

What the librarian who rejected Melania Trump's Dr. Seuss books as 'racist' got wrong

By **Molly Roberts** September 29

Oh, the places you'll go! Unless, that is, you're 10 Dr. Seuss books donated by Melania Trump and your planned destination is the shelves of the Cambridgeport School library.

The first lady gave a collection of titles by the beloved children's author to award-winning education programs around the country. As kids learn at school, when you get a gift, even if it is unappealing or unnecessary, you take it and say thanks. What you do after that is up to you. That is not what happened in Cambridge, Mass.

Instead, school librarian Liz Phipps Soeiro wrote a letter back to Trump informing her that "we will not be keeping the titles for our collection." Why? Her school is relatively wealthy; its library shelves are well-supplied already. But on top of that, Seuss is "a bit of a cliché" — and worse, he's a racist.

To support her argument, Soeiro cites scholarly work on "the minstrel characteristics" of Seuss's characters, or "caricatures." The Cat in the Hat may have been based on blackface entertainers, and before his storybook career took off Seuss sketched cartoons filled with racist stereotypes, particularly of Japanese people.

Okay. So Seuss had issues. But so did a vast array of other authors, including pretty much anyone writing before, say, 1930. And Dr. Seuss books contain plenty of other lessons more amenable to the forward-thinking, from “The Lorax’s” hit-you-over-the-head environmentalism to the anti-fascism of “Horton Hears a Who,” “Yertle the Turtle” and “The Sneetches.” As The Post’s Rachel Chason points out, Seuss was also a champion for children’s literacy, the same cause Trump sought to promote when she sent out his books.

Dismissing Seuss’s expansive oeuvre as “racist propaganda” is lazy. And, if the photo some online sleuth discovered that looks an awful lot like Soeiro dressed in a Cat-in-the-Hat outfit hugging “Green Eggs and Ham” to her chest is anything to go on, this anti-Seuss crusader doesn’t actually disagree.

A librarian’s role — and Cambridgeport’s has a graduate degree in library science, so she should know it — is to curate a collection that represents a diverse set of viewpoints over an extended period of time so that readers can see the widest possible picture of the literary past and present. Her additional role as an educator is to provide students with the full context of any of those works, showing them how to understand the good, the bad and the ugly in it.

No school employee has an obligation to fawn over an administration whose policies they see as antithetical to their mission as an educator, and Soeiro’s letter does include separate critiques of Education Secretary Betsy DeVos’s agenda. But the way she chose to lash out against DeVos’s regime — by rejecting a well-intentioned gift on disingenuous grounds — doesn’t seem in line with that mission either.

Soeiro’s letter to the first lady also included a list of 10 books that challenge the traditional literary canon. They include the tale of a Chinese-African-Cuban girl who breaks a taboo against female drummers, the saga of a Pakistani boy’s victory over a bully in a kite battle and a story starring a Haitian American mother incarcerated because she is undocumented. In

other words, the books on the list aim to help children go places that Dr. Seuss never imagined. Good. That's Soeiro's job. Adding Trump's choices to the stacks certainly won't keep her from doing it.

Molly Roberts works in The Post's opinion section.

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