

# CANCEL CULTURE IS ONE SCRAMBLED IDEA



**DAVID PENBERTHY**

**W**HEN I was a kid I spent hours rifling through boxes of books in my late grandfather's shed. It was a treasure trove as Grandpa was a voracious reader and magazine subscriber.

He had amazing leather-bound collections of National Geographic maps from the 1940s.

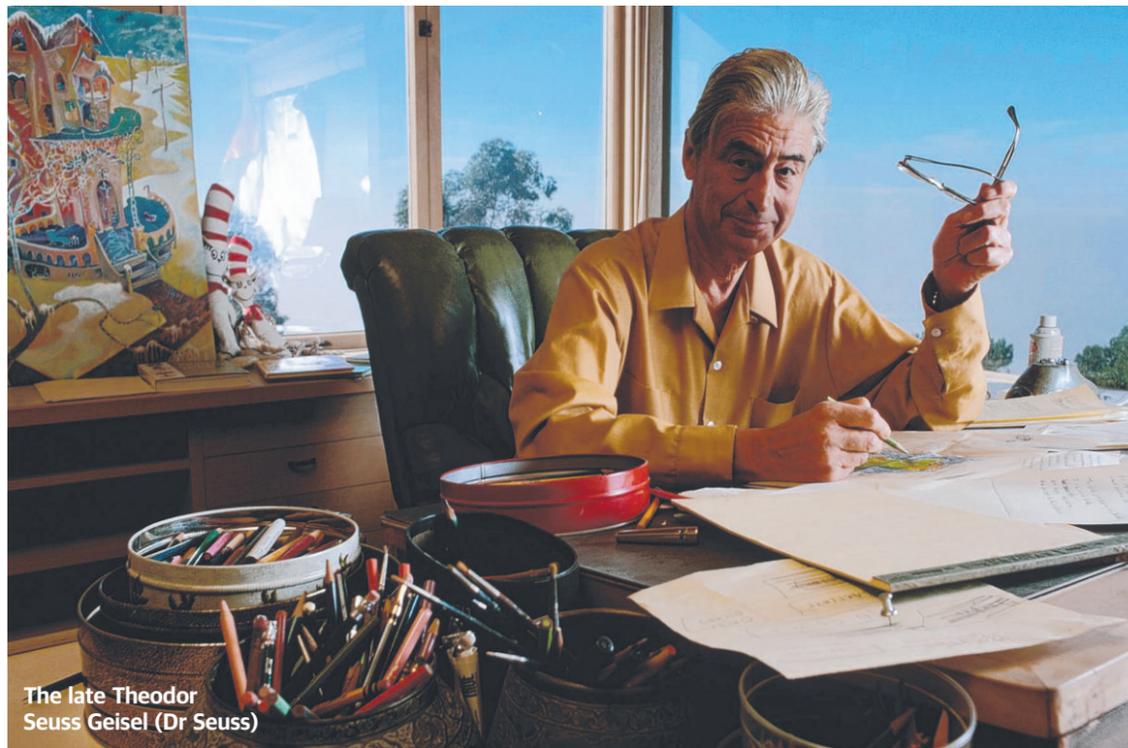
There were maps showing the Theatre of War in the Pacific with American air bases marked on places I had never heard of such as the New Hebrides and Phoenix Islands. Maps of colonial Africa with wild-sounding countries such as Tanganyika and Italian Somaliland.

He also had my dad's old books from when he was a kid. One of them was called Little Black Sambo. It was about an Indian boy who chased four tigers around a tree until they turned into pools of butter, which his mother used to make pancakes. It was Dad's favourite book as a kid.

There was another book I found in Grandpa's shed that confused and troubled me at the time and repulses me today. It was one of those Boy's Own Annual anthologies with strip cartoons of dashing men having adventures.

One was about an aviator, one about some bloke fighting pirates, and one was a story called Bombardment Starts at Noon! which featured a Chips Rafferty-style figure riding around central Australia on horseback rounding up indigenous people before a nuclear bomb was tested. The indigenous characters in the book were referred to by the demeaning three-letter abbreviation derived from the word Aborigine.

The premise of the story was that the hero was on a race against time to get them all before the bomb went off, the story ending with him



**The late Theodor Seuss Geisel (Dr Seuss)**

figuring that he'd found as many as he could, and it was time for the blast to go ahead.

I mention these books to make the point that standards change and society changes. What was once seen as harmless can be seen with hindsight and greater understanding as unintentionally hurtful or downright grotesque.

Today you would no sooner publish a patronising book about a cute Indian boy called Little Black Sambo than a book about a sweet caucasian kid called Little White Honky (indeed when you flip it around, it says a lot about the quaint mindset under which it was ever deemed acceptable).

And as for turning one of the greatest atrocities committed against indigenous Australians into a Biggles-style adventure, that speaks volumes about our historic ambivalence to their treatment since our arrival.

