

GUIDELINES

For NAACP units on partnering with school officials to determine “appropriateness” of Dr. Seuss Books, other published works and other children’s books that may have “racist themes or images.”

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Supplementals added by Tamar LaSure-Owens

- In “*Research on Diversity in Youth Literature*,” researchers Katie Ishizuka and Ramon Stephens found that only 2% of the human characters in Dr. Seuss’s books were people of color. And *all* those characters were “depicted through racist caricatures. Research shows that even at the age of 3, children begin to form racial biases, and by the age of 7, those biases become fixed.
- “One of the reasons for that is the images and experiences that they’re exposed to regarding marginalized groups and people of color,” Ramon Stephens says. “And so [Seuss’ books] being mainstream, and being spread out all over the world, has large implications.”
- If kids open books and “the images they see [of themselves] are distorted, negative [or] laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society in which they are a part,” Rudine Sims Bishop, a scholar of children’s literature, wrote in a 1990 article.
- But when they see themselves represented in a positive way, it can have a similarly powerful effect.

<https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2019/02/26/695966537/classic-books-are-full-of-problems-why-cant-we-put-them-down>



What is slavery?

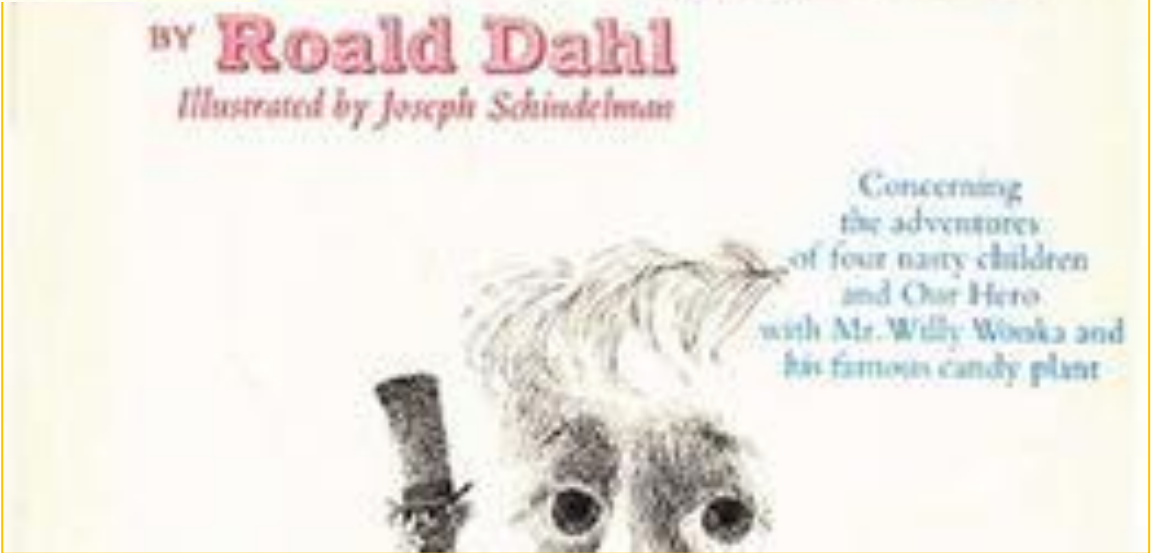
When using these books in a classroom setting, it is an opportunity to introduce and discuss concepts like slavery and colonialism. You may also discuss how stories and images that appear innocent on the surface can be used to mask what's really going on.

What is colonialism?





from 'the very deepest and darkest part of the African jungle where no white man had been before.' Mr. Wonka keeps them in the factory, where they have replaced the sacked white workers. Wonka's little slaves are delighted with their new circumstances, and particularly with their diet of chocolate. Before they lived on green caterpillars, beetles, eucalyptus leaves, 'and the bark of the bong-bong tree.'



Who are the Oompa Loompas?

The Oompa Loompas in “*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*” are orange people who are enslaved happily by Mr. Wonka. The book presents slavery as fun. In the original version, the Oompa Loompas are not white people from Loompaland. They are African pygmies from Africa.



Racist Elements in Children's Books

It is important for teachers to facilitate conversations on the racist elements in children's books with students who may be too young to do this kind of critical reading on their own. Consider asking questions like:

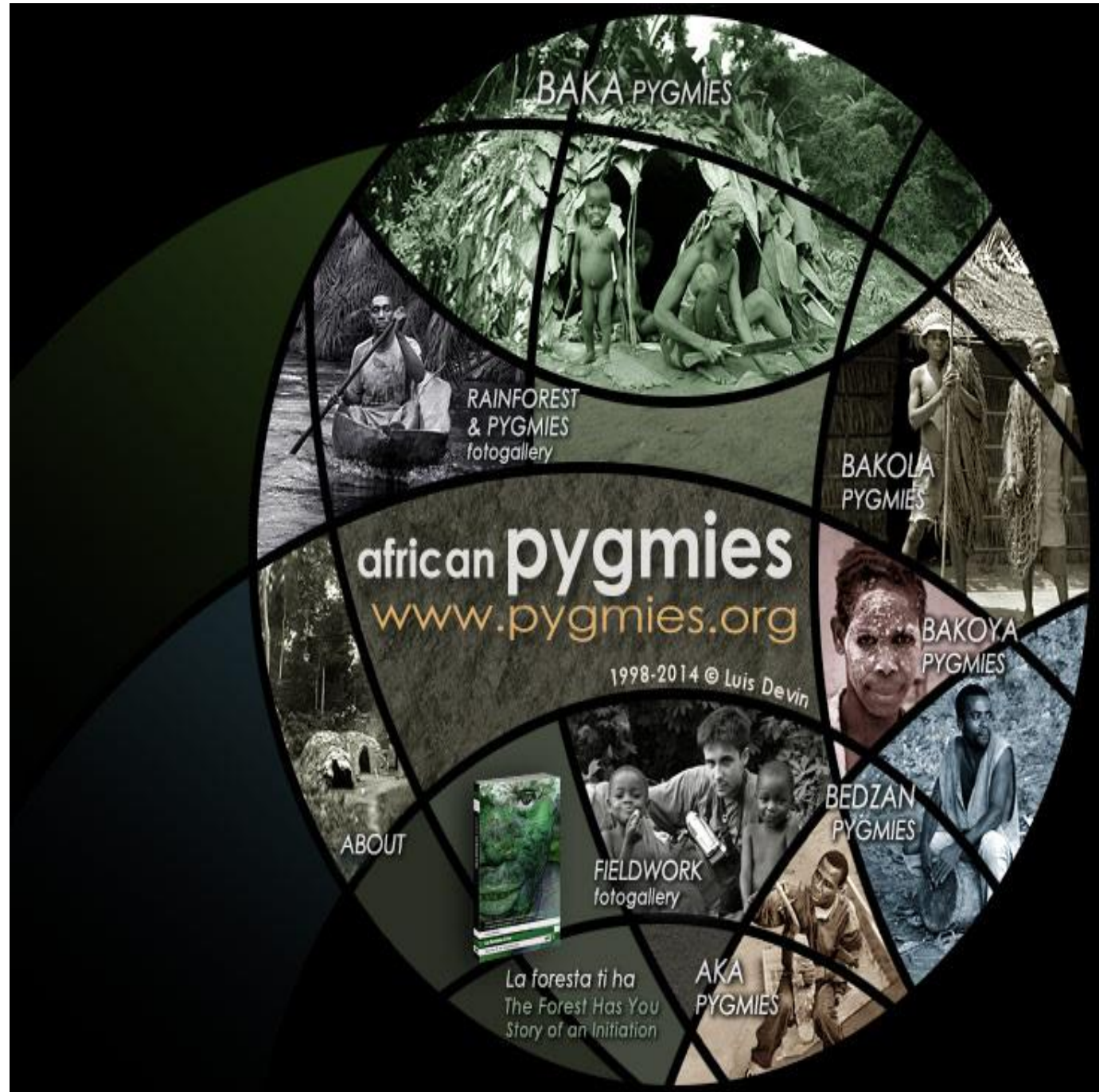
1. Would you be happy working in a factory and imprisoned there?
2. What do you think about presenting the Oompa Loompas as happy?
3. Why are all the characters in this book white? What do you think about that?



