

Children's Literature Goes to War: Dr. Seuss, P. D. Eastman, Munro Leaf, and the *Private SNAFU* Films (1943–46)

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IN APRIL OF 1941, THEODOR SEUSS GEISEL—BETTER KNOWN AS DR. Seuss—became a political cartoonist for *PM*, New York's Popular Front newspaper. Convinced that America would be drawn into the rapidly expanding World War, he feared that isolationism left the country vulnerable. As Geisel recalled,

The way I went to work for *PM* is that I got annoyed with Lindbergh and his America-Firsters. I was already somewhat prominent as a cartoonist, but nobody would print my cartoons against Lindbergh. So I went to work for *PM* for almost nothing. When the United States got into the war I started receiving a lot of letters saying I was a dirty old man who had helped get us into the war, and I was too old to fight. So I enlisted. (Webb A21)

In January of 1943, Geisel stopped writing cartoons for *PM*, left New York and took the train out to Hollywood, California, where he would be a captain in the US Army's Information and Education Division—"Fort Fox" (Morgan and Morgan 106).

Major Frank Capra, the Oscar-winning director, headed "Fort Fox." Composer Meredith Wilson (best known for *The Music Man*, 1957), and Philip D. Eastman served in the same unit (Morgan and Morgan 107). Though he later became the P. D. Eastman famous for books like *Go, Dog. Go!* (1961), Phil Eastman was then a former Disney animator. As "Dr. Seuss," Geisel himself was best known for his "Quick Henry, the Flit!" advertising campaign, though he had by then published four children's books.

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Capra placed Ted Geisel in charge of the animation branch and assigned him to make educational films that would run in the *Army-Navy Screen Magazine*, a biweekly newsreel shown to the troops (Costello 44; Barrier 502; Norris). Ted Geisel and Phil Eastman teamed up with directors Chuck Jones and Friz Freleng; vocal impressionist Mel Blanc; composer Carl Stalling; and the other creative minds behind Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, and Porky Pig. Exactly who came up with the idea of Private SNAFU is not clear, but the idea itself was simple: Teaching by negative example, Private SNAFU would embody his name, an acronym for (as the first cartoon put it) "Situation Normal All . . . All Fouled Up." Although we know who directed them, specific information about individual episodes is hard to come by because the *SNAFU* films otherwise lack credits. That said, of the 28 *SNAFU* episodes created between 1943 and 1946, historians of animated cartoons generally agree that Geisel wrote or cowrote "The Home Front," as well as the eight verse cartoons, and that he and Munro Leaf cowrote "It's Murder She Says . . ."

This article investigates how the experience of writing these propaganda cartoons shaped the postwar children's books of Dr. Seuss, P. D. Eastman, and Munro Leaf. As part of the Popular Front, these three authors created films to support America's fight against fascism; as juvenile authors, they created books that teach American children not just how to read but how to think. Writing for both US soldiers and their children, these three authors provide an opportunity to consider the ways in which wartime ideologies emerge in twentieth-century American children's literature. Examining the relationship between their *SNAFU* cartoons and their children's books shows us how military educational culture influenced civilian educational culture. Some of their children's books uphold the best ideals of the Popular Front—critical of racism, challenging authoritarianism—but others undermine this progressive spirit.

Uncle Sam-I-Am?: From SNAFU to Beginner Books

Before exploring *SNAFU*'s influence on postwar children's books, we should touch briefly on how children's books may have influenced *SNAFU*. Although Munro Leaf cowrote only one or two of the *SNAFU* cartoons, he was the sole established children's author and the only one

writing explicitly didactic children's books. By 1943, Leaf had written over a dozen juvenile titles, including the controversial bestseller, *The Story of Ferdinand*. When published in the fall of 1936, critics accused the book of being, alternately, Communist, Fascist, or Pacifist; Leaf always maintained that *Ferdinand* was simply "the story of a Spanish bull that refused to go into the arena to fight" ("Writer for Young . . ." 21). Not a member of Fort Fox, Leaf was stationed in Washington, DC as a troubleshooter for General Somervell, who was in charge of all domestic production. As Leaf's son Gil remembers, "Whenever there was a problem, my father would go out there and try to solve it" (Gil Leaf, interview). One Friday in 1943, Geisel and Leaf were both in Washington, trying to solve the problem of malaria, a disease then putting a lot of soldiers out of commission in the South Pacific. The official military manuals were boring, many GIs lacked even a high school education, and they were not making the connection between mosquitoes and malaria. Leaf thought that "GIs would read a comic book, particularly one that was a little racy, whereas they wouldn't read olive-green manuals of which they had hundreds" (Gil Leaf, interview). So, Leaf invited Geisel home for the weekend, and the two of them created the pamphlet *This Is Ann* (1943). Leaf wrote the text; Geisel drew the pictures. It told the story of Anopheles Annie, the malaria mosquito, portraying her as the sexy whore of the insect world, spreading disease to men who failed to take precautions. *This Is Ann* became the basis of the *SNAFU* cartoon, "It's Murder She Says" (May 1945), in which Annie gets *SNAFU*. The pamphlet is also the likely inspiration for "SNAFU vs. Malaria Mike" (March 1944).

