

## 2.6 The Untold Story of Dr. Seuss

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### SPEAKERS

Jasmine Bradshaw

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- J** Jasmine Bradshaw 00:00  
You're listening to the First Name Basis podcast, Season Two, Episode Six: "The Untold Story of Dr. Seuss."
- J** Jasmine Bradshaw 00:14  
Welcome to First Name Basis, a community of parents committed to making the transformation from good intentions to confident action. Join us each week as we cover critical topics and answer the questions you've never felt comfortable asking. We'll use the lessons we learned to teach our children about race, religion, and culture. I'm your host, Jasmine Bradshaw.
- J** Jasmine Bradshaw 00:48  
Hello, First Name Basis fam. I am so glad you are here. So a couple of weeks ago, I mentioned on the podcast that we don't read Dr. Seuss books in our house, and there's a reason behind that. And I said, "You know, maybe you guys would be interested in an untold story of Dr. Seuss," and I got so many messages. So I'm really excited that this is an episode that you are excited about, because I have been thinking about this episode for so long. It was maybe a year and a half ago now that I found out the truth about Dr. Seuss, and it's been one of those things that I want to share with people. But I know that there are so many people who are really sensitive about it. So I hope that you will listen and learn and then decide what you feel is best for your family.
- J** Jasmine Bradshaw 01:33  
Before we jump in, I just want to give you a quick rundown of the flow of the episode, just so that you know what to expect. So apart from being a children's author, Dr. Seuss actually created a lot of political cartoons and propaganda and ads for different companies. So I'm going to start with all of those things and the timeline of when those came about and what they were.

Because I think that's kind of the untold story piece of it that we don't know. Then after that, we'll talk a little bit about the representation of people of color in his children's books that we're a little more familiar with, and then we'll go into, "Okay, now what do I do now that I have all of this information? What are some ideas about how I can handle it?"

J Jasmine Bradshaw 02:16

While preparing for this episode, I read a handful of different articles. But almost every single one of them pointed back to this study. And the study is called "The Cat is Out of the Bag: Orientalism, Anti-Blackness, and White Supremacy in Dr. Seuss's Children's Books." And this study was published in February of 2019, so just about a year ago. I believe so strongly in citing our sources, because if we were having a conversation and you had a counterpoint to what I was saying, I would want to know where you got that information. So I think it's only fair that I put it out there. This is the study that I use where I got so much of the information for this episode. Back when the study was published in February of 2019, 650 million Dr. Seuss books had been sold. And he's actually sold 450 million books since he passed away, so he's actually more popular now than he was when he was alive.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 03:14

And according to Dr. Seuss enterprises, so the company that lives on in his name, one out of four children born in the United States will receive a Dr. Seuss book as their very first book. And I read that statistic and I was like, "Yeah, that totally makes sense." I've been to so many baby showers where that book is given as the one of the very first books to put on a child's shelf. So our question today is, is that appropriate? And should that be the case?

J Jasmine Bradshaw 03:42

So the story starts kind of back in the 1920s. He is going to Dartmouth College and he writes for their humor magazine. It's called the "Jack-o-Lantern." And we all know Dr. Seuss for his drawings. And he was really famous at that time for his cartoons, because everybody loved the way that he drew and what he wrote, but his cartoons were actually incredibly racist. There was one cited where he draws Jewish caricatures and he plays on Jewish stereotypes. So he drew this cartoon where there's a quarterback who is Jewish, and he's holding on to the ball. And he says that he's not going to give up the ball unless somebody pays him. So that's a really, you know, old stereotype about Jewish people being greedy and being money hungry, and all of those different types of things. And you can tell that the quarterback is supposed to be Jewish because the caricature that he's drawn is just really terrible. And he also draws cartoons that have Black caricatures. And he draws Black people as gorillas. He draws us as cannibals, and we're often surrounded by flies and holding spears, showing that we are uncivilized.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 04:58

So fast forward a little bit to 1928. And this is when he begins to use the pen name Dr. Seuss, and he's still playing the same game and drawing these racist cartoons. This first cartoon that he signs Dr. Seuss is a racist cartoon of a Japanese woman and some children. And of course,

again, he's drawn a caricature. And in the caption, instead of spelling children the correct way, he spells it, C-H-I-L-D-L-E-N, because the stereotype is that Japanese people have a hard time saying their Rs. So a lot of people who tried to defend Dr. Seuss say that the reason why he was anti-Japanese is because of World War II, but this is in 1928, which is way before World War II began. So his prejudice and racism against Japanese people is very deeply rooted.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 05:50

