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## The Annotated Cat: Under the Hats of Seuss and His Cats (review)

Megan Lambert

Children's Literature Association Quarterly, Volume 33, Number 2, Summer 2008, pp. 213-215 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press  
DOI: 10.1353/chq.0.0008



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no matter how well-versed the authors may be in the cultures about which they are writing. She points out, for instance, that some of Paul Goble's most highly acclaimed retellings of Lakota narratives draw on sources written by ethnographers who filtered what they heard through their own Eurocentric worldviews. In fact, she asserts—and here she draws on the Canadian writer Thomas King for corroboration—the past as subject matter is virtually lost to the Native writer in North America, having been told so often and so authoritatively by the dominant culture that it is no longer open to reconstruction. The response, she quotes King as saying, is for Native writers “to use the Native present as a way to resurrect a native past and to imagine a Native future” (104).

The field of multicultural literature criticism in America has been mired for a while in questions such as what makes a work culturally authentic and who is entitled to write about what. These and other questions revolve around cultural authenticity and are too often framed in binary form: authors as cultural insiders or outsiders; cultural appropriation vs. cultural consciousness; aesthetic truths vs. cultural truths. An infusion of new tools is needed to take the discussion beyond authenticity of the texts themselves and into the greater realm of how the texts represent stated and unstated ideologies in America. These tools are what Bradford offers in *Unsettling Narratives*. It is an ambitious book, grounded in the theories of postcolonial studies and filled with examples of close textual readings and analyses that are nuanced rather than

reductive. Although Bradford's intention is to examine how children's texts represent indigeneity, her examples provide models for reading all children's texts by, about, or referencing cultures marginalized in the United States. Her opening example of Lynne Cheney's *America: A Patriotic Primer* alone is practically worth the price of the book.

*Susan Stan is a professor in the English Department at Central Michigan University, where she teaches courses in multicultural and international children's literature.*



*The Annotated Cat: Under the Hats of Seuss and His Cats. Introduction and Annotations by Philip Nel. New York: Random House, 2007.*

**Reviewed by Megan Lambert**

There is a certain appropriate air of scholarly mischief in the undertaking of an annotated version of Theodor Seuss Geisel's two groundbreaking beginning reader books about the Cat in the Hat, which seem at first blush to be surprising candidates for annotation. After all, annotated books are designed to provide interpretive context by creating layers of back story, analysis, and expansion around the central text, and the central texts in this case, *The Cat in the Hat* and *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back*, are ones designed with controlled vocabulary, brevity, and accessibility as their defining elements. One might ask, “What is there to annotate?” By pursuing this somewhat surprising project, Nel positions himself as a maverick worthy of the subversive feline object of his

study as he responds with “a variety of contexts in which we might interpret the books—biographical, historical, political, cultural, formal, aesthetic and others” (17).

What is there to annotate? Plenty. To paraphrase another Seuss classic: Nel can annotate here. Nel can annotate there. Nel can annotate anywhere. Acknowledging the interdependent nature of art and text in the beginning reader form, Nel appropriately attends to the *Cat* books’ illustrations and words in his work and thereby provides insight into Geisel’s creative process as both a writer and illustrator. Ultimately, Geisel’s spare, controlled texts get an exhaustive, line-by-line analysis, though at times the annotations read as mere rephrasing of the Seuss texts. Happily, Nel usually moves well beyond this to provide engaging insights and expansions on the stories, and the notes frequently delve into the realm of adaptation studies as Nel analyzes how the original beginning reader texts were molded into scripts for stage, film, and animated productions. In a note reflecting on an opposite progression, Nel draws a connection between the controlled vocabulary Geisel used in his beginning reader books and the work he developed while employed by the U.S. Army’s Information and Education Division, during which he created educational films about a character named Private SNAFU, who taught troops by negative example. Nel writes:

Since many U.S. troops were not well educated or even literate, these cartoons had to get their message across in plain English. As Technical

Fairy, First Class—a masculine Tinker Bell with a five o’clock shadow—tells SNAFU at the end of the “Gripes” episode (July 1943), “The moral, SNAFU, is the harder you work, the sooner we’re gonna beat Hitler, that joik.” This sentence has the same meterical emphasis as “‘You *should not* be here / When our mother is not. / You get out of this house!’/ Said the fish in the pot.” The presence of these anapests suggests that in writing the SNAFU cartoons, Seuss developed skills he would use in writing the Beginner Books series. In a sense, *Private SNAFU* is an uncle (or father) of the 236-word *The Cat in the Hat* (54).