As the *SNAFU* film "It's Murder She Says" does, Leaf's children's book *Robert Francis Weatherbee* (1935) teaches by negative example, delivers its lessons with a dose of humor, and uses simple language to tell its story. Its central character refuses to go to school and learns from the consequences: he cannot write a letter to his uncle to ask for a pony; unable to count how many apples he needs for his mother's recipe, he gets no apple pie; when lost, he cannot read the signs that would lead him home. At the very beginning of *Robert Francis Weatherbee*, his parents wonder whether he will be a fireman, policeman, sailor, or the President of the United States. At the end, our title character says to himself, "If I can't read and I can't write, and I can't count, I will have a very hard time being a fireman or a policeman or a sailor or the

President of the United States.” So, the narrator explains, “Robert Francis Weatherbee/WENT/TO/SCHOOL/and he learned/to read and/to write and/to count and/he had a good time.” The end of a SNAFU cartoon also provides a lesson. When SNAFU’s foolishness has not killed him, the accident-prone soldier tells just what he has learned and how he will reform; when he has already been killed, SNAFU instead tells us what he ought to have done. Throughout the episode titled “SANFU vs. Malaria Mike,” Malaria Mike (a mosquito) keeps trying to get SNAFU, who through a series of accidents manages to miss Mike’s attempts to infect him. Finally, at the end, Mike succeeds; SNAFU contracts malaria and dies. SNAFU then reappears at a microphone to offer the moral of this episode: “Just a moment, please. This program has come to you through my sponsors, the United States Army, distributors of GI Repellent, mosquito nets, Atabrine tablets, and good old-fashioned horse sense. Gee, I wish to hell I’d used ’em.” The SNAFU cartoon’s playfully delivered moral recalls Leaf’s work. Its simple but direct style typifies what Gil Leaf describes as his father’s “common-sense approach to things.” As Munro Leaf liked to say, “I made a career of turning 25-cent words into nickel words” (Gil Leaf, interview). Pairing simple language with good-humored moralizing, both the SNAFU films and Leaf’s children’s books teach in a concise, easy-to-understand manner.

Keeping the language simple was key to the success of both the SNAFU films and Random House’s “Beginner Books” series. “The Chow Hound,” a verse cartoon written at least in part by Geisel, suggests how SNAFU influenced this series of primers for beginning readers. In “The Chow Hound,” a bull—who bears a striking resemblance to Leaf’s Ferdinand—enlists in order to become food for SNAFU. Watching the food’s progress, the bull’s ghost says, “through rain and mud and jungle heat,/my only thought was SNAFU must eat.” Once the food arrives, SNAFU takes too much, can’t eat it all, and tosses some in the garbage can. Enraged, the bull’s ghost butts SNAFU over the mountaintops and, lifting up the lid of the garbage can, turns to the camera to tell us, “Yes I joined up the first day of war, but now I’m regretting my haste./I joined up as food for SNAFU, and all I became was just waste.” This and other verse SNAFU cartoons mark the first time that Geisel uses such a limited vocabulary to tell a story. *Private SNAFU*, then, may be seen as uncle or even parent to the 236-word *Cat in the Hat*.

Just as he wrote *SNAFU* cartoons to provide entertaining lessons for the troops, so Seuss created *The Cat in the Hat* (1957), *Fox in Socks* (1965), and *Green Eggs and Ham* (1960) to provide entertaining primers for children. In response to anxieties about why the typical American “Johnny and Susie” could not read, Seuss concluded that children were not learning to read because the *Dick and Jane* primers were boring. To provide a better primer, he wrote the *Cat in the Hat* and launched Random House’s Beginner Books. For *The Cat in the Hat*, he used no more than 236 different words, all from preapproved “word lists.” Though he later threw out the word lists, he always limited his vocabulary for the Beginner Books. While the *SNAFU* cartoons did not teach the troops to read, they *did* teach the troops using simple language. As many US troops were not well educated or even literate, these cartoons had to get the message across in plain English. As Technical Fairy, First Class—a masculine Tinker Bell with 5 o’clock shadow—tells *SNAFU* at the end of the “Gripes” episode, “The moral, *SNAFU*, is the harder you woik, the sooner we’re gonna beat Hitler, that joik.” This phrase has the same metrical emphasis as this verse from *The Cat in the Hat*: “‘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 Seussian anapests suggests that writing the *SNAFU* cartoons allowed Seuss to develop the skills he would use in writing the Beginner Books series.

How *SNAFU* shaped the style of P. D. Eastman’s contributions to the Beginner Books series is harder to discern. Certainly, the theme of teaching by negative example emerges in his *Sam and the Firefly* (1958) and in *The Best Nest* (1968). In the former, Gus the firefly learns the perils of misusing his knowledge: although it may be fun to skywrite signs that mislead or endanger the public, he realizes that he should not. In the latter book, a pair of birds seek better nests in a variety of places, only to learn that the best nest is the one they already have. However, as Dr. Seuss was Eastman’s editor, it is hard to tell whether we are looking at the influence of Seuss or of *SNAFU*. In a memo concerning “The Sea Encyclopedia,” a never-completed collaborative project, Seuss complains that he “doesn’t want to write any more Beginner Books for other authors to sign,” suggesting that he did more than simply edit some Beginner Books. In this same memo, he refers to “the war with Phil Eastman who fought every one of the thousand ideas that have made him a wealthy retired useless county squire.” Referring to *The Cat in the Hat Dictionary* (1964), which Eastman illustrated, Seuss says that “In the course of doing it my love of writing for

children was sort of trampled to death." This memo points to editorial conflicts between Seuss and Eastman, but it also raises questions about authorship. That is, perhaps so many people think of Eastman's *Go, Dog. Go!* (1961) as a Dr. Seuss book because it bears Seuss's influence. Its style and theme are very close to Seuss's *One fish two fish red fish blue fish* (1960), published the year before. Lines like "Big dog. Little dog./ Big dogs and little dogs/Black and white dogs" recall "Black fish/blue fish/old fish/new fish" from *One fish two fish red fish blue fish*. In light of Seuss's editorial work, the poetic affinities between his *One fish two fish . . .* and Eastman's *Go, Dog. Go!* complicate any attempt to locate the precise nature of *SNAFU*'s influence on Eastman's books.