So then in 1929 he begins to write for a couple of different magazines. One is called Judge Magazine and the other is called College Humor, which I thought was kind of funny, because I know there's a College Humor magazine around today. And I was wondering if it's the same one. I didn't have time to look it up, but if you know, you should definitely message me and tell me. So in this magazine, he continues on the same track of making his racist cartoons. And this one was the one that, when I showed it to my husband, we decided that we were no longer going to have Dr. Seuss in our home. In these magazines, he portrays Black people as monkeys and uses the N-word. And there was one cartoon in particular that really hurt me. In this cartoon, there's a picture of Black men who are for sale, which, instantly for me, obviously brings me back to a really awful time in our nation's history. And the white men are standing there as if they're going to buy one of these Black men, and the caption says, "Take home a high grade [N-word] for your woodpile." That is just disgusting. Like the idea that you would draw human beings in such a way that you're saying that they should end up on a woodpile. What do we usually do with wood? We burn it. He was saying that people who look like me and my family are not worth being alive and that we should be burned. I just couldn't stomach it. And I know that this is kind of a hard medium to be having this conversation over. It's a podcast, you can't actually look at these cartoons with your eyes. But I will definitely link them in the show notes. And I'm going to be sharing them on our social media @firstname.basis on Instagram so that you guys can really get a grasp on what these cartoons were and how awful they were.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 07:45

So the timeline gets a little fuzzy here, but I'm not sure if he was still working at the magazines or if he just moved on. But then he begins to make ads for a company called Flint, which is a bug repellent company. And in these ads, the people of color are always being subservient to the white men. So there's an ad where an Arab man is pulling a camel that has a white man sitting on top of it. And he is clearly in service to this man. There's an ad where there's a white photographer in the middle of the jungle and they're trying to get a shot of these animals. And there's a Black man standing next to them and this Black man...it's just such an awful caricature. He has a spear. He has gigantic lips. He has a grass skirt on. He looks as close to a monkey as you could possibly look.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 08:38

He starts to pick up some steam from these ads and in 1934, he starts to work for an oil company. And again, it's more of the same "lots of racist depictions of Black people being cannibals and ape faces. And this is a time in our country when there is an average of 10 lynchings of Black people each and every year. And if you've ever seen a photo of a lynching, it

is the most stomach-churning thing you could ever see. And I can't imagine the fear in the Black community as they saw people being ripped from their homes and killed and hanged for things that they often did not do. So to think that Dr. Seuss is drawing ads with these disgusting caricatures and perpetuating these awful stereotypes of the Black community is really disheartening.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 09:32

He's still working for companies and making ads and then in 1938, he writes his very first children's book, "And To Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street." Of course, he's a brand new author, so he doesn't have very much notoriety or fame yet, so he continues to work for different companies. And the next company that he works for in 1940 is called Narragansett. Now, Narragansett is a beer company. And as soon as I read the name, I was like, "Wait a minute. Where have I heard that before?" If you remember from "The Untold Story of Thanksgiving," the Narragansett is actually a tribal nation, a tribal nation that has been here in the Americas for over 30,000 years. They are still around and Dr. Seuss is the one who creates their mascot. And he draws a caricature, of course, of a Native American. And he calls him "Chief Ganset" And then on Thanksgiving, he has a really famous ad in which he draws Chief Gansett pointing a gun at a turkey and the caption reads, "Goes great guns with turkey." So that is another stereotype that Native Americans don't speak English very well, and that they speak this broken English. So I went on the Narragansett website, because this company is still around. Just like the people are still around, the company is also still around. And I just searched Dr. Seuss to see what would come up. And they have an entire page dedicated to him. And every year on his birthday, they repost his ads. And they're like these blog posts that are really excited and like, "Happy Birthday, Dr. Seuss! We're so glad that you drew Chief Gansett for us! Look at these vintage ads!" and it was really gross. This is one of the things that I will not be linking because I don't want to drive any traffic to their website. And I don't drink beer, but if I did, I definitely wouldn't drink Narragansett.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 11:32

