

## BOOK REVIEWS

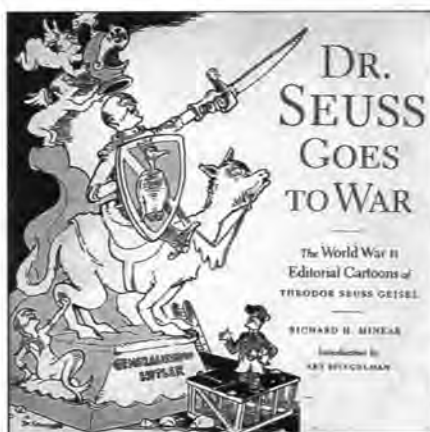
# Dr. Seuss Goes to War

## *The World War II Editorial Cartoons of Theodor Seuss Geisel*

By Richard H. Minear

NEW YORK: THE NEW PRESS, 1999  
272 PAGES

This collection of over two hundred wartime editorial cartoons of Dr. Seuss may surprise readers more familiar with his postwar children's books. Appearing in the New Deal-tinged New York newspaper *PM* in 1941 and 1942, the drawing style and fantasy in the cartoons are clearly Seussian. However, instead of the pure whimsy of cultural icons such as *The Cat in the Hat*, *Horton*, or *The Grinch That Stole Christmas*, the wartime cartoons are blatantly didactic, if not propagandistic. Many cartoons ridicule the enemy with wildly implausible scenes that cannot fail to provoke laughter. Others, such as one depicting Jews hanging in trees, are visually too violent to evoke anything but black humor.



Minear makes the interesting observation that this particular image would be familiar to prewar Americans who knew all about lynching since there were, on average, more than ten per year, not of Jews, but African Americans. One of the real strengths of the book is the detailed discussion

of such contemporary issues and historical contexts that will be lost on those unfamiliar with wartime society. While the cartoons stand on their own—the format and layout are excellent—the real value of this collection is in the commentary. A prolific scholar of the war and Japan, Minear guides the reader through the cartoons, explaining obscure verbal and visual references, from Father Coughlin to Flit bug spray. Hitler was the most frequent target of Dr. Seuss's wit, but Charles Lindbergh, a prominent critic of American involvement in the war, was also frequently attacked with ostrich images. *PM* was an early and strong supporter of American involvement in the war, and an equally firm advocate of winning the war once Pearl Harbor crushed isolationism.

The book has an introduction giving a summary of Dr. Seuss's early life, and the last section has interesting speculations on his role in the Frank Capra Signal Corps films, which he worked on after accepting a commission in the Army in January 1943. The cartoons that form the core of the book are organized into four themes: the home front, Germany, other enemies (including Japan), and winning the war. This organization makes sense, but it also presents cartoons out of the sequence they appeared in *PM*. For that reason, the author includes a useful chronological list of cartoons from January 30, 1941 to January 5, 1943. He also points out that the University of San Diego will post all of the editorial cartoons on [www.orpheus.ucsd.edu/spaccoll/pm/](http://www.orpheus.ucsd.edu/spaccoll/pm/).

How can the cartoons be used in the classroom? The cartoons and commentary would be invaluable in a high school or university course on the war and propaganda. The book is somewhat limited for readers of *EAA*, because Seuss did not deal as much with Japan as he did with Germany or Italy. Like other cartoonists, he used racist stereotypes to depict the Japanese, but was unusual in showing them as swarming cats rather than the insects and monkeys that most wartime propaganda used. One of the most disturbing cartoons is one showing Japanese-Americans as dangerous saboteurs; like most Americans, Dr. Seuss and *PM* did not extend their sense of justice and rights to the 120,000 Japanese Americans detained during the war. This might be a good discussion question, just as the willingness of

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March 20, 1942

Hergé to publish *Tintin* in a collaborationist newspaper during the war has become an issue in Europe. Although the Japan content is limited, the cartoons would be good additions to John Dower's work on wartime imagery.

I imagine that some will disagree with me, but I do not think the cartoons would be suitable for the elementary or middle school student. They would immediately recognize the style and appreciate the visual humor, but what they would learn, if not handled very carefully, might be wartime world views rather than a contemporary knowledge of the meaning of those views. Certainly students need to know at least the gist of Minear's exegesis of any cartoon shown in class. Propaganda (domestic and enemy "propaganda" were often attacked by Dr. Seuss even as he engaged in the same) is certainly important for students to study and recognize for what it is, but we must be careful of the Archie Bunker effect. Was Archie Bunker a satirical figure, an obvious parody of bigotry, or did some or even many viewers actually enjoy his articulation of prejudices that they themselves would be reluctant to reveal? Is Bart Simpson really a contemporary Huck Finn, is his dysfunctional nuclear family in the end supportive, or is he a role model for young sociopaths? These are issues subject to and worthy of debate, and in my view teachers should think about them and decide before using wartime cartoons with younger students. By their very nature, an effective editorial cartoon is visual, visceral, and simple in message. Long before the sound-bite, cartoons said it all with an economy of space, and like sound-bites, often with economy of critical thinking.

Until publication of this book, Seuss has not received the attention of Herblock or Bill Mauldin, artists known for their visual impact. Seuss was a different kind of cartoonist, drawing complex surreal scenarios such as turtles piled up in a "V" for

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victory shape, foreshadowing *Yertle the Turtle* and other stories that tickle the imagination and won him the love of children everywhere. Minear is to be commended for bringing this productive period—Dr. Seuss did over 400 cartoons for *PM*—to light, and providing an excellent guide to his work and American wartime thinking. The book might have been titled, "whimsy goes to war," an irony that Dr. Seuss, who died in 1991, might appreciate. ■

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## Chinese Myths

By Anne Birrell

Chinese myths were primarily a diffuse and fragmentary oral tradition, eventually preserved in writing only in a piecemeal fashion. Many classical texts are unavailable in translation, and the stories have been unknown to Western readers. This book introduces students and general readers to a selection of narratives organized by themes and motifs that help set Chinese myths in the context of world mythology.

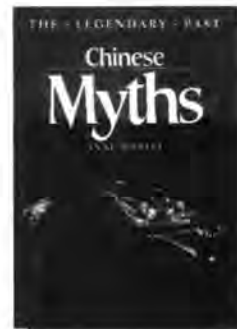
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