

The New Criterion

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On beyond madness!

by Joshua T. Katz

Just last week, a wonderful cabinetmaker spent two days at my house installing shelves in a room where I have long intended to display my collection of alphabet books. Once he'd left, I put them up one by one—alphabetically, of course—stopping now and again to leaf through some I particularly like. One of these was Dr. Seuss's *On Beyond Zebra!*, first published in 1955, in which Conrad Cornelius o'Donald o'Dell draws letters

he never had dreamed of before!
And I said, "You can stop, if you want, with the Z
"Because most people stop with the Z
"But not me!"

I did not imagine then that on the 117th birthday of Theodor Geisel, Dr. Seuss Enterprises would announce that six of his books, including *On Beyond Zebra!*, would no longer be published or licensed because "they portray people in ways that are hurtful and wrong." Or that President Biden in his proclamation for Read Across America Day (which takes place on March 2 specifically in honor of Dr. Seuss) would, unlike his predecessors Presidents Obama and Trump, fail to mention one of the country's best-loved children's authors.

This is madness.

When the morning news broke, I took *On Beyond Zebra!* back off its new shelf and tried to discern the problem. It is true that there is mention of a man Americans (still) celebrate with a federal holiday:

So, on beyond Zebra!
Explore!
Like Columbus!
Discover new letters!

A friend more attuned to the zeitgeist than I am suggests, however, that at issue are the orientalizing depictions of one Nazzim of Bazzim, who rides a camel-like beast called a Spazzim

(spelled with the Seussian letter spazz), and possibly also of Flunnel (spelled with flunn), a “softish nice fellow who hides in a tunnel.”

Let me repeat: this is madness.

For me, this is not simply about cancel culture, though I shudder to imagine taking my children into secret tunnels to read to them some of the most creative and joyous writing of the twentieth century. As someone who teaches linguistics for a living, I care deeply about the role that language games play in liberal education, both in the classroom and at home. I suggest that providing young children with models for how to bend language successfully—and how, yes, to illustrate these linguistic twists as well—increases the likelihood that they will grow up to be good writers and thinkers. It also equips them with the best antidote to life’s troubles: a sense of humor.

In the fall, I taught, for the fifth time, a freshman seminar at Princeton University titled “Wordplay: A Wry Plod from Babel to Scrabble.” It is perhaps the only class in the country in which both Dr. Seuss and James Joyce are on the syllabus. In 2015, *Time* magazine listed it among the “11 Bizarre College Courses We Actually Want to Take”; four years earlier, it was ranked number 7 of 18 “Hottest College Courses” by the *Daily Beast* and number 2 of “22 Fascinating and Bizarre Classes Offered this Semester” by *Mental Floss*. This past semester we briefly considered *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish*, which I’m pleased to say has not yet been pulled from circulation, and *On Beyond Zebra!*. The students seemed happy. Will I be pressured from now on to abandon these books, or at any rate the latter?

Everyone engages in wordplay, from infants to geezers, and Dr. Seuss and James Joyce have more in common—also with biblical acrostics, contemporary blackout poetry, cryptic crosswords, and rap battles—than people generally suppose. In the best examples of wordplay, among which I include both *On Beyond Zebra!* and *Finnegans Wake*, unusual attention to form not only does not take attention away from content but actually magnifies it. It is a great gift for a child to feel free to experiment with language and learn that it is possible to say just the right thing in a quirky way that, once expressed, seems just right.

Not everyone will like *Finnegans Wake* or appreciate how its author contorts language; for one thing, the beginning of the second “sentence” of this infamously allusive novel may have something to do with rape (“Sir Tristram, violer d’amores . . .”). Clearly not everyone likes or appreciates Conrad Cornelius o’Donald o’Dell either. So it goes. But surely we long ago learned our lesson about burning, banning, and memory-holing books—unless, that is, they are serious, data-driven studies about complicated matters of life and death by people such as Ryan T. Anderson.

One of the books we discussed in the seminar is Mark Dunn’s *Ella Minnow Pea: A Progressively Lipogrammatic Epistolary Fable* (the subtitle was abandoned, in the paperback edition, in favor of *A Novel in Letters*). The premise is wacky: the governing body of a small island decrees that whenever one of the letters of the pangram “The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog” falls from a

cenotaph in the town center, that letter is henceforth verboten in all communication, both written and oral. As letters keep falling, the citizens grow ever more despairing, living as they do under an absurdist totalitarian regime that sharply curtails their freedom of speech; readers of their epistles as Dunn presents them become increasingly unhappy, too, frustrated by the mounting linguistic constraint. Fortunately, there is a happy ending.

Sounds, letters, words, sentences, books: these are the elements of thought. Restrict them at your peril.

It is true that Theodor Geisel was an imperfect man. For example, he supported the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. That said, he was a liberal Democrat who despised Richard Nixon and whose widow gave money from his estate to Planned Parenthood. If Seuss is canceled, anyone can be canceled—as, indeed, we are seeing day after day in this year of mayhem.

This is how *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish* ends:

Today is gone. Today was fun.

Tomorrow is another one.
Every day,
from here to there,
funny things are everywhere.

As today's mores give way to tomorrow's, let's preserve at least our funny things—and our freedom.

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