Pygmies.org

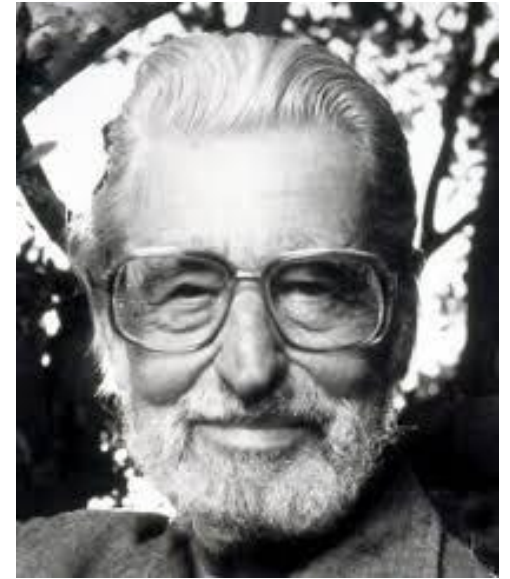
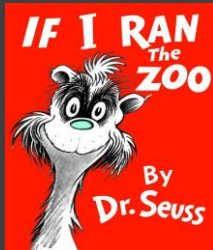
The website is dedicated to the hunter-gatherer peoples living in Central African rainforests, commonly called *Pygmies*. The website introduces their cultures, promotes their protection, documents their richness and shows some of the factors that increasingly threaten their survival.

The website was created by the Italian anthropologist and writer Luis Devin. It presents photos, music, sounds and other material collected during his fieldwork among the Baka of Cameroon and Gabon and among other pygmy groups in the Western Congo Basin.
<http://www.pygmies.org/#introduce>



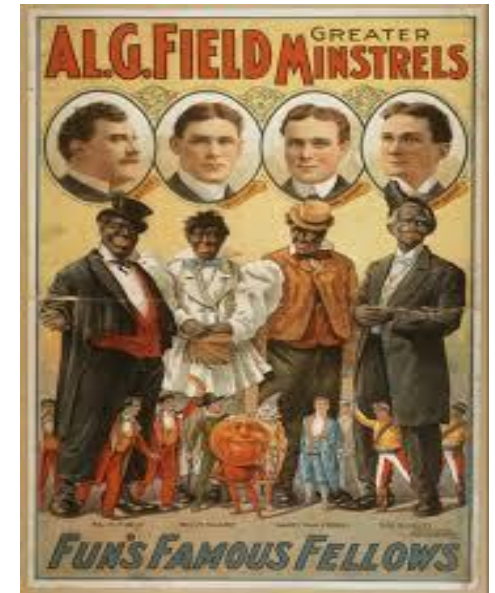
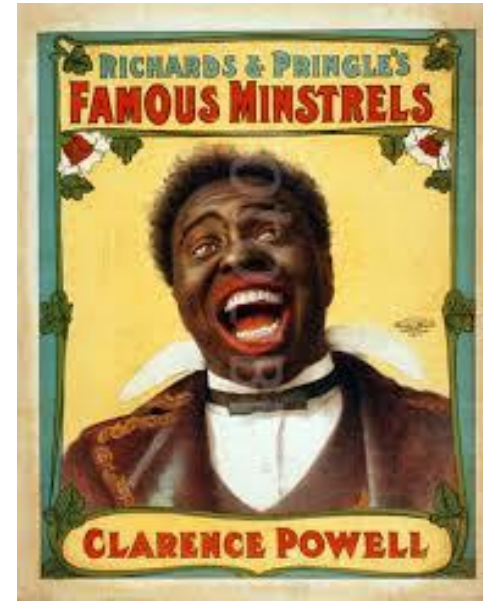
Theodor Seuss Geisel

The career of Dr. Seuss, whose full name was Theodor Seuss Geisel, is complex and not easily summarized. As a political cartoonist, he criticized Jim Crow laws, but also drew racist cartoons depicting Japanese-Americans as the enemy. Some of his early books also have similar skits and characters that depict slavery, enslaved Africans and African Americans in racist and demeaning stereotypes. "If I Ran the Zoo" contains stereotypical images of Africans and references "helpers who all wear their eyes at a slant."



These kinds of conversations with children are important. Even when it's uncomfortable. Even when teachers do not know all the answers.

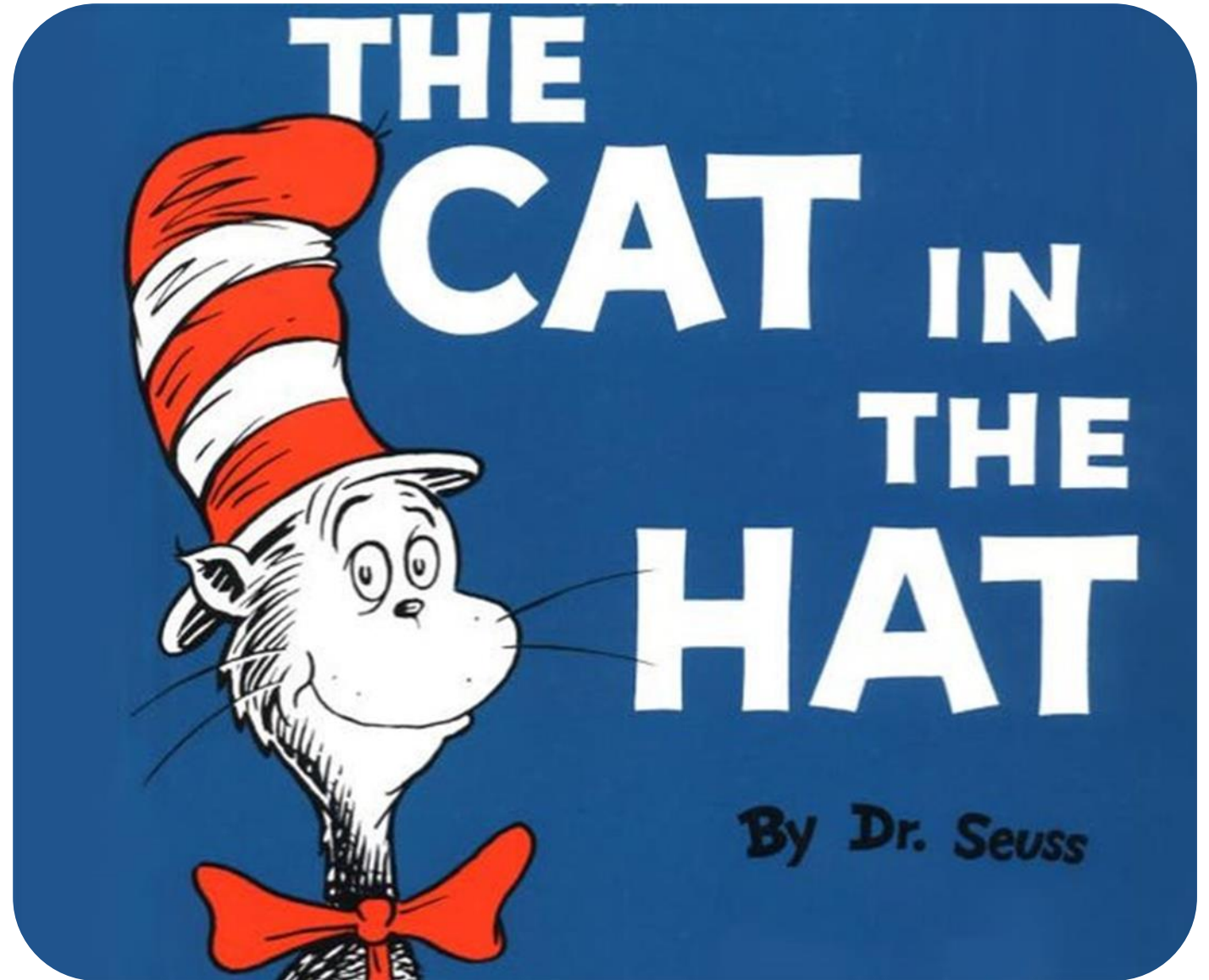
Who knew that Dr. Seuss's depiction of the "*Cat in the Hat*" was based on racial stereotypes and inspired by traditions of blackface minstrel entertainment?



