



# America's gift to learner readers

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**Jill Bennett** considers **Dr Seuss**.

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Dr Seuss (Theodor Seuss Geisel: Theo. Le Sieg) started work as a freelance magazine humorist and cartoonist and then spent thirteen years in the advertising business. He began his picture book career in 1937 with **And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street** which he says was written to amuse himself on an Atlantic crossing, the words synchronising with the rhythm of the ship's engine. Once home he drew the pictures, but twenty-nine publishers rejected the book before it was finally accepted by Vanguard Press.

Seuss never had any formal training in writing or art and says that he has no set working habits.

In 1957 the first Beginner Book **The Cat in the Hat**, now an established classic, was published by Random House who have published all but his first two books. **The Cat in the Hat** has a controlled vocabulary and was specially written for children learning to read. Seuss reports that he thought the book would take him a couple of weeks but it took well over a year before he was satisfied with it. This care and dedication is one of the hallmarks of his work for children both as creator and Editor in Chief of the Random House Beginner Book series.

It is probably the brash illustrations which first attract children to the books and they are then hooked by Seuss's infectious humour and rhyme and the fast-moving pace of his writing. ; But the combination of text and pictures has an alchemy all of its own: one has to read them both, and learner readers get tremendous support from the close link between words and images.

The zany characters in the exuberant fantasies transcend all age barriers: