009); see also *The Sneetches*, *supra* note 7.  
 10. See generally DR. SEUSS, *OH, THE PLACES YOU’LL GO!* (1990).  
 11. See *THE LORAX*, *supra* note 5.  
 12. *Id.*

as an environmentalist, an agitator, a disruptor, a believer in business sustainability, and one who views himself and his immediate environment as part of one larger ecosystem.

I wrote about the Lorax in March 2012 in a blog on the *Huffington Post*<sup>13</sup>—not from the point of view of recounting a children’s fable, but from the perspective of using him as a way to discuss business sustainability and the role of business in society. The reactions I received in response to this blog posting reaffirmed something that I had always sensed: Seuss compels us to explore his world of fantastical creatures and adventures, but we can also use his world as a vehicle for exploring the real world of today.

Fellow “Seussers” began to come out of the woodwork. One such fellow Seusser is my co-organizer Professor Richard Chused, who was the first to say: “You should do a symposium,” to which I said, “I’ve never done a symposium,” and to which he in turn said, “I’ll help.” And from that simple exchange began a journey to gather a community of people together to adventure with Seuss and his characters, in the hope that, like his characters, we too will submit to being turned right side up, and maybe at the end we will emerge more enlightened about our role and our potential in our communities and beyond.

I think this idea of submitting to the fable and emerging transformed is what makes children’s literature a perfect vehicle for Seuss and his message of fairness, equality, justice, respect for individuality, human dignity, and overcoming the differences that divide us. If you have ever watched children play, you will see that they are not defined by boundaries, they reimagine rules, they shift perspectives, they redefine power, they create creatures and scenarios that defy logic, they escape through imagination, they believe in the seemingly impossible, they are instinctual, they don’t require empirical proof for defining wrong from right, and they have the enviable capacity to distill the most complex problem down to its essential nature.

Seuss got this, and in a way he wrote his stories just like a child would play. For example, many of Seuss’s characters wear extravagant “dress-up” garb (think of Bartholomew and his five hundred hats);<sup>14</sup> they love to make grand and dramatic entrances (like our friend the Cat in the Hat—“then something went BUMP! How that BUMP made us jump! We looked! Then we saw him step in on the mat! We looked! And we saw him! The Cat in the Hat!”),<sup>15</sup> they make exaggerated claims (as in *McElligot’s Pool*),<sup>16</sup> they like gadgets and eccentric machines (like the Thinga-ma-jigger<sup>17</sup> or Sylvester McMonkey McBean’s Star-Off machine),<sup>18</sup> and they move in

---

13. See Tamara Belinfanti, *Corporations in a Lorax State*, HUFFINGTON POST (Mar. 7, 2012, 3:31 PM), [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tamara-belinfanti/corporate-responsibility\\_b\\_1322136.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tamara-belinfanti/corporate-responsibility_b_1322136.html).

14. See DR. SEUSS, *THE 500 HATS OF BARTHOLOMEW CUBBINS* (1989).

15. *THE CAT IN THE HAT*, *supra* note 1, at 5–6.

16. See *McELLIGOT’S POOL*, *supra* note 3.

17. See *THE CAT IN THE HAT*, *supra* note 1.

18. See *The Sneetches*, *supra* note 7.

and out of reality in their made-up world (like the child protagonist Marco in *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street*).<sup>19</sup>

Now, while children's literature is the vehicle for Seuss's message, his message is meant for the child in all of us—that part of us where imagination is still alight and quick, that is not content with accepting irrational boundaries and lines of division, that does not let us take ourselves too seriously, and that does let us dare to dream and take a chance. Seuss's seemingly illogical verses and nonsense words allow us to shed ourselves from both real and perceived constraints, and invite us to reimagine what's possible. As Seuss himself said, "I like nonsense, it wakes up the brain cells. Fantasy is a necessary ingredient in living, it's a way of looking at life through the wrong end of a telescope."<sup>20</sup>