Leaving aside for the moment the question of who wrote what, both *SNAFU* and the Beginner Books share concerns over the use and misuse of knowledge. As wartime propaganda, the *SNAFU* cartoons of course dramatize the need to keep secrets. This message figures prominently in four *SNAFU* episodes: "Rumors," "Going Home" (all by Geisel), "Spies" (cowritten by Geisel and Eastman), and "Censored" (by Eastman). Leaf wrote no Beginner Books, but Eastman's *Sam and the Firefly* explicitly reflects upon the dangers that education poses when it is not used wisely. Just as *SNAFU* shows off by divulging confidential information in "Spies," "Rumors," and "Censored," so Gus the firefly shows off by creating glowing messages in the night air. *SNAFU*'s antics endanger his unit and himself; Gus's false directives cause traffic accidents, disrupt commerce, and lead to Gus's capture. While Seuss's books tend to side with the rebellious characters, they do on occasion concur with the cautionary tale offered by Eastman's *Sam and the Firefly*. In *Fox in Socks* (1965), Knox endures Fox's increasingly difficult tongue-twisters, until the very end of the book, when he finally snaps. Exclaiming, "Now wait a minute, Mr. Socks Fox!" Knox spits back one of the mouth-muddling rhymes and stuffs Fox into a bottle. Inasmuch as both of these tales emphasize the perils of abusing one's knowledge, the *SNAFU* cartoons may be considered their direct antecedent.

"It Is Fun to Have Fun/But You Have to Know How": Entertainment, Ideology, Audience

Designed to convey knowledge while holding the audience's attention, the Beginner Books and the *SNAFU* cartoons both strive to balance the

didactic and the entertaining. Their didactic aims, however, differ. While the implicit ideological assumptions of a Beginner Book may influence a reader's behavior, its explicit aim is simply to show children that reading is fun. In contrast, a *SNAFU* cartoon seeks to make its viewers into better soldiers. That said, the cartoons and especially the children's books signify beyond and sometimes against their author's intentions. When the Cat in the Hat says, "It is fun to have fun/But you have to know how," he is teaching children to read in a light-hearted, humorous way, but he may also be teaching by negative example. Balancing on a ball while holding up a cup, milk, cake, fish, rake, books, toy ship, toy man, and red fan may *not* be the way to have fun—as the reader sees when the Cat and "ALL the things fall" on the subsequent page. However, *The Cat in the Hat* does not conclusively support following the rules. For a reader, the fun may reside in watching the Cat break the rules and get away with it—the Cat does not ultimately receive punishment for the range of domestic chaos he creates. Like *The Cat in the Hat*, *Private SNAFU* may also signify in multiple and contradictory ways. Unlike *The Cat in the Hat*, *Private SNAFU* ultimately teaches its audience how to behave as good soldiers. As Eric Smoodin points out, even though *SNAFU*'s name "signifies discontent by pointing out the irrationality and disorganization of the military status quo" (74), the cartoons ultimately emphasize that the soldiers' "discontent was at best merely selfish [. . .] and potentially even dangerous" (87). In other words, while the *SNAFU* cartoons share *The Cat in the Hat*'s irreverent tone, *SNAFU* ultimately endorses the idea that its audience should submit to authority. *The Cat in the Hat* does not.

In this respect, the continuity between the *SNAFU* cartoons and the children's books varies widely from author to author. Of the three authors examined in this essay, only P. D. Eastman emphasizes the wisdom of authority figures in both his propaganda cartoons and his children's books. Just as *Private SNAFU* needs the guidance of military experts, Eastman's child characters need the guidance of their elders. In "SNAFUperman" (March 1944), *SNAFU*'s fellow soldiers protest that his noise making prevents them from studying. *SNAFU* retorts that he does not need books: "When I get at them Nazis, I ain't gonna clunk them over the head with no books. What you gotta give them dopes is a belly full of lead." As *SNAFU* play-acts machine-gunning the enemy, the Technical Fairy appears and pronounces him "SNAFUperman." *SNAFUperman* then takes off to bomb Berlin, but, lacking a map,

nearly bombs Washington. Next, he mistakes a US tank for a Japanese tank. Finally, trying to prevent the bombing of a harbor, he does not recognize that he has gathered delayed action bombs, which explode, blowing him sky-high. At the cartoon's end, as Private SNAFU lies injured and bandaged in a hospital bed, the Technical Fairy asks if there's anything he can do. In a hoarse whisper, SNAFU replies, "Yes. Yes, there is." As the Technical Fairy leans closer to listen, SNAFU then shouts, "Get me a Field Manual!" SNAFU has learned the value of studying, just as the US Army wants him to do.