"*The Cat In the Hat's* main character comes from blackface vaudeville and was based on an African American woman who worked as an elevator operator," said Philip Nel, an English professor at Kansas State University. "Although the cat brings liveliness to two children on a dreary day, he is also clearly marked as not belonging in their white household."

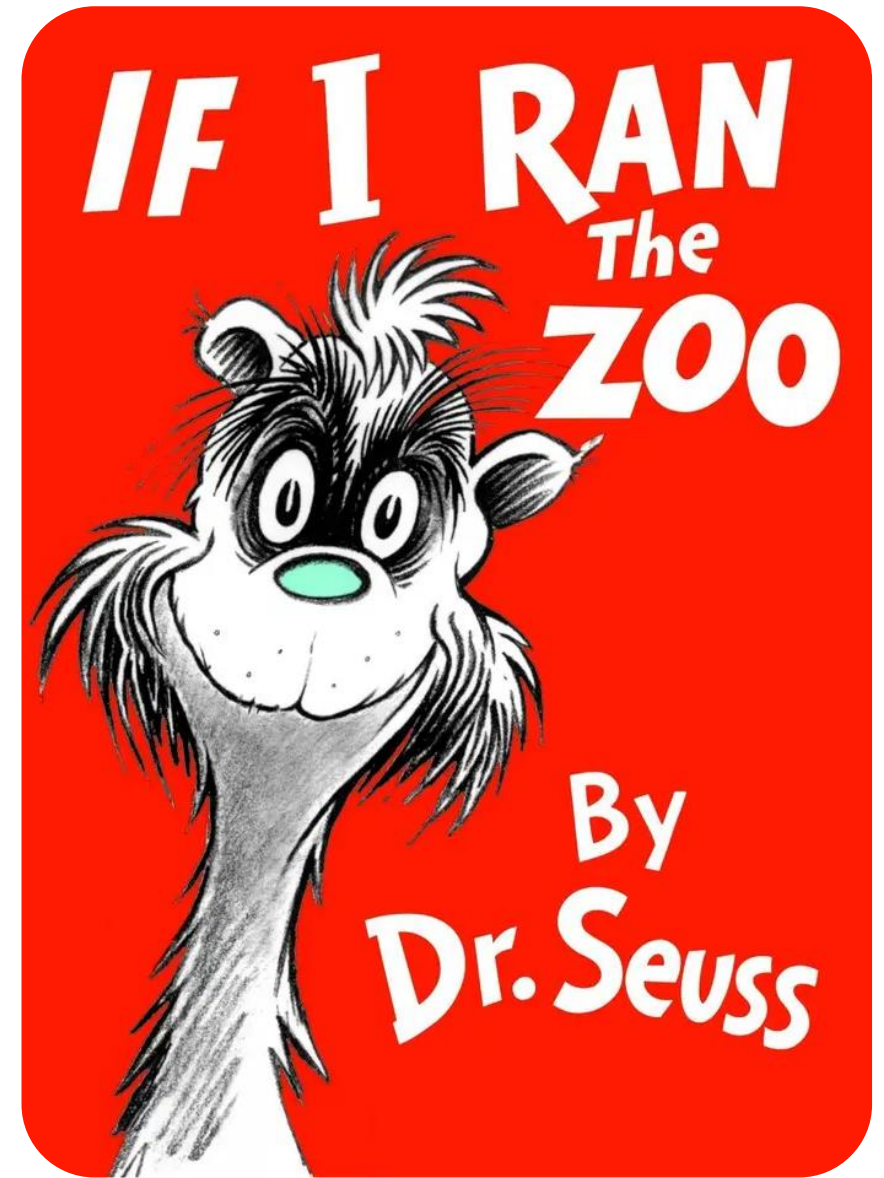
<https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2017/10/04/is-ithe-cat-in-the-hati-racist.html>

The Cat's physical appearance, including the Cat's oversized top hat, floppy bow tie, white gloves, and frequently open mouth, mirrors actual blackface performers; as does the role he plays as 'entertainer' to the white family — in whose house he doesn't belong," wrote Kat Ishizuka, Director of the Conscious Kid Social Justice Library.



In the book, “If I Ran the Zoo” two men said to be from Africa are shown shirtless, shoeless and wearing grass skirts as they carry an exotic animal. In addition, the book also refers to Asian characters as having “eyes all a slant” alongside a drawing of three men of Asian descent carrying a caged animal on their heads.