I want you to keep in mind that while he's working for these companies and writing these ads, he's still also writing children's books. So he's writing "The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins," "Horton Hatches the Egg." He's continuing to write children's books alongside all of these ads that he's making. Then, the tide kind of shifts away from advertisements and into political newspaper cartoons, because the United States goes into World War II. So this is in 1941 to 1943 he publishes over 400 political cartoons in the newspaper. And a lot of these cartoons are seen as propaganda. In these political cartoons, he really goes after Japanese people. He draws them with pig snouts. He draws them as snakes, as monkeys, as cats. He uses racial slurs. And I wanted to read you a little excerpt from the study because this is one of those things that you just have to hear to believe. And there's a word in there that I'm just going to replace with "heck," because I don't really want to deal with saying a curse word. But it says, "And another one of his cartoons, published in 1942, depicted John Haynes Holmes, co-founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and American Civil Liberties Union beheaded by a Japanese man. Holmes was a pacifist who was opposed to the United States entry into the war, which Seuss vehemently supported. When Seuss received criticism for his cartoon of Holmes he responded, quote, 'Right now when the Japs are planting their hatches

into our schools, it seems like a heck of a time for us to smile and warble "brothers." It's a rather flabby battle cry. If we want to win, we've got to kill Japs, whether it depresses John Haynes Holmes or not. We can't get palsy walsy afterward with those that are left."

J Jasmine Bradshaw 13:30

So obviously, when you're in a war, there are going to be people who are your enemy, but that doesn't mean that every single person who is of that nationality is your enemy, especially the people in the United States who are of that nationality. You probably also know that these seeds of fear and hatred were sown so deep that the Japanese American people were rounded up and placed in incarceration. They were placed in camps where they could not leave and forced to live there because the United States government was so afraid of them. And six days before this happened " so they call it internment but I say incarceration " because incarceration is when you're forced to go somewhere, you're not allowed to leave. So six days before this incarceration happened, Dr. Seuss published a cartoon where Japanese people are lined up, and they're all going through this little stand, and they are being handed TNT. So he calls them saboteurs and he draws them with explosives in their hands.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 14:33

Now, I don't know about you, but there's no way I feel like you can say that this wasn't impactful for America as a nation to be seeing these things in the morning while they're having their breakfast around the table with their family and they open up the newspaper and see a caricature of somebody who they believe they should be afraid of. So that's a basic overview of his ads, his political cartoons, the propaganda that he did. Now there's a lot more that I skipped. But you guys, this study is 50 pages long. So if you want to go more in depth, you can absolutely read that. But I thought it was important to just kind of pick out a few different examples because I think that's all we need.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 15:15

So moving on to the way in which Dr. Seuss portrays people of color within his picture books. The study goes through 50 of the 59 books that he wrote. And out of those 50 books, there are 2240 human characters, and only 45 characters are people of color, that is an equivalent of 2% of all the characters that he ever drew were people of color. 43 of those 45 characters of color had characteristics that would align with the definition of Orientalism. Now if you're not sure I wanted to read the definition because I needed a little bit of a refresher, too. Orientalism is a way of seeing that imagines, emphasizes, exaggerates, and distorts differences between Middle Eastern, Southeast Asians, South Asians, and East Asians. It often involves seeing these cultures as exotic, backward, uncivilized, and at times dangerous in relation to Europeans and/or white people." So 14 of those 45 characters are stereotyped as East Asian, and the other 29 are wearing turbans. So you can imagine the stereotypes that go along with that. So you're thinking what does it mean to be stereotyped as East Asian? Well, almost all of the East Asian characters are wearing conical hats, which you might have heard them referred to as rice paddy hats. And if they aren't wearing a hat, they are carrying a white man on their head. So this is from the book "If I Ran the Zoo," and under the caricatures of East Asians, it says, "Helpers who all wear their eyes at a slant from countries no one can spell." Now, I really don't

know about you, but I don't want my child reading that. I don't want my child seeing pictures of Asian people depicted with slanted eyes. And I also don't want them to think that they don't need to learn the names of the countries where other people come from. It's just very disrespectful. "If I Ran the Zoo" was published in 1950, and this is where we see those two other characters of color. And both of those two characters of color are African. And he continues with his horrible depictions of Africans as monkeys.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 17:34