Likewise, in Eastman's children's books, grown-ups and authorities frequently supply the correct answers upon which the children depend. The baby bird of *Are You My Mother?* (1960) spends the entire story looking for his mother. After determining that the kitten, the hen, the dog, the cow, an old car, a boat, and a jet plane, are all *not* his mother, the baby bird meets a steam shovel (which he calls a "Snort," after it says "SNORT" to him). Upset, he cries, "Where am I? [. . .] I want to go home! I want my mother!" (57). Baby bird cannot find his mother on his own, but the paternal "Snort" places him back in his nest, and mother returns home. In *Sam and the Firefly* (1958), Sam the Owl takes on the more "adult" role, providing the guidance that the "Snort" does in *Are You My Mother?* and that military experts do in *Private SNAFU*. Sam teaches Gus the firefly how to write words and, when Gus starts to abuse his education, Sam tries to set him straight. At an intersection, Gus writes, "GO FAST," "GO SLOW," "GO RIGHT," and "GO LEFT," causing an accident. Sam begins to lecture him but Gus rebels, treating Sam as a meddling adult. "I LIKE this game! Let me be, you old GOOSE, you!" Gus says (27). Sam tries again: "That was a BAD trick. Come back here now. Bad tricks are not fun!" (28). Gus tells him to "go on home!," adding, "You old GOOSE! You old HEN! What do you know about fun? GOOD-BY!" (29). In the end, Gus learns his lesson. After he changes a sign from "Hot Dogs" to "Cold Dogs," the Hot Dog Man catches him, imprisons him in a jar, and drives off with the jar in the back of his pick-up truck. Reflecting on his misbehavior, Gus says, "I should have stopped when Sam said NO. I was bad" (48). Fortunately, Gus is given a chance to redeem himself. The pick-up stalls on the train tracks, Sam smashes the jar open, so that Gus—now free—can use words to stop the train. He writes "STOP STOP STOP STOP," the train stops, and all is well (56). Gus and Private SNAFU learn that following the advice of authority is the right thing to do—for both you and those around you.

The children's books of Munro Leaf and Dr. Seuss do not share Eastman's and *SNAFU*'s faith in authority. Seuss consistently sides with the rebels, while Leaf's allegiances are mixed. In the postwar *How to Behave and Why* (1946), Leaf tells us, "Grown ups aren't some kind of weird monsters that have fun making us do things we don't want to do" (45). Instead, he explains, "They just know a lot more than we do because they have been here longer. Listen to what they tell you and you will be surprised how right they usually are" (46). On the other hand, his characters Ferdinand and Wee Gillis do not accept the wisdom of the grown ups. In *Wee Gillis* (1938), the title character rejects the advice of both his father's relatives (who stalk stags in the Highlands) and his mother's relatives (who herd cows in the Lowlands), preferring instead to play bagpipes in "his house halfway up a medium-sized hill." In *The Story of Ferdinand*, the bull does not aspire to enter the bullfights in Madrid—as the other bulls do, and as the bullfighters expect him to do. He prefers to "sit just quietly under the cork tree and smell the flowers." At the end of each book, the title character gets his wish and not only remains independent, but does so with the full support of the society in which he lives. The contradictory impulses in Leaf's work do in some senses embody the contradictory impulses within the *SNAFU* films. *SNAFU* is at once a skeptical rebel and the very reason why soldiers should conform to the behaviors expected of them. Ultimately, however, the *SNAFU* cartoons side with authority and, when we take into account that the vast majority of Leaf's works are advice books of the *How to Behave* variety, perhaps Leaf is inclined to side with authority—or with *certain* authorities.

Although Seuss's cartoons and children's books do enforce some repressive ideological messages (discussed more fully in the next section), Seuss's characters consistently manifest a much greater deal of skepticism toward the wisdom of adults. In *The Butter Battle Book*, adults embark upon a buildup of weapons of mass destruction, apparently headed toward World War III. At the end, the only child present questions the sense of what they are doing. As a Yook and a Zook each stand on a wall, poised to drop their Seussian nuclear bomb on to the opponent's country, the Yook's grandchild tries to intervene: "'Grandpa!' I shouted. 'Be careful! Oh, gee!/Who's going to drop it?/Will you . . .? Or will he . . .?'" The chilling reply is "'Be patient,' said Grandpa. 'We'll see./We will see . . .'" In this concluding scene, Seuss allows his child character's question to suggest the folly of mutually assured

destruction. In *The Lorax*, the child plays a similar role. Remorseful of his destruction of the environment, an adult character known as the Once-ler throws the final Truffula seed to the boy who has been listening to his tale. The Once-ler tells him, "Plant a new Truffula. Treat it with care./Give it clean water. And feed it fresh air./Grow a forest. Protect it from axes that hack./Then the Lorax/and all of his friends/may come back." The hope of the future rests with this child who, in his uncorrupted state, does not share adults' belief that business is more important than the environment. As the Once-ler says just before giving him the seed, "UNLESS someone like you/cares a whole awful lot,/nothing is going to get better./It's not." And, famously, *The Cat in the Hat* does *not* end with the two children resolving to tell their mother of the day's misadventures with the Cat, Thing One and Thing Two. Instead, the book ends on the question, "What would YOU do if your mother asked YOU?" Seuss invites the child to decide for him- or herself how the question should be answered.

More than Leaf's or Eastman's postwar books, Dr. Seuss's postwar books display a faith in the ameliorative power of children, and promote Popular Front ideas about progressive education. As Julia Mickenberg writes in "The Pedagogy of the Popular Front: 'Progressive Parenting' for a New Generation, 1918–1945" (2003), advocates of progressive parenting "laid the greatest emphasis on giving children freedom to develop as individuals; they also assumed that adult institutions were corrupt, and that children were the basis for a new, more democratic, egalitarian and vibrant social order" (229). In some cases, this philosophy extended to the ways in which parents "governed" the household: parents were encouraged to run their households as a democracy, not a dictatorship. As a November 1938 issue of *Parents* magazine asked, "Are You a DICTATOR? You are on guard against dictatorship in politics, but what about the management of your own home? Are you training little goose-steppers there?" (quoted in Mickenberg 236). Seuss very likely would agree with what Carleton Washburne, president of the Progressive Education Association, wrote in 1941: "Progressive education does not indoctrinate children with any particular solution to problems, but instills in them a desire to examine all proposals, to get beneath propaganda and prejudice, to seek facts and reasons, and to think boldly" (quoted in Mickenberg 231). Seuss clearly shared Washburne's faith in children's ability to think more critically than adults do and, in so doing, to imagine a better

future for the country as a whole. As Seuss writes in an essay published in 1960, “children’s reading and children’s thinking are the rock bottom base upon which the future of this country will rise. Or not rise” (“Writing for Children: A Mission”).

