

# A Tribute to Dr. Seuss

by | Joann Burand

If you know of a “Who” or a “Grinch” or a “Zax,” you probably already know the wonderful, wacky world of Dr. Seuss. I had the privilege of knowing Dr. Seuss not only through his many books, but also through a personal correspondence in which he responded faithfully each year to a letter from my class for a period of twelve years.

I first wrote to Dr. Seuss because I wanted him to know the impact he had on children and how he motivated early learners to love books and to develop their imaginations. I still can feel a thrill as I recall the excitement of receiving a letter postmarked La Jolla, California, addressed to “Mrs. Burand’s Class.” I felt it was important for the children to know books were written by real people. How special it was to know a real author was writing back to us!

All age barriers disappeared with Dr. Seuss. His books were for children and grown-ups; for preschoolers and college graduates; for readers and nonreaders. With Seuss, grown-ups became partners and playmates in fun. Whether reading together or alone, you could cuddle on a couch or stretch out on the carpet and gaze at the pages of Seuss for hours.

William Spaulding, the director of Houghton Mifflin’s educational division, challenged Dr. Seuss to write a story that first graders couldn’t put down. But the book’s vocabulary was to be limited to a list of 225 words. Dr. Seuss read the list forty times and got more and more discouraged.

“There are no adjectives!” he wailed.

He was so desperate he decided to read the list once more and the first two words that rhymed would be the title of his book. He found “cat” and then “hat.”

It took Seuss a year of getting mad as blazes and throwing the manuscript across the room. He began doodling sketches of the cat as he struggled with the verse. He placed a red and white stovepipe hat on the cat’s head, giving it white gloves, and a red bow tie with three impossible loops. Finally the words began to click into place. *The Cat In the Hat* was taking charge. The book appeared in the spring of 1957. It was called the most influential first grade reader since the McGuffey Readers.

It was my love of Dr. Seuss and his message to children in his books that caused me to include a Seuss unit every year I taught school. Children, who did not even like eggs, ate the gross-looking green eggs and ham made in class and asked for more. As we read *Bartholomew*



and the *Oobleck*, we made our own oobleck that stuck to our hands and made a mess. I found not only were we having fun in the classroom as we laughed with *The Cat In the Hat* as he ransacked a house, but we were also learning some important lessons. His playful language engaged and expanded our minds with a budding vocabulary of word play. He inspired a sense of nonsense with talking goldfish, green eggs and ham, and wockets of pockets. There was no limit on creativity and imagination—traits I wanted to instill in the children I taught.

Drama entered the classroom as we altered our voices to the call of the Lorax or to the proud boast of a Sneetch or to the humble plea for rights by Yertle the Turtle. What better way to teach verbal expression as we learned to read?!

Seuss’s wife, Audrey Geisel, has said, “His books contain more sane, sensible, and just plain hilarious advice for living than most of the self-help books crowding bookstores today.”

His wonderfully endearing characters have messages to share—Horton and his faithfulness to hatching an egg; Yertle and his cry for freedom; the Lorax and his plea for caring for the earth; the Grinch and his discovery of the true meaning of Christmas. I wanted not just to teach my first graders to read, but also to learn important lessons in living and values. Dr. Seuss provided the framework to do this, as we read together first one book and then another. We learned to be more caring for each other and for ourselves.

As we read Dr. Seuss, I sensed a bonding in the classroom. His books brought families and classrooms together in ways that only shared experiences between parents, teachers, and children can. It was through the printed pages that a cherishing of a character and a story bound us together. It was in this bonding that I was able to help children love school and love books.

Dr. Seuss, I thank you! You helped me to be a better teacher and you helped countless students to be inspired to imagine, to read, and perhaps to write. Thank you, again, Dr. Seuss for your letters to a first grade class in Anderson, Indiana, that brought *The Cat In the Hat* to life for many children, creating memories which will be passed on for generations to come.

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