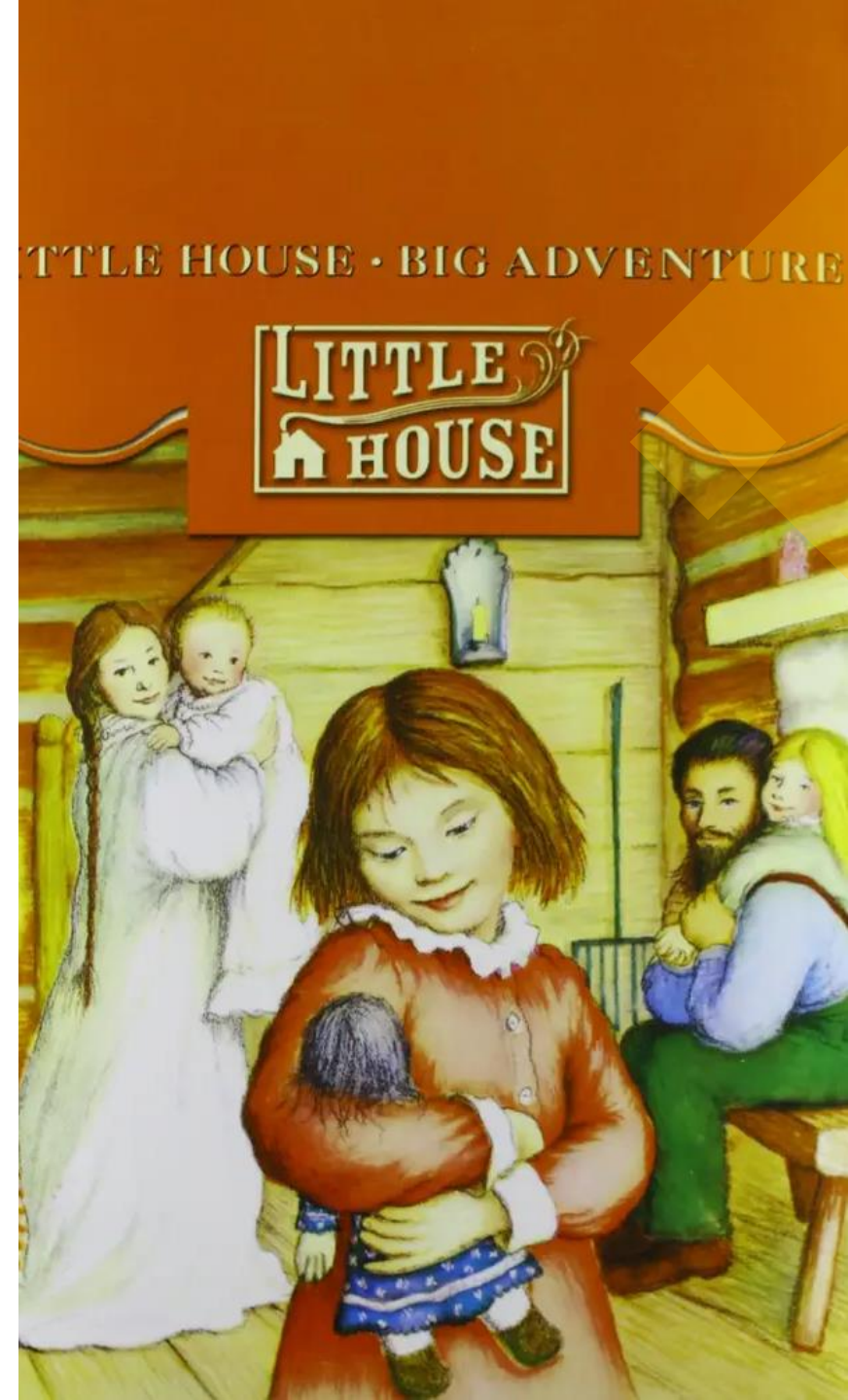
Outside of Dr. Seuss books, the author's personal legacy has come into question, too. Theodor Geisel wrote an entire minstrel show in college and performed as the main character in full “blackface.” Blackface is the practice of non-African American people darkening their skin in deliberate attempts to impersonate African Americans. Although blackface has a history that is likely as old as the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, it exploded as a form of racist white entertainment in the United States in the 1820s, with the first minstrel shows.



<https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2019/02/26/695966537/classic-books-are-full-of-problems-why-cant-we-put-them-down>

<https://theconversation.com/the-problem-with-blackface-97987>

- The "**Little House**" books is a series of American children's novels written by Laura Ingalls Wilder, based on her childhood and adolescence in the American Midwest between 1870 and 1894. Eight of the novels were completed by Wilder and published by Harper & Brothers. This series has recently come under criticism for its racial stereotypes of Native Americans and African Americans. According to the Washington Post, the Harpers Publishing Company decided to change the word "people" to "settlers" in 1953 to edit her original sentence "...no people. Only Indians lived there."
- In 2018, Laura Ingalls Wilder's name was dropped from the lifetime achievement award given by the Association for Library Service to Children. The association said that the stereotypes found in the series were "inconsistent with ALSC's core values."



The Classic Bestseller

THE INDIAN IN THE CUPBOARD

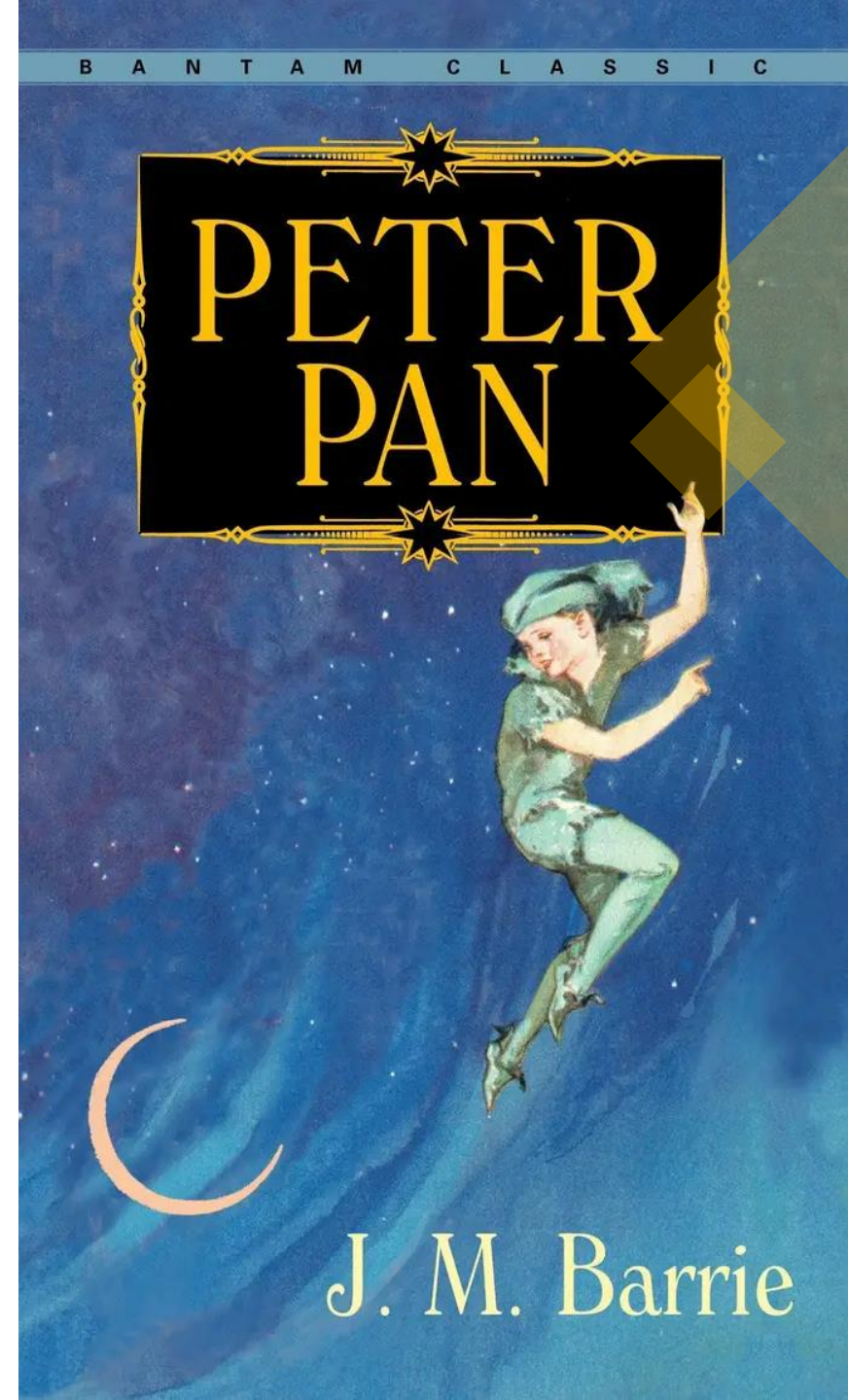
LYNNE REID BANKS



- Readers criticized the author for having Little Bear (the toy figurine) speak only broken English and view things in a simplistic way.
- Many, including the blog American Indians in Children's Literature, pointed out that even the concept of owning a "plastic Indian" is problematic and unacceptable.
- Today, **"The Indian in the Cupboard"** by Lynne Reid Banks is on Random House's banned book list.