However, the ideological complexity of Seuss’s children’s books indicates that they may have operated in ways other than he intended. The works of Eastman and Leaf—along with the *SNAFU* cartoons—also signify in multiple ways. Just as *SNAFU* questions authority in order to teach the viewer to submit to authority, so Leaf’s *How to Behave and Why* promises to liberate the child reader from the confines of childhood into the privileged realm of adulthood, but does so by persuading the child to conform to adult rules. Disguising obedience as rebellion also recurs—albeit in slightly altered forms—in the ways that the films and the books treat ethnic, racial, and gender differences.

Being an American Can Be Fun: An Ideological Education

On the one hand, the *SNAFU* cartoons show Seuss, Eastman, and Leaf as Popular Front patriots, fighting Fascism, criticizing prejudice against blacks and Jews, and generally promoting the highest American ideals. On the other hand, the *SNAFU* cartoons reinforce anti-Japanese racism, and often portray women as sex objects, traitors, or both. *SNAFU*’s racist caricatures and the children’s books’ latent (and overt) sexism indicate that these three authors were not fully aware of some of the antidemocratic implications of their own rhetoric. The flaws in these works’ liberatory strategies point to the ways in which even progressive propaganda can oppress.

Although the cartoons advance the Popular Front’s anti-Fascist message, their anti-Japanese racism seems to undercut otherwise progressive views on race. For example, Seuss’s support of civil rights for African Americans appears prominently in the *PM* cartoons he created before joining “Fort Fox.” In the *SNAFU* cartoons, as in Seuss’s *PM* cartoons, the Japanese are not accorded the same degree of humanity that representatives of other Axis nations are. That is, while all Axis characters appear as stereotypes, the “Jap” stereotype is more vicious because it suggests the Japanese are less human. In “Spies” (August 1943)—the sole *SNAFU* cartoon to include caricatures of the Germans, the Japanese, *and* the Italians (who surrendered in September of

1943)—the spies from all three countries speak in accents. However, in rendering the “Japs” with buck teeth, slanted eyes, and large glasses, the cartoons make them look more “Other” by emphasizing their difference from European spies. “The Aleutians—Isles of Enchantment (Oh Brother!)” (February 1945), an otherwise light-hearted lesson on how to cope in the intemperate Aleutian Islands, starts off with a Japanese stereotype. As the voice-over explains, “The Aleutians are a string of island bases extending over a thousand miles westward from the Alaskan peninsula. These islands the Japs once considered a back door to the United States.” The cartoon then shows a small, sneaky, buck-toothed, slant-eyed “Jap” tip-toeing up to a giant door on island. “But when the door was opened,” the announcer observes, a tall US serviceman appears, towering over the little “Jap.” The American serviceman stamps on the Japanese character’s foot, and this “Jap” shouts (in dialect), “Ooh. Regleetable incident” and scarpers off. While the presence of such stereotypes in Allied propaganda (to say nothing of stereotypes in Axis propaganda) is hardly news, what makes them worthy of comment are the antiracist children’s books created after the war and—in Leaf’s case—even during the war.

Although they approach racism in different ways, Eastman, Seuss, and Leaf all actively criticize it. Seuss’s children’s books reject the xenophobia and racism of the *SNAFU* cartoons and instead offer socially progressive messages—critical of fascism, supporting civil rights, and even advocating environmental conservation. As I have argued elsewhere, Seuss’s work as a political cartoonist and Army propagandist galvanized his commitment to certain social issues and inspired him to write children’s books that challenge certain structures of power. As Seuss told his biographers, “I had no great causes or interest in social issues until [opposing] Hitler” (Morgan and Morgan 98). He is not exaggerating. Seuss’s message books are a distinctly postwar phenomenon. In the prewar *Horton Hatches the Egg* (1940), Horton has to take care of one egg; in the postwar *Horton Hears a Who!* (1954), he has to save an entire planet of Whos from total annihilation. In the prewar *500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins* (1938), King Derwin’s unjust actions affect Bartholomew alone; in the postwar *Bartholomew and the Oobleck* (1949), King Derwin’s misrule affects the entire kingdom, covering it in sticky, green Oobleck. The King Derwin of *Oobleck* is an early version of Yertle the Turtle, whose career Seuss has said “was modeled on the rise of Hitler” (Cott 29). Critiquing a turtle king who expands

his empire quite literally on the backs of his citizens, Seuss's *Yertle the Turtle* (1958) may be the most popular anti-Fascist book ever written. After the War, Seuss's message books concern themselves with the big issues: protecting the rights of minorities in *Horton Hears a Who!* and in *The Sneetches*, opposing tyranny in *Yertle the Turtle*, protecting the environment in *The Lorax* (1971), and satirizing the arms race in *The Butter Battle Book*.