Seuss gives voice to the smallest of the small; he gives voice to the voiceless. His deliberately asexual and aracial characters are either larger than life or so small as to be almost insignificant or near invisible. They reverse convention; many of them reject the rigidity and confining norms of their society through imagination and colorful escapades. Some of them are forced into situations that require them to fly in the face of their society's expectations and norms. In Seuss's world, issues of discrimination, exclusion, oppression, human rights abuses, ideological warfare, business sustainability, and abuses of power become transformed into questions about the rights of people who live on top of a small speck of dust on a dandelion;<sup>21</sup> they become transformed into questions of the difference between those who have stars on their bellies and those who do not;<sup>22</sup> they become transformed into questions about the tension between the need for business to keep on "BIGGERING AND BIGGERING AND BIGGERING" and the anti-"glumping" need of the environment;<sup>23</sup> they become transformed into questions about the legitimacy of an imperialist ruler named Yertle the Turtle who sits (literally and figuratively) on the backs of the oppressed turtles upon which his power depends;<sup>24</sup> and they become transformed into questions about ideological differences between those who eat their bread butter side up, and those who eat their bread butter side down.<sup>25</sup> I have never quite figured out the logistics of eating bread butter side down, but that is neither here nor there, because the fundamental idea is the same—that whether you live in Who-ville,<sup>26</sup> Weehawken,<sup>27</sup> or in the Jungle of Nool,<sup>28</sup> there

---

19. See *AND TO THINK THAT I SAW IT ON MULBERRY STREET*, *supra* note 4.

20. *E.g.*, *Dr. Seuss Quotes*, BRAINYQUOTE, [http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/d/dr\\_seuss.html](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/d/dr_seuss.html) (last visited Mar. 10, 2014).

21. *See, e.g.*, *HORTON HEARS A WHO!*, *supra* note 2.

22. *See The Sneetches*, *supra* note 7.

23. *See THE LORAX*, *supra* note 5.

24. *See DR. SEUSS, Yertle the Turtle*, in *YERTLE THE TURTLE AND OTHER STORIES* (1958).

25. *See DR. SEUSS, THE BUTTER BATTLE BOOK* (1984).

26. *See, e.g.*, *HORTON HEARS A WHO!*, *supra* note 2.

27. *See, e.g.*, *THE LORAX*, *supra* note 5.

28. *See HORTON HEARS A WHO!*, *supra* note 2.

are certain rights and expectations that all creatures should be able to enjoy, and at the same time peacefully coexist with others in their community.

Seuss's narratives actively explore how the characters achieve this. Usually it does not happen overnight. They need to come to common ground, or one character wears down the other to the point where he or she concedes (*Green Eggs and Ham*),<sup>29</sup> or (in several stories) something unexpected happens that jolts their reality and forces them out of their comfort zone. In terms of a jolting force, Seuss liked eccentric and zany machines. And I get it. In a way Seuss's rhymes function like these fantastical machines that he and his characters are fond of—both the machines and his rhymes serve a transforming function, converting the accepted and the mundane into something that forces both the characters and readers to see something new.

Some of the books that are the subject of this symposium, including *Horton Hears a Who!*<sup>30</sup> and *The Sneetches*<sup>31</sup> end with the characters in a seemingly enlightened state. But, in other books, the characters are unable to move beyond their differences, and, because of this, they are left at a standstill when the book ends. Here I am thinking of the Yooks and the Zooks in *The Butter Battle Book*<sup>32</sup> or the North Going Zax and South Going Zax who refused to allow each other to pass, so even at present, we are told that they are still at an impasse, “un-budged in their tracks.”<sup>33</sup>

Two questions that might be asked are: Why Seuss? Why now? I am not sure I can answer these questions because they require freezing Seuss at a moment in time and I am just not sure that is possible. But, if I were about to be boiled in Beezle-Nut juice like our protagonist in *Horton Hears a Who!*,<sup>34</sup> I would say that Seuss writes with raw honesty, integrity, magic, and surprise. He uses linguistic gymnastics, verbal antics, and slightly off-kilter drawings to create a fantastical world for exploring:

The differences that divide us,  
 The threads that connect us,  
 The “markers” like race, ethnicity, or sexual preference that identify us,  
 The boundaries that confine us,  
 The norms that define us,  
 The communities that bind us,  
 The ideologies that separate us,

---

29. See DR. SEUSS, *GREEN EGGS AND HAM* (1960).

30. *HORTON HEARS A WHO!*, *supra* note 2.

31. *The Sneetches*, *supra* note 7.

32. *THE BUTTER BATTLE BOOK*, *supra* note 25.

33. *The Zax*, in *THE SNEETCHES AND OTHER STORIES*, *supra* note 7, at 35.

34. *HORTON HEARS A WHO!*, *supra* note 2.

OPENING REMARKS TO *EXPLORING CIVIL SOCIETY THROUGH THE WRITINGS OF DR. SEUSS*

The inalienable rights that are supposed to be for all of us,

The marginalization of the “smallest” among us,

The power structures that can either empower, crush, or enable us.

And, from all of this, how do we create a civil society that recognizes the  
individuality of each of us and the shared interests of all of us?

For me, this is why we held this symposium and why the authors have contributed  
to this symposium issue.

I hope you enjoy!