- In the book “Peter Pan” by J.M. Barrie, the Native Americans are called a racial slur and display certain stereotypical characteristics like speaking in grunts and calling Peter Pan the "great white father." Peter Pan himself uses a racial slur when referring to them.
- Some film adaptations of the story have tried to update the references to Native Americans — or leave the tribe out altogether.

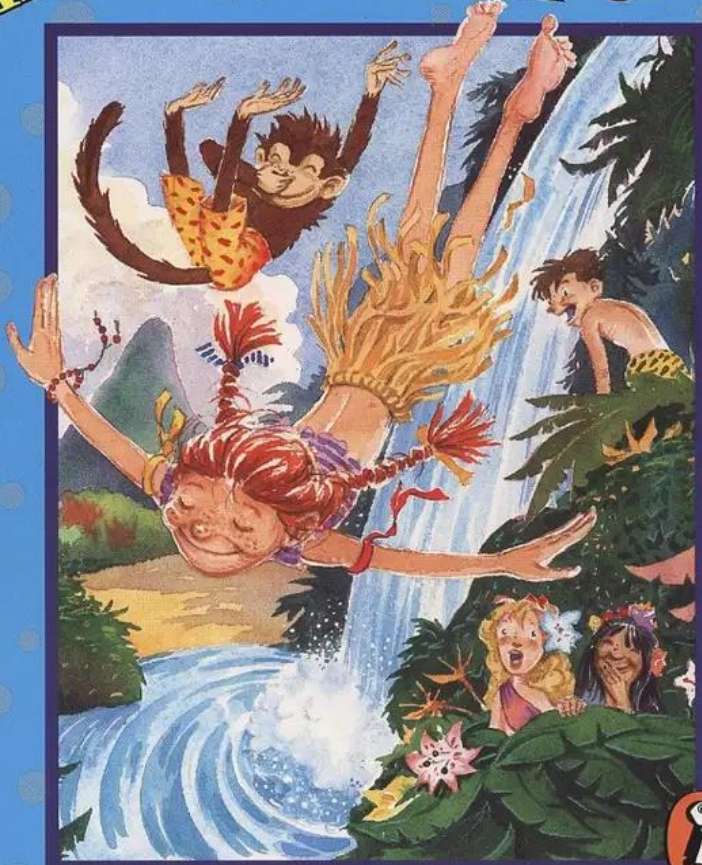
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ASTRID LINDGREN

Pippi

in the South Seas



- The offending words were modified in the book “**Pippi in the South Seas**,” when a 1969 television series about the red-haired heroine was re-aired in 2014, according to the New York Times. At the time, producers announced that they were choosing to edit two different scenes that were deemed offensive.

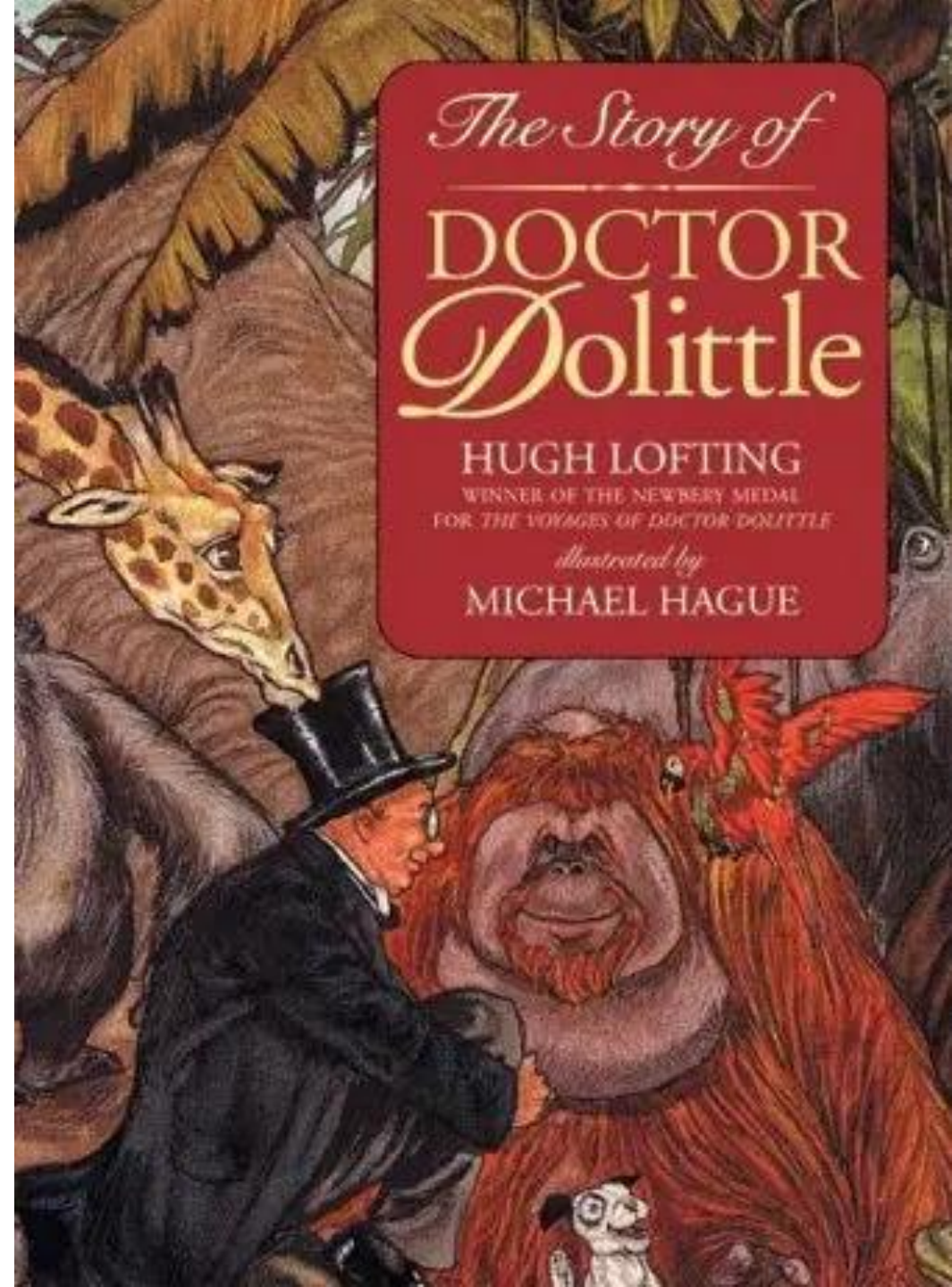
- The book has also been criticized for containing colonial undertones. Dr. Eske Wollrad from the Federal Association of Evangelical Women in Germany was the most-public critic of the book. "It is not that the figure of Pippi Longstocking is racist, but that all three in the trilogy of books have colonial racist stereotypes,"

- Wollrad cited a passage of the book in which African American children throw themselves into sand as another point in the book that she took issue with and struggled to read to her nephew, who is African American.