Although Eastman's books offer few explicitly political messages, *Go, Dog. Go!* does implicitly endorse racial diversity. Just as H. A. Rey matter-of-factly includes racially mixed crowds in his *Curious George* books, P. D. Eastman presents dogs of different colors playing together. He writes of "Big dogs and little dogs./Black dogs and white dogs" (6–7). In the accompanying illustration, black dogs run along side of white dogs and spotted dogs. Throughout the book, Eastman shows dogs of different colors undertaking similar activities, reinforcing the idea that ability does not depend upon color. He shows us "A red dog on a blue tree./A blue dog on a red tree./A green dog on a yellow tree" (12–13). Each of the "Three dogs at a party on a boat at night" is of a different color: green, gray, and blue (33). Reinforcing this message, the male and female dog who drive off together at the end are a pink poodle and a yellow dog with black spots. While a modern reader may find these combinations of different-colored animals unworthy of comment, contemporary readers would have been more likely to notice. Three years before the publication of *Go, Dog. Go!*, Garth Williams's *The Rabbits' Wedding* (1958) made the national news because it depicted the wedding of a white rabbit and a black rabbit. Some parents in Florida and Alabama read the book as advocating for interracial marriage, deemed the book unsuitable for children, and demanded that it be removed from public libraries. Perhaps Eastman alludes to the controversy in his own book's "Black dogs and white dogs" or in the marriage between the pink dog and yellow dog. Whether or not *Go, Dog. Go!* alludes to Williams's book, when animals of different colors play together, it promotes the notion that it is normal for children of different colors to play together, too.

While Eastman's racial politics tend to emerge subtly, Leaf—like Seuss—is more apt to state his beliefs directly. Leaf's *War-Time Handbook for Young Americans* (1942) offers a very strong antiracist message: "There are some of us who seem to think that we are the only kind of Americans who really are Americans and people who are a little bit

different from us aren't American at all," Leaf tells us (58). "That is a stupid or foolish thing to believe or say," he explains.

Anybody who talks that way might just as well know that everyone of us had a father and mother, or a grandfather and grandmother, or a great, great grandfather and great, great grandmother who came to this country from somewhere else. (59)

As Leaf points out, "The only people who were here when the first white men came were red Indians, and even they came from somewhere else way before that" (60). *Being an American Can Be Fun* (1964) makes a similar claim when it tells us, "Your parents or your grandfather's or your grandmother's parents or their grandparents or theirs came from some other country to live here and become Americans. If you are an American Indian, your people were here first" (18). And the book ends by telling us that the best American boys and girls "have treated each other as equals, all sharing our great rights that were promised to us when our country was started. Let's do our best to make our land and our people even better as we grow up. Then all the world will know HOW and WHY BEING AN AMERICAN CAN BE FUN" (55). Even *How to Behave and Why* (1946), which is not explicitly a book about America, makes a point of being inclusive. Reminding its readers to treat differences with respect, the narrator says, "Other people have ideas and thoughts/ways to do things/ways to work/ways to play/ways they think of God/and/their country/and/their race./Their way can be just as right/as/your way./Remember that, and be glad you/have a chance to choose the best of all ways" (52). Stating frankly that young readers should accept difference, Leaf's books embody the idea that all people should be treated fairly, irrespective of race, religion, country of origin, or the ways they work and play.

If these postwar and wartime books embody the progressive spirit of the anti-Fascist work that Leaf and Seuss did during the war, some also deploy that same work's rhetoric of exclusion. While racial stereotypes virtually disappear from Seuss's postwar work, sexism remains much in evidence. With the exceptions of "Home Front" and "Going Home," the *SNAFU* cartoons depict women only as strippers, prostitutes, spies, or gossips. In "The Goldbrick," as *SNAFU* snores, his breath blows up the skirt of the woman on the poster above him, revealing her knickers. In "Spies," *SNAFU* dates a female Nazi spy who sends off letters by carrier pigeon to "Adolf." However, that is part of the point: The

SNAFU films rely on these stereotypes because, as Munro Leaf put it, “If you make it racy, then soldiers will pay attention” (Gil Leaf, conversation). To make propaganda that would persuade GIs to keep healthy, the *SNAFU* cartoons show Anopheles Annie, the whorish malaria-carrying mosquito, spreading malaria much as her human counterpart spreads venereal disease. According to Gil Leaf, Annie “had a profound effect on [reducing] malaria losses” (Gil Leaf, interview). As Eric O. Costello notes in his excellent article on the *Private SNAFU* films, that there were three *SNAFU* cartoons on malaria is hardly surprising: “Half of the US casualties in the Pacific were due to malaria, and each day 3 out of 1,000 men would be out of action because of it” (50). So, while modern readers may rightly object to these representations of women, we might also remember that Seuss, Eastman, and Leaf were deploying these stereotypes to help save soldiers’ lives and win the war in the Pacific.

When writing books to educate children, Leaf and Seuss do not represent women as spies or whores, but they do slip into stereotypes. Seuss’s works slight girls either by failing to include female characters or by representing them in an unflattering light. As Alison Lurie memorably pointed out in a 1990 essay, Seuss’s children’s books have an “almost total lack of female protagonists”: “little girls play silent, secondary roles” (51) and adult females, like Mayzie of *Horton Hatches the Egg* or Gertrude McFuzz (one of the “other stories” in *Yertle the Turtle and Other Stories*), appear as vain or selfish. One little girl who does not play a secondary role soon learns that she should. In “The Glunk that Got Thunk” (from *I Can Lick 30 Tigers Today and Other Stories*) she thinks up a dangerous Glunk, which her brother then must un-think. Lurie concludes, “Moral: women have weak minds; they must not be ambitious even in imagination” (52). As I develop more fully in *Dr. Seuss: American Icon*, Seuss’s books grant girls fewer rights and opportunities.

