

THE CAT IN THE HAT

The Dr. Seuss character has made reading fun for 50 years

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See Dick run. See Jane run.

See the Cat in the Hat chase Dick and Jane into the footnotes of history.

That's essentially what happened 50 years ago when a silly book about a feisty feline single-handedly revolutionized how children learn to read.

Until *The Cat in the Hat's* debut in 1957, reading primers were, well, boring.

"The reading primers that were then dominant in the American educational system - Dick has a ball; the ball is red, red, red - were not interesting to read," said Philip Nel, a children's literature specialist at Kansas State University.

Critics writing in periodicals like *Life* magazine charged that dull books for beginners were to blame for why kids couldn't read. Children's authors of the day, including Theodor Seuss Geisel - Dr. Seuss to you and me - were challenged to do something about it.

Geisel already had written some children's books, but he also was notable for coming up with a popular advertising catchphrase of the day for Flit insecticide: "Quick, Henry, the Flit!"

When he turned to writing *The Cat in the Hat*, Geisel did so with a list of simple words from his publisher. He was to limit the book to words on the list.

In the end, he needed only 236 of them. Sounds easy, right?

It took Geisel 1 1/2 years.

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"The less words one uses, the more difficult it is. Any poet knows that," said Jerry Mallett, director of the Mazza Museum of International Art from Children's Picture Books at the University of Findlay.

Mr. Mallett, who has written more than 50 books, got to know Geisel, who died in 1991, when their paths crossed on the literary circuit.

"He was an absolute genius with words," Mr. Mallett said. "[*The Cat in the Hat*] has affected more children over the decades than probably any other book," he said.

One story Geisel liked to tell suggested that the title simply came from finding two words on the vocabulary list that rhymed. He wrote that earlier attempts, including one about a bird, were thwarted because "bird" and other words weren't on the list.

From a practical perspective, Geisel used sounds and rhymes to help kids pronounce words, according to Mr. Nel, who teaches a college course on Dr. Seuss and wrote *The Annotated Cat: Under the Hats of Seuss and His Cats* (Random House, January, 2007).

"The words are a clue. They're a key. You know that 'cat' rhymes with 'hat.' That's an enormous aid to children," he said.



Nancy Eames, children's library manager at the main branch of the Toledo-Lucas County Public Library, with the Cat in the Hat statue. (THE BLADE/JETTA FRASER)

Perhaps the biggest innovation that walked in the door with *The Cat in the Hat* was a contagious sense of chaos and fun. After all, the fancifully illustrated story is about a lanky cat that stirs up mischief with a couple of kids and their naysaying fish on a rainy day.

"This is bringing anarchy into the reading primer," Mr. Nel said.

Kids loved it, including a young Mr. Nel, who now is 37.

"He not only taught me to read, but he taught me that reading is fun," he said.

The Cat in the Hat became an instant bestseller. Random House has sold about 10.5 million copies of the book, not including millions more sold through a direct-mail program, according to Judith Haut, spokesman for Random House Children's Books.

Schools, though, received the book a bit more coolly, at least initially.

"In the schools, people were a little resistant," Ms. Haut said. "It was very different from the Dick and Jane primers. ... *The Cat in the Hat* breaks the rules."

Today, the book is a mainstay in libraries and schools across the country.

Children throughout America will be celebrating Dr. Seuss and his signature character today with readings and other programs.

At Riverside Elementary School in Toledo, for example, Ohio Senate Minority Leader Teresa Fedor (D., Toledo), a former teacher, will read *The Cat in the Hat*. Parents will be invited to read with their kids and take part in other activities too.

"There's not a generation that hasn't been affected by Dr. Seuss books," said Riverside's principal, Romules Durant.

First-graders at Reynolds Elementary School are hosting a "read-in." At Arlington Elementary School, where there will be a day of activities, Principal Bill Colon has promised to dress up as the famous cat.

The National Education Association has its Read Across America day on March 2 in honor of Dr. Seuss's birthday. Random House is among the sponsors of the literacy initiative Project 236, which is encouraging read-alouds of all 236 different words in *The Cat in the Hat* at 2:36 p.m. today.

Even after 50 years, the book has aged well, said Nancy Eames, children's library manager at the main branch of the Toledo-Lucas County Public Library.

"I think Dr. Seuss books are every bit as popular as they've always been," she said. "Because he used fantastic creatures and extraordinary situations that we don't encounter in real life, they don't seem dated."

It helps too that many of today's parents were raised on the Cat.

"Parents remember the books so fondly," she said. "I think that the Dr. Seuss books are so fun to read out loud that parents don't mind reading them over and over again."

There can be little doubt that Geisel's creation has become an American icon. *The Cat in the Hat* has appeared in books, television programs, on the silver screen and Broadway, and been featured on postage stamps.

At the children's library in downtown Toledo, he's even there in person - as a 5-foot-tall statue.

"I've seen little ones run to the Cat in the Hat. They'll slap his hand and hug him," said Ms. Eames.

Sometimes she'll ask if they know who the creature is.

"At least a third of the time," she said, "someone will say Dr. Seuss."

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