<https://www.insider.com/classic-childrens-books-that-havent-aged-well-2019-5>

- **"The Story of Dr. Dolittle"** was fiercely criticized for portraying negative stereotypes of African Americans, using colonialist overtones and racial slurs. For example, in one part of the original book, Dr. Dolittle agreed to help an African prince who wants to marry a Caucasian princess by bleaching his skin.
- According to the New York Times, Librarian Isabelle Suhl called the book "chauvinistic" and said "the 'real' Doctor Dolittle is, in essence, the personification of The Great White Father Nobly Bearing the White Man's Burden and that his creator was a white racist and chauvinist, guilty of almost every prejudice known to modern white Western man."
- According to the Times, **The Story of Dr. Dolittle** was no longer printed after the 1970's and was altered or changed in the late 1980s to remove much of the offensive content.

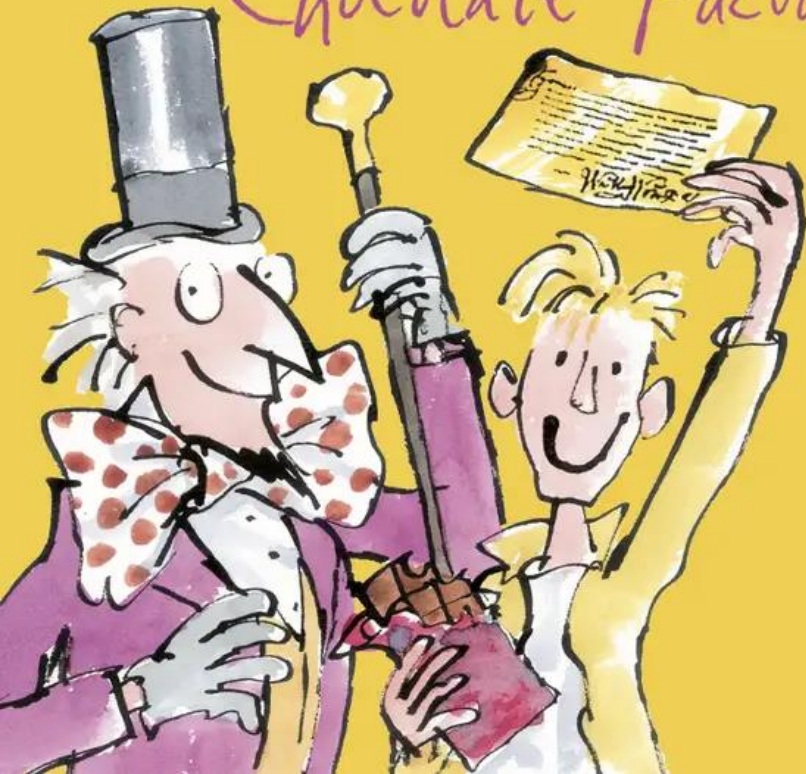
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Roald Dahl

illustrated by Quentin Blake

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory

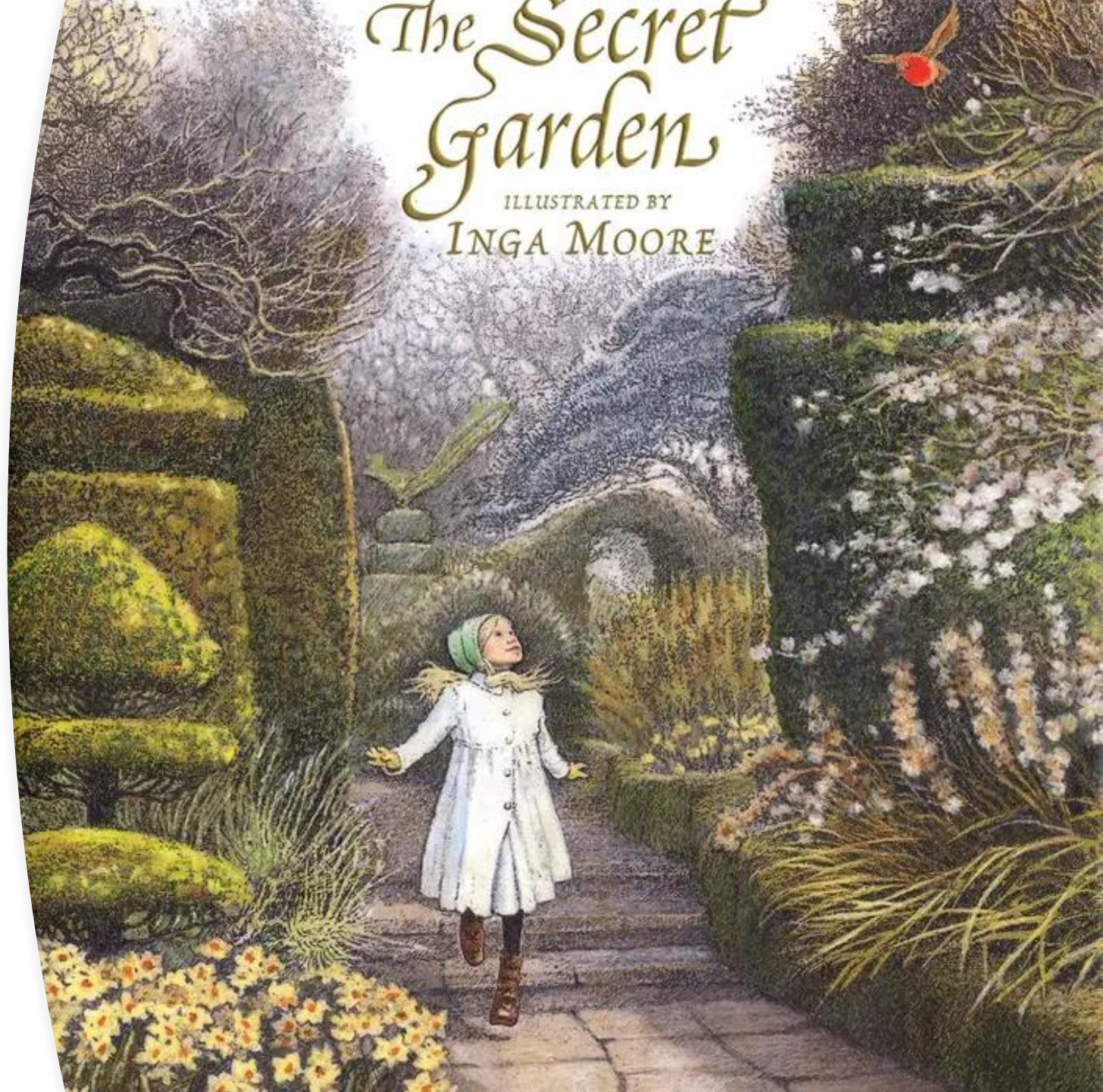


- Fans of "**Charlie and the Chocolate Factory**" may know the story as a harmless one, but the original story is not culturally sensitive to African Americans.
- The Oompa Loompas, now seen as orange people from a made-up place, were originally African Pygmies. When the book was released in 1964, many people, including African Americans, criticized its racist portrayal, and Roald Dahl said he was ashamed but that he originally didn't see the issue.
- Dahl revised "**Charlie and the Chocolate Factory**" and it was re-released in 1973. But even recent adaptations of the book have experienced criticism yet again because the Oompa Loompas are viewed as "happy slaves."