Ultimately, the book’s greatest strength is its wealth of visual material, which includes process pieces alongside finished art and ample connections to Geisel’s illustration work in advertising and in his other books. (There is even a depiction of the aforementioned Technical Fairy, First Class, complete with his five o’clock shadow.) This allows the reader insight into Geisel’s broader life as an artist who worked and reworked his compositions in order to achieve their comic brilliance and whose work outside of the children’s book world shows remarkable connections with work within this realm.

For example, Nel refers the reader to Charles Cohen’s suggestion that the Wild Tones from Seuss’s 1937 advertisements for Stromberg-Carlson radios might be antecedents for the Things in *The Cat in the Hat*. Nel quotes Cohen’s assessment that the Wild Tones “‘bear a bushy resemblance to the equally untamable’ Things One and Two” and continues, “Just as the

Wild Tones ‘made such a ruckus and ruined radio broadcasts,’ so Thing One and Thing Two ‘wreaked havoc on an entire household’”(80). The reader is treated to a small reproduction of the advertisement featuring the Wild Tones, positioned on the verso page across from a recto page reproduction of the double spread on pages 50–51 of *The Cat in the Hat* depicting Thing One and Thing Two (80–81). The visible resemblance between the Wild Tones and the Things is apparent, but a compositional similarity is clear as well: the large net hoisted aloft by the boy narrator of *The Cat in the Hat* mirrors the uplifted arm and balled fist of the Wild Tone in the advertisement. Nel does not comment on this connection, but viewers can make their own visual interpretation of the images due to their thoughtful juxtaposition.

Nel’s annotated work arrives in the fiftieth anniversary year of *The Cat in the Hat*’s publication and at a time when the easy reader form is garnering new critical attention. The American Library Association’s new Theodor Seuss Geisel Award is

given annually beginning in 2006 to the author(s) and illustrator(s) of the most distinguished contribution to the body of American children’s literature known as beginning reader books published in the United States during the preceding year. The award is to recognize the author(s) and illustrator(s) of a beginning reader book who demonstrate great creativity and imagination in his/her/their literary and artistic achievements to engage children in reading. (<<http://www.ala.org>.)

establishing the beginning reader book as an emerging form in the field. After years of not-so-much-fun with Dick and Jane, *The Cat and the Hat* offered children learning to read some “good fun that is funny” (35). Nel has expanded on this fun by bringing the Cat in the Hat, and by extension, the beginning reader form, to the annotated table. This is an exciting move because it both signals both greater attention to illustration in critical studies of children’s literature and acts as part of a broader push to acknowledge and study the beginning reader form as a distinct area of the field. On the latter point, children’s literature studies, librarianship, and education are still playing catch up with beginning readers as a form, and the emergence of the Geisel Award makes the time ripe to defining exactly what distinguishes a beginning reader from a picture book and how these differences might inform how these books are used, critiqued, and studied. Nel’s latest, focused work is a valuable contribution to this broader area of inquiry. On the former point, with Nel’s careful attention to illustration coming on the heels of earlier annotated illustrated novels such as *The Annotated Charlotte’s Web* and *The Annotated Alice*, I wonder how long it will be before annotated picture books start to emerge as well.

*Megan Lambert is an instructor of Children’s Literature Programs at the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art and has served as a visiting lecturer in children’s literature at several colleges and universities throughout New England.*

The fact that this new award is named for Geisel speaks to his key role in