Having said all that, it feels increasingly that in our rush to erase the mistakes of the past that we risk erasing everything.

The announcement this week that

six Dr Seuss books are being withdrawn from sale is not just testament to our modern capacity for jumping at shadows, it also suggests that nuanced and thoughtful discussion is pretty much dead, when a person who was almost uniformly good as Seuss can be judged so harshly on the basis of a few missteps that should be seen in the context of his times.

Seuss did one early "humorous" cartoon where he depicted African-American people in minstrel caricature and quoted the old saying "n..... in the woodpile".

As a political cartoonist during World War II, he produced a handful of war cartoons depicting Japanese people with exaggerated facial features (putting him in the same company as every other cartoonist rallying against the forces of fascism at the time).

He also drew a picture of a Chinese person — whom he described as a Chinaman — in early book called And To Think That I Saw It On Mulberry Street, depicted wearing a conical bamboo hat and holding chopsticks.

For this and a few other crimes, judged by the standards of 2021 and not the mores of the 1940s, Seuss has now had six of his books cancelled.

The distressing thing about their cancellation is it ignores the fact that Seuss's political cartooning was overwhelmingly aimed at tackling prejudice. He drew several cartoons bemoaning the fact that due to segregation black Americans were denied work alongside whites during the war effort.

He also drew several cartoons denouncing the anti-Semitism and pro-German rhetoric of the aviator Charles Lindbergh, who aside from having the honour of being the first pilot to cross the Atlantic, had the unpleasant distinction of being an isolationist who believed the United States should let Hitler have his way in Germany.

Dr Seuss's biographer Brian Jay Jones noted that Seuss would draw tens of thousands of cartoons during his career and that only a "small number were truly racially insensitive".

Yet here we are, Seuss banned. The most unnerving thing about



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Seuss's cancellation is that it was not foisted on the organisation that protects Seuss's legacy, Seuss Enterprises, but came from the organisation itself.

Tactically, I guess this makes them smart. In the age of the Twitter pile-on, the change.org petition and the angry social media boycott where a person's entire life and work can be reduced to a vacuous hashtag, it might be better from a marketing perspective to get ahead of the curve, however dumb the curve might be.

It is a great pity, as it makes a man who did more than any author to advance child literacy in the 20th century look like a flawed figure whose prejudices were so acute that they need to be expunged from his record.

In a tangential but related sense, I will wrap up with a quote from the comic actor Harry Shearer on the fact that, as an Englishman, it's now been decreed he can no longer voice the African American character Dr Hibbert in *The Simpsons*.

"I have a very simple belief about acting," he said. "The job of the actor is to play someone who they're not. That's the gig, that's the job description."

If only things were still that simple.

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## Thank you, retail workers, for putting up with plenty

**I**T'S common in Victoria, when we're not in lockdown, to be served by a professional hospitality worker with a mask on.

They do their best to provide quality service with no smile seen, and a muffled exchange of words.

In call centre teams, it's common to hear conversations about the hardship and fear of vulnerable customers on the other end of the phone, daily reminders of the despair and destruction for many Australian households.

And when retailers ask the question to a customer "how are you?", they almost hold their breath with anticipation, ready for much more than a "good thanks" reply.

Australia, the lucky country, may



**JAQUIE SCAMMELL**

of escaped the seismic death and destruction from the pandemic compared with other nations, however we have been affected by this pandemic and its ripple effect is being felt subtly throughout all our daily interactions.

Let us not forget that your local butcher, banker and retail assistant are frontline workers too. Not saving

lives as such but they have the potential to improve lives.

Customer service could be the medicine for keeping people together, giving us the understanding of each other by elevating the ordinary moments in a day.

The small acts of kindness, the listening ear when there is no one else to talk to, the feeling of being seen, heard and understood by a stranger who happens to be packing your grocery bag can expand beyond an insignificant moment.

It can be the very moment in a day that reminds you of the power of humanity, the resilience in people and the importance of keeping connected in the community and being around other members of society.

For an average of \$22 per hour, frontline service people can be misunderstood as low-paid workers with a low impact on our days. They too are fatigued and feeling the impact of the constant fear of contagion, yet their primary role is to rise above their own fear to be patient with others, ultimately putting others' needs first.

We are asking them to be flexible with standard procedures and continually adapt to the ever-changing needs and regulations that are bestowed in a matter of hours.

We are asking them to be understanding without judgment and accepting of the unpredictable, sometimes unacceptable, behaviour of customers who are feeling the prolonged effects of the pandemic.

Whether you view retail assistants, hospitality workers, call centre and supermarket attendants as unskilled workers or not, the reality is that they are being asked to be more skilled than ever before, dealing with the unpredictable human behaviours that are prominent off the back of a global pandemic.

So next time you're picking up groceries or heading to the post office, be mindful and alert to the service interactions that are delivered by frontline workers.

After all, they are, just like you, doing their best to make sense of all of this — the only difference is that they have chosen to serve you.

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