While Leaf’s books do not grant equal opportunities to girls, they are more gender inclusive than Seuss’s or Eastman’s. *How to Behave and Why* (1946) begins, “This is really a book about how to have the most fun in living, and it doesn’t matter if you are a boy or a girl, a man or a woman—the rules are all the same” (2). For the most part, *How to Behave and Why* maintains this inclusiveness throughout. In response to the question, “How can we grow from a weak baby to a strong and healthy man or woman?” Leaf answers, “Doctors and scientists study

and learn what is the best way to keep ourselves healthy. Our fathers and mothers learn from them and they tell us" (39, 42). Leaf's drawings show only male doctors and scientists, but his language does suggest that fathers and mothers are equally important. His explicitly nationalistic books—*A War-Time Handbook for Young Americans* and *Being an American Can Be Fun*—convey a comparably mixed message. Both books feature a boy and a girl who lead us through the lessons. In *A War-Time Handbook*, we learn that "Boys and girls everywhere are learning to help raise vegetables, fruits and flowers" (50). We see boys and girls at work in the garden (52–53) and even collecting scrap materials (56–57). As William Tuttle points out in *"Daddy's Gone to War": The Second World War in the Lives of American Children* (1993), "While adults frowned on girls playing war games with boys, there was nothing but approbation for girls and boys working together in scrap collection drives and savings bond campaigns" (145–46). The increased number of women-led households (while the men were off to war) may also have challenged gender stereotypes. Perhaps the lingering effects of this phenomenon prompts Leaf's narrator in *Being an American Can Be Fun* to say that "your mother and father [. . .] have the right to help choose the men or women who make the laws and see that they are obeyed" (16). Just as this language grants both women and men a role in voting and governing, so Leaf suggests that both parents might work outside the home: "Because your parents can work at what they do well, they can earn and save the money to buy the clothes that you need" (29).

Yet, the books also convey a sense that women's work differs from men's work. In *A War-Time Handbook*, "fathers and sons" get to "fix the broken things" like radios and skates, but "mothers and daughters are the squad that is in charge of mending and sewing" (28). Leaf's assumptions here were by no means unusual. Constance Bowman, a schoolteacher who built bombers during the summer of 1943, reports that her gender often made her work suspect in the eyes of others. Her own mother said, "That was unfortunate that our flyers had to contend with us as well as with the Japs and the Germans." The father of bomber-builder Clara Marie Allen asked if her work "[was] checked by someone else before the ships went into the air" (Bowman and Allen 83). Suggesting that Leaf's views shift slightly during the subsequent two decades, *Being an American Can Be Fun* does qualify its claim about women's work when it says, "Your mother, who probably buys the food

and fixes it for the family”—the narrator here says, “who probably” instead of just assuming that the mother does these tasks (24). However, he represents fathers as the primary breadwinners (23), and complete gender equality appears dangerous. In contrast to the freely elected government of America, the government of countries run by “communists and dictators” (47),

owns the forests, farms, mines and mills, and controls just about everything that people use to make a living. [. . .] The women work as hard and as long as the men, doing the same kind of jobs from truck driving and ditch digging to being scientists and doctors. The government decides how many people will work at what jobs and where. What YOU want to do as one person is not important to them. YOU DO WHAT THEY WANT YOU TO DO. (49)

This passage implies that if women were allowed to do what they wanted to do, they would not be doing “the same kind of jobs” as the men. In these instances, Leaf’s postwar conduct books for children uphold divisions between men’s work and women’s work, boys’ play and girls’ play.

If the assumption that gender dictates behavior undoes some progressive impulses in Leaf’s otherwise fairly gender-inclusive work, the widespread tendency to use “he” or a boy character to represent both boys and girls is *not* actively sexist. In *Three Promises to You* (1957), a book about how the United Nations is working to secure peace, Leaf uses a boy stick figure as the generic “you”—the child to whom these promises will be kept. However, when explaining that, to avoid war, “All the leaders of the governments worked together like a big family,” Leaf draws three women among the seven world leaders. This illustration suggests that, though a boy may stand in for the universal child, both women and men are capable of running a government.

Eastman’s postwar books convey more rigidly conservative messages about gender roles. In *Go, Dog. Go!*, the repeated sequence in which the male dog does not like the female dog’s hat implies that women ought to focus on their appearance to please men. During the first three repetitions of this scene, the female dog asks, “Do you like my hat?”, the male dog replies, “I do not,” both dogs say “Good-by!”, and the female dog looks slightly perturbed. After trying on three relatively normal hats, on the fourth occasion the female dog appears wearing a truly outlandish hat. This time, when she asks, “And now do you like my hat?”, the male dog says, “I do. What a hat! I like it! I like that

party hat!" The dog couple then drives off into the sunset together, waving "Good-by!" This concluding scene reinforces the "dating" subplot of *Go, Dog. Go!*, and the lesson that women (and, by extension, girls) need to use fashion to entice a man (or boy) to drive off into the sunset with them.