<https://www.insider.com/classic-childrens-books-that-havent-aged-well-2019-5>

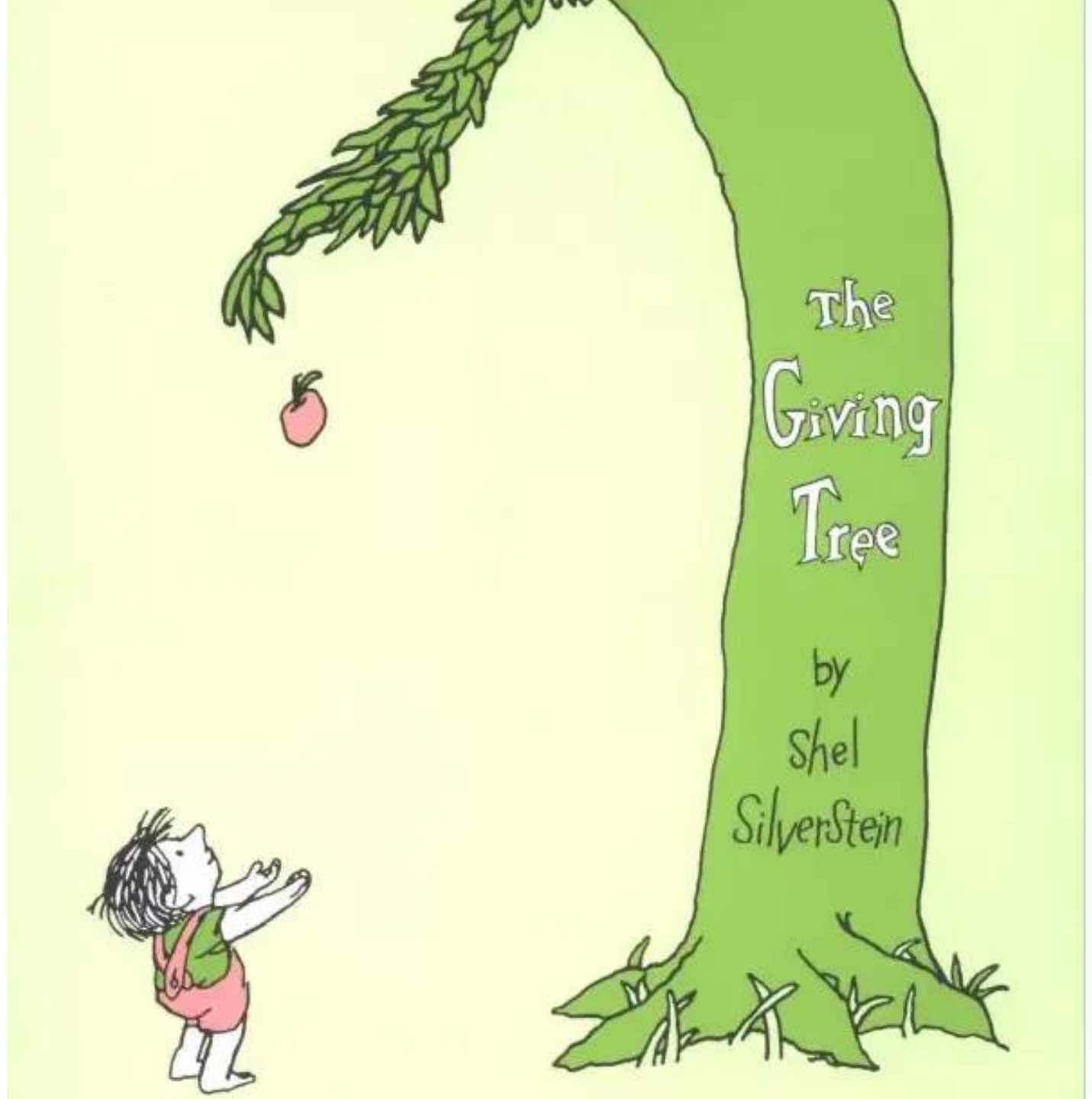
- **"The Secret Garden"** has been criticized for many things, including colonizing overtones and outright racism against African Americans and Native Americans. The Secret Garden says that African Americans and Native Americans are not respectable and are not human beings.
- The book does not appear to have been changed since its original publication.

<https://www.insider.com/classic-childrens-books-that-havent-aged-well-2019-5>



- **The Giving Tree** may be a classic tale of selflessness, but many have taken issue with it in modern times.
- While the "giving tree" is seen as an allegory for a mother who gives and gives until it's no more than a stump for its child to sit on, not everyone agrees that it is a heartwarming story of parental selflessness.
- "Children's books educate children, but children's books also educate parents," children's book author Laurel Snyder told the Chicago Tribune. "When you give a new mother, after her first baby, 10 copies of 'Giving Tree,' it does send a message to the mother that we're supposed to be this person."

<https://www.insider.com/classic-childrens-books-that-havent-aged-well-2019-5>



Read Across America Week and Dr. Seuss Day

Held annually on March 2nd, Dr. Seuss Day is a holiday that celebrates the birthday of Theodor Seuss Geisel – otherwise known by the pen name by which he authored children’s books: Dr. Seuss. During the 1990s, the National Education Association advocated for a day to celebrate reading all over the United States. In 1998, it started Read Across America and decided to hold it on the same day as Dr. Seuss’s birthday. On Dr. Seuss Day it is customary to read a favorite book with your child. It could be one of Dr. Seuss’s books or it could be another children’s book author. The main objective for the day is to engage children in reading and to get them to read on a regular basis. Considering this, the National Education Association rebranded Read Across America in 2017, backing away from Seuss’ books and Seuss-themed activities. It introduced a new theme of "celebrating a nation of diverse readers." Its website now highlights works by and about people of color.

NAACP units can partner with school districts to:

- Not include Dr. Seuss books in Read Across America.
- Discuss the racist themes and images in Dr. Seuss books with students.
- Read children’s books about and written by Native Americans, African Americans, Hispanic Americans and other authors of color.

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The National NAACP's Educational Priority is for every school district in each state to address how African American students are often perceived, treated, taught/educated and disciplined.

- On a national level, each state's Department of Education and Education Association (union) to re-examine the effectiveness of their current approaches to literacy education. Students need to be taught how to decode racism in all books. While some things are obvious, some things may be less obvious—*until* the reader is given the proper tools.
- Implement Professional Development (in-service training) throughout the school year for teachers and para-professionals in diversity training on implicit bias, cultural awareness, identifying racial stereotypes and best practices on teaching hard history (such as slavery).
- In preparing for discussions about racism in children's literature, it is recommended NAACP Education Committees to read ***"The Cat is Out of the Bag: Orientalism, Anti-Blackness, and White Supremacy in Dr. Seuss's Children's Books"*** by Katie Ishizuka and Ramon Stephens. Their analysis sought to evaluate the claims that Dr. Seuss's children's books are anti-racist, and was shaped by the research question: **"How and to what extent are non-white characters depicted in Dr. Seuss's children's books?"**

10 Quick Ways to Analyze Children's Books for Racism and Sexism

by *The Council on Interracial Books for Children*

1. Check the Illustrations:

- **Look for Stereotypes.** A stereotype is an oversimplified generalization about a particular group, race, sex, or gender, which usually carries derogatory or inaccurate messages, and is applied to all members of a group. While you may not find stereotypes in blatant forms, look for variations that demean, ridicule, or patronize characters because of their race, sex, or gender.
- **Look for Tokenism.** If there are characters of color in the illustrations, do they look just like white people except for the color of their skin? Is there one token character of color amidst many white faces? Do people of color look stereotypically alike, or are they depicted as genuine individuals with distinctive features?
- **Look for Active Doers.** Do the illustrations depict characters of color in subservient and passive roles or in leadership and action roles? Who is depicted as needing help and who takes action? Are males the active doers and females the inactive observers? Are gender identities portrayed that go beyond a female/male binary?

