

March 2021 Tuesday Topic

Dr. Seuss, Library Policies, Censorship, “Cancel Culture” & Choosing Books to Read Aloud, Display and Promote

Welcome to Tuesday Topics, a monthly series covering topics with intellectual freedom implications for libraries of all types. Each message is prepared by a member of OLA's Intellectual Freedom Committee or a guest writer. Questions can be directed to the author of the topic or to the IFC Committee.



Intellectual
Freedom
Committee

Oregon Library Association

“Six Dr. Seuss books — including ‘And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street’ and ‘If I Ran the Zoo’ — will stop being published because of racist and insensitive imagery, the business that preserves and protects the author’s legacy said Tuesday. ‘These books portray people in ways that are hurtful and wrong,’ Dr. Seuss Enterprises told The Associated Press in a statement that coincided with the late author and illustrator’s birthday.” - [Washington Post](#), March 2, 2021

Many well-known and beloved authors are problematic due to racist imagery or stereotypes. Quite a few books fall into this category, as librarians and educators have long been aware. Examples include the “Little House on the Prairie” books, “Dr. Doolittle”, “Peter Pan”, and “The Indian in the Cupboard”. Authors may also be problematic due to personal behavior and publicly expressed beliefs -- writers such as Roald Dahl, J.K. Rowling and others come to mind.

This week, Dr. Seuss is in the news after his estate decided to stop publishing six of his 48 books.

Most libraries do own some or all of the six Dr. Seuss books in question. As public institutions, libraries must abide by the First Amendment, and cannot remove books because we disagree with the ideas in those books - that would be censorship. Our libraries keep books unless they meet our school board-adopted criteria for deselection (weeding/removal): they are rarely or no longer checked out by library users, they are damaged or unappealing in appearance, they contain incorrect outdated facts, and so on. Every library has - or should have - a policy and a form community members may fill out to ask for a book's removal; for schools, that decision often goes to the school board.

However, while we cannot remove library books, we as librarians and library staff can and do choose not to promote every book in the library. We choose better, more recent, more diverse, anti-racist titles to highlight instead. We can decide not to add the problematic books to book displays, read them aloud to classes, or recommend them to teachers and students. We may also let library users know about racism, stereotypes, or other issues in books, and then suggest different titles as alternatives.

We also often select books other than Dr. Seuss for celebrations of Read Across America Week (Mar. 1 -5). This is the approach [a school district took this year in Virginia](#), and it's a good one. They did not remove any library books, they simply made better choices for their celebration. As Loudoun County Public Schools said in their statement, "We continue to encourage our young readers to read all types of books that are inclusive, diverse and reflective of our student community, not simply celebrate Dr. Seuss."

Choosing not to display or highlight problematic titles is not censorship or “cancel culture.” It’s teachers and professional librarians using their judgement to benefit children and families. When we update our curriculum and the novels students read as a class, we also consider these issues. There are millions of books available; why not skip books with obviously racist illustrations, stereotypes, and other serious problems in favor of books that will be the “windows and mirrors” for all children, as described by [Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop](#)?

Many school districts and public libraries have adopted and implemented Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion policies. We have decided that EDI is a priority in our schools and libraries. Those decisions should and do play a role in deciding which books we purchase, highlight, and use in our classrooms and our library programs.

Yes, it’s possible to read a classic novel or picture book with a class or group of children (or with your own child) and point out the racist imagery or other problematic content. However, this does not always happen in practice. In addition, just showing that imagery can do harm. Librarians, teachers and parents constantly make choices as far as what to teach and read. Professional judgement calls for knowing and using more current and diverse children’s literature, in place of books with harmful content.

Libraries cannot and should not remove books due to content. Library staff can, however, help educate library users. We can use our collection development policies - which describe how and why we buy books - to add amazing new titles. Teachers can pick the best books for their classroom libraries and for their lessons, not books with racist, sexist, homophobic, and otherwise problematic illustrations and text. Public librarians can do the same for their storytimes and events. We can and must promote,

display, and recommend books that provide windows and mirrors for all students and their families.

-- Miranda Doyle, District Librarian, Lake Oswego School District
Intellectual Freedom Chair, Oregon Association of School Libraries
doylem@loswego.k12.or.us