While their representations of gender and race deserve critical attention, we must remember that Theodor Seuss Geisel was born in 1904, W. Munro Leaf was born in 1905, and Philip Dey Eastman was born in 1909. Given that Eastman, Geisel, and Leaf were all born in the first decade of the twentieth century, when women did not have the right to vote and ethnic jokes were common, evidence of stereotypes in their books is unremarkable. What makes the subject worth remarking upon is that contemporary children continue to read these books. If, as Leaf writes in *Reading Can Be Fun* (1953), "The reading that you do [. . .] will help to make you the kind of person you want to be when you're grown up" (33), then we should examine closely the lessons that children's books teach their readers. While we can never know the degree to which their experience writing *Private SNAFU* episodes influenced their subsequent books for children, examining continuities between the wartime propaganda and postwar books offers an occasion to reflect upon the ways that children's literature educated postwar America—teaching children not only how to read but what it means to be an American. When the fathers who watched *SNAFU* cartoons later read their children books by the same authors, the children may have been learning more than the parents expected. Whether promoting prejudices that they otherwise sought to counter or offering a genuinely emancipatory practice, *Private SNAFU* and his literary descendants show us what happens when children's literature goes to war and then seeks to promote a lasting peace.

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Philip Nel is an Associate Professor of English and Director of the Program in Children's Literature at Kansas State University. He is the author of *The Annotated Cat: Under the Hats of Seuss and His Cats* (Random House, 2007), *Dr. Seuss: American Icon* (Continuum, 2004), *The Avant-Garde and American Postmodernity: Small Incisive Shocks* (UP Mississippi, 2002), and *J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter Novels: A Reader's Guide* (Continuum, 2001). He and Julia Mickenberg have just finished coediting *Tales for Little Rebels: A Collection of Radical Children's Literature* (NYU P, expected 2008).

Private Snafu is the title character of a series of black-and-white American instructional adult animated shorts, ironic and humorous in tone, that were produced between 1943 and 1945 during World War II. The films were designed to instruct service personnel about security, proper sanitation habits, booby traps and other military subjects, and to improve troop morale. Primarily, they demonstrate the negative consequences of doing things wrong. The main character's name is a play on the military slang acronym SNAFU, "Situation Normal: All Fucked Up." "Children's Literature Goes to War: Dr. Seuss, P. D. Eastman, Munro Leaf, and the Private SNAFU Films (1943-46)". *The Journal of Popular Culture*. 40 (3): 468-487. doi:10.1111/j.1540-5931.2007.00404.x. Snafu! in June of 1943 - the first of twenty-seven such films produced between 1943 and 1945 - the boys were greeted with a more wholesome interpretation: "Situation Normal, All" With his troops intoxicated and the Luftwaffe bearing down, Snafu decides it's better to take a needle in the tuckus than an incendiary bomb where the stars and stripes don't shine. The fantasy dissolves. Hierarchy is restored. Mark David Kaufman received his Ph.D. in English literature from Tufts University. He has published critical essays in *Hypermedia Joyce Studies* and *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly*. Currently, he is at work on a book project, tentatively titled *Secret States: Modernism, Espionage, and the Official Secrets Act*. "Children's Literature Goes to War: Dr. Seuss, P.D. Eastman, Munro Leaf, and the Private SNAFU Films (1943-46)" Philip Nel Kansas State University. Munro Leaf -- whose *The Story of Ferdinand* (1936) was at the center of a political controversy before the war -- wrote a series of *Can Be Fun* books that both educate and implicitly reflect upon the role of education in shaping postwar America. As Leaf writes in *Reading Can Be Fun* (1953), "The reading that you do [...] will help to make you the kind of person you want to be when you're grown up." However, the SNAFU cartoons' racist caricatures and the children's books latent (and overt) sexism indicate that these three authors were not fully aware of the power structures in which they were enmeshed.

Children's literature goes to war: Dr. Seuss, P. D. Eastman, Munro Leaf, and the Private SNAFU films (1943-46). *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 40(3), 468-487. [CrossRef](#) [Google Scholar](#). Pease, D. (2010). Even Dr. Seuss goes to war. *Dallas Morning News*, p. 2c. [Google Scholar](#). Peterson, L. (2006). Dr. Seuss in translation: Translating the nonsense verse of Theodor Seuss Geisel. An analysis of *le chat au chapeau* and *le chat chapeaut*. (Master's thesis). Geisel, Eastman, and Leaf authored books designed to promote personal responsibility, conservation, and respect for multiculturalism, though they were ambiguous about racism and sexism. Geisel's characters were often portrayed as rebels who displayed independence of mind. Eastman's characters, on the other hand, typically embraced the wisdom of authority figures. Leaf's heroes were in between, and seemed more ambiguous toward independence and authority. [1]. *Filmography*. "Children's Literature Goes to War: Dr. Seuss, P. D. Eastman, Munro Leaf, and the Private SNAFU Films (1943-46)". *The Journal of Popular Culture*. 40 (3): 468-487. doi:10.1111/j.1540-5931.2007.00404.x. Munro Leaf -- whose *The Story of Ferdinand* (1936) was at the center of a political controversy before the war -- wrote a series of *Can Be Fun* books that both educate and implicitly reflect upon the role of education in shaping postwar America. As Leaf writes in *Reading Can Be Fun* (1953), "The reading that you do [...] will help to make you the kind of person you want to be when you're grown up." While neither Leaf nor Eastman favor the overtly political style of Dr. Seuss, all three authors offer lessons in the exercise of power in a democratic society. However, the SNAFU cartoons' racist caricatures and the children's books latent (and overt) sexism indicate that these three authors were not fully aware of the power structures in which they were enmeshed. Private Snafu was, of course, an animated cartoon character designed for the military recruits. He was an adorable dolt who sounded like Bugs Bunny and looked a bit like Elmer Fudd. And in every episode, he taught soldiers what not to do, from blabbing about troop movements to not taking malaria medication. And one of the main writers was none other than Theodor "Dr. Seuss" Geisel. As you can see in the first Snafu short *Coming* (1943), directed by Chuck Jones (see above), the movie displays a salty sensibility intended for an army camp rather than a Sunday matinee.