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2. Check the Story Line

Although blatant racist and sexist representations are no longer prevalent, racist and sexist attitudes and assumptions still find more subtle expression in books. Some of the subtle forms of bias include the following: _____

- **Standards for Success**-Does it take "white" behavior for a person of color to get ahead? Is "making it" in the dominant white society projected as the only ideal? To gain acceptance and approval, do persons of color have to exhibit extraordinary qualities—excel in sports, get A's, etc.? In friendships between white children and children of color, does the child of color have to do most of the understanding and forgiving?
- **Resolution of Problems**-How are problems presented, conceived and resolved in the story? Are people of color considered to be "the problem?" Are the oppressions faced by people of color and women represented as related to social injustice? Are the reasons for poverty and oppression explained, or are they accepted as inevitable? Does the story line encourage passive acceptance or active resistance? Is a particular problem that is faced by a person of color resolved through the benevolent intervention of a white person? Who causes and who resolves the problem?
- **Role of Women**-Are the achievements of girls and women based on their own initiative and intelligence, or are they due to their good looks or to their relationship with boys? Are gender roles incidental or critical to characterization and plot? Could the same story be told if the gender roles are shifted? Are there characters with a range of gender identities?





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3. Look at the Lifestyles

- Are people of color and their setting depicted in such a way that they contrast unfavorably with the unstated norm of white middle-class suburbia? If people of color are depicted as “different,” are negative value judgments implied? Are people of color depicted exclusively in ghettos, barrios, or migrant camps? If the illustrations and text attempt to depict a particular culture, do they go beyond oversimplifications and offer genuine insight into the lifestyles of the characters?
- Look for inaccuracy and inappropriateness in the depiction of cultures outside of dominant white society. Watch for instances of the “quaint-natives-in-costume” syndrome, which is most noticeable in areas like clothing and customs, but also extends to behavior and personality traits.

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Weigh the Relationships Between People

- Do the white people in the story possess the power, take the leadership, and make the important decisions? Do people of color and females primarily function in supporting roles?
- How are family relationships depicted? In African-American families, is the mother always dominant? In Latino families, is the family always portrayed as struggling? If the family is separated, are societal conditions—unemployment, poverty, for example—cited among the reasons for the separation? Are characters from a range of genders portrayed in nurturing roles?





10 Quick Ways to Analyze Children's Books for Racism and Sexism

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5. Note the Heroes

- For many years, books showed only “safe” heroes of color, in particular those who avoided serious conflict with the white establishment of their time. People of color today insist on the right to define their own heroes (of any gender) based on their own concepts and struggles for justice. When heroes of color do appear, are they admired for the same qualities that have made white heroes famous or because what they have done has benefited white people? Ask, “Whose interest is a particular hero really serving?”

10 Quick Ways to Analyze Children's Books for Racism and Sexism

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6. Consider the Effect on a Child's Self-Image

- Are norms established that limit any child's aspirations and self-concept? Children of color are often bombarded with images of the color white as the ultimate in beauty, cleanliness, virtue, etc., and the color black as evil, dirty, menacing, etc. Does the book counteract or reinforce this positive association with the color white and negative association with black? Will all children of color from a range of backgrounds find one or more characters with whom they can readily and positively identify?
- Are there gender associations based on who performs brave and important deeds? What concept of beauty is portrayed and does that concept of beauty vary by gender?





10 Quick Ways to Analyze Children's Books for Racism and Sexism

by The Council on Interracial Books for Children

7. Consider the Author's or Illustrator's Background

- Analyze the biographical material on the jacket flap or the back of the book. If a story deals with a theme related to a specific minority group, what qualifies the author or illustrator to deal with the subject? If the author or illustrator are not members of the group of color being written about, is there anything in their background that would recommend them as the creators of this book? Also, consider the same issues related to other members of the bookmaking team—e.g. translator, editor, publicist.

10 Quick Ways to Analyze Children's Books for Racism and Sexism by

The Council on Interracial Books for Children

8. Check Out the Author's Perspective

- No author can be wholly objective. All authors write out of a cultural as well as personal context. In the past, children's books were created by white, middle class authors and illustrators, so that a single ethnocentric perspective dominated children's literature in the United States. Read carefully to determine whether the direction of the author's perspective substantially weakens or strengthens the value of the book. Are omissions and distortions central to the character or message of the book? Check the websites of the author and illustrator to read their statements and perspectives in discussing their creation of the book.





10 Quick Ways to Analyze Children's Books for Racism and Sexism

by The Council on Interracial Books for Children

9. Watch for Loaded Words

- A word is loaded when it has insulting overtones. Examples of loaded adjectives (usually racist) are *savage*, *lazy*, *conniving*, *superstitious*, *treacherous*, *wily*, *crafty*, *docile*, and *backward*.
- Look for sexist and gendered language and adjectives that exclude or ridicule women or exclude gender identities beyond male/female. Look for use of the male pronoun to refer to both males and females or the use of binary language that signals that the only two options for gender identity are male or female. While the generic use of the word "man" was accepted in the past, its use today is outmoded. The following examples show how sexist language can be avoided: substitute ancestors for forefathers; chairperson for chairman; community for brotherhood; firefighters for firemen; manufactured for man-made; the human family instead of the family of man. Examples of how gendered language can be avoided include substituting siblings for brother and sister, parents for mom and dad, children for boys and girls, and they for he/she.

10 Quick Ways to Analyze Children's Books for Racism and Sexism

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10. Look at the Copyright Date

- Books with characters of color did not appear until the mid-1960s, many of which were published to meet the new market demand but were still written by white authors, edited by white editors and published by white publishers. They therefore reflected a white point of view. Authors of colors writing about their own experiences emerged in the 1970s, but this trend has fluctuated with the market over the years. Non-sexist books, with rare exceptions, were not published before 1973.
- The copyright dates, therefore, can be a clue as to how likely the book is to be overtly racist or sexist or gendered, although a recent copyright date is no guarantee of a book's relevance or sensitivity. The copyright date only means the year the book was published. It usually takes several years from the time a manuscript is submitted to the publisher to the time it is printed. This time lag meant little in the past but is significant in a time period of rapid change and evolving consciousness as children's book publishing attempts to be relevant.
- Adapted by Worlds of Words (2020) from *10 Quick Ways to Analyze Children's Book for Racism and Sexism* (1980), published as a brochure by the Council on Interracial Books for Children (New York). The brochure is out of print and the organization no longer exists.
- Another adaptation of these guidelines was created by Louise Derman-Sparks, *A Guide for Selecting Anti-Bias Children's Books*.
- For academic reviews of global children's literature, please read WOW Review: Reading Across Cultures.