Moving on to 1957, he writes "The Cat in the Hat." And I know that this is going to be a really hard one for people to part with, but the Cat in the Hat is actually a depiction of blackface. If you don't know what blackface is, there was a very popular form of entertainment done by white people in which they made fun of Black people. So they would paint their skin black and they would outline their lips to make them really big. And then they would do these plays in which they acted really dumb, really loud, really forgetful, really buffoonish. And they were almost always subservient to a white person. So there would be a white person in the play who was smart and funny and witty, and then the person in blackface would just be bumbling around the stage acting really, really foolish and silly. And this was the way in which white people made fun of and laughed at Black people. So the Cat in the Hat is believed to be in blackface because the Cat in the Hat was based on an elevator operator that Dr. Seuss met. Her name was Annie Williams, and he thought that she was really funny. So he decided to base a character on her. But if you look at the Cat in the Hat, he mimics blackface and the way that the cat's role is to entertain these white children. And oftentimes, the Cat in the Hat's getting himself in these really silly situations where he's acting really buffoonish.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 19:00

But it doesn't stop there. It also extends to the Cat in the Hat's appearance. So obviously, the Cat in the Hat is darkened color, has a really big mouth, has white gloves " which was really indicative of blackface and minstrel shows " and has a big floppy red tie. If you look, there's a photo of the Cat in the Hat next to somebody in blackface. And it's one of those things where you just can't deny it after you see it. And there's proof that Dr. Seuss really enjoyed minstrel shows because he actually wrote and performed in blackface in his very own minstrel show. So in 1958, just a year later, he writes the sequel to "The Cat in the Hat," which is called "The Cat in the Hat Comes Back." And in this book, he gets into the bathtub and he leaves a ring of ink all over the bathtub and then he starts to spread ink throughout the house, and it's getting all over everything, getting everything so dirty: the white comforter, all over the walls, and this is actually a stereotype that people used to perpetuate about people of color that our color was unnatural. They would say that Black people got their color from drinking ink. They called it, in an ad for ink, they would call it N-word milk. This was their way of showing society that our darker skin color was unnatural, and that it was dirty. So for the Cat in the Hat to be spreading ink all over the house and pulling in this stereotype that was already there about people of color, it just kind of seems undeniable to me that these two things are related.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 20:35

And a lot of people will say things like, "Oh, well, he changed. What about 'The Sneetches'?" And they had a really big section in the study about "The Sneetches" in which they explained

that "The Sneetches" doesn't actually show acceptance, because the sneetches that had the stars and the sneetches that didn't have the stars, all of a sudden throughout the book they start to get mixed up. And it's not until they can't tell who's who that they actually decide to accept one another. So they're not accepting people for their differences. They're accepting them because they can't tell if they're a part of their group or not. And it showed in the study that the sneetches who didn't have the stars on their belly, they were downtrodden. They didn't like who they were, they were really depressed about their situation, which is not the case for communities of color. We are proud of who we are. We have pride in our community and we should not have to be mixed up with somebody from the dominant culture in order to be accepted.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 21:30

Unfortunately, Dr. Seuss never apologized for any of his ads, any of his caricatures any of his propaganda. He never said sorry. And there were a lot of people who wrote to him asking him to change things. And there were a lot of organizations that said, "Hey, can you change this part in your book? It's offensive." Or, "Can you change these different characters?" And he wouldn't make changes. He was given the opportunity and he chose not to. And I know there will be a lot of people who will say things like, "Oh, it was a different time, and blah, blah, blah." But I want you to think about the fact that he passed away in the 90s. And there were a lot of people who were doing the right thing then, you can find people all throughout history who are standing up against racism, who are standing up against Orientalism, who are standing up for the things that are right, and I don't see Dr. Seuss doing that. So I don't want his books in my home. I feel like there is enough racism and other junk in the world that we have to deal with that I don't want to worry about bringing one of his books into my home, and planting that seed within my child.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 22:37

So what do we do about this? Well, what you choose to do with this information is ultimately your decision. And do the bad things that he did negate all of the good things that he did in his life? Absolutely not. But my home is a sanctuary and I get to choose what comes into it. And I feel like his books don't align with our family values. There are so many things, especially if you're religious like I am, there are so many things that we say no to and don't bring into our homes because they don't align with what we believe. So I don't feel like this is any different. And there are people who will take in all of this information and choose not to do anything. And I want you to think about what that says about what you value. There's a woman who wrote a book all about Dr. Seuss, in which she did a ton of research and she learned all about the things that he wrote all the cartoons, all of the implications of what he wrote in his book. And this is what she had to say at the end about "If I Ran the Zoo," quote, "Occasional stereotypes of native peoples' pot bellies, thick-lipped Blacks from Africa, squinty-eyed Orientals may offend some modern readers. But in general, the book delights readers of several ages and several levels." End quote. That was Ruth Kay McDonald. And after writing her book, that was the conclusion that she came to. And I feel like it's lucky for her that none of those stereotypes or caricatures were written about her, because I don't think she would be saying the same thing after looking into it.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 24:12

I also want you to consider this question: when I'm trying to think of whether or not I should include something in my home, I usually ask myself, "Okay, how would I feel if someone from that culture came over to my house and saw this?" For example, what if my daughter had a friend over and they decided they wanted to read some books together? They're reading, they're flipping through the pages, and that child sees a caricature or a stereotype of themselves in a Dr. Seuss book. I would feel awful, and I would feel like I probably need to address it with their parents. And I just... really that's not a road that I want to be going down. So when I think about, "Should this be in my home?" I always think about what would someone from that culture actually feel and think about me and about what I value if they saw this in my home. And let me add that many people of color have looked into this. And a lot of us understand what Dr. Seuss has done and who he is. So when I come to your home and I see Dr. Seuss books, I know what that means.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 25:14

If you choose to get rid of your Dr. Seuss books, don't get rid of them without any explanation to your children. Now, I had decided that we weren't going to do Dr. Seuss a while ago, so I've never had this conversation with my daughter because she's only two-and-a-half. And I don't think she's ever actually seen a Dr. Seuss book. But if I had an older child, I would have an age-appropriate conversation with them about why we are getting rid of the book. I might say something like, "You know, when Dr. Seuss drew pictures of other people, he drew them in a way that is really disrespectful and makes fun of them. And our family believes in the importance of respecting people and their differences. So we should probably get rid of this book." And if you have children who are even older than that, you can look through the books together and analyze them and look for stereotypes to talk about why these books aren't appropriate in your house.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 26:06

So the other side of the coin is school, Read Across America Week is coming up. Read Across America Day is actually on Dr. Seuss's birthday on March 2. And if you choose to talk to your child's teacher, I just wanted to give you some tips for how you might approach that conversation. If it were me and I was going into my child's teacher, I would just be really upfront with them. Explain that you have recently learned all these different things about Dr. Seuss. You can share articles with them that I'm going to link in the show notes. You can share the study that I referenced, and you just tell the teacher that you know that they value inclusion, and that's why you want to bring it to their attention, you know that you are both working towards the same thing, trying to create well-rounded members of the community and your child and they're trying to do it for your child as well as so many other children. And you know that they want to make sure everyone feels loved and safe and included in their classroom. And these books don't really foster that feeling or support those values. So I would also highlight the fact that the National Education Association has shifted away from Dr. Seuss as the theme of Read Across America week. The new theme is "Celebrating a nation of diverse readers." So when all of this stuff came to light, it was presented to the National Education Association and they agreed that Dr. Seuss probably shouldn't be at the center of Read Across America anymore. They took away the Cat in the Hat as their mascot, and now they're focusing on celebrating a nation of diverse readers.



J Jasmine Bradshaw 27:42

So if the teacher doesn't already know that, which they probably do, but you can just encourage them to also move in that direction. I mean, all of their readers are diverse, whether it be a nationality and culture or in the things that they're interested in reading. We don't need to focus on Dr. Seuss. We need to encourage kids to foster a love of reading and we can totally do that without Dr. Seuss.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 28:06

So I hope that this has been helpful. I hope that you've gained some insights and some tips and that you ultimately decide what is best for your family and your home and your child. Thank you so much for listening to this episode and being committed to building a community of inclusion. I can't even tell you how happy it makes me when I hear from you guys on Instagram. If you're not yet part of the First Name Basis family, please find us on social media @firstname.basis. Send us your questions. Send us your comments. Send us your experiences — we want to hear it all. If you feel more comfortable sending in an email you can email us at [hello@firstnamebasis.org](mailto:hello@firstnamebasis.org) And everything that I talked about in this episode — books, podcasts articles...I will make sure to link in the shownotes. Okie dokie; I'll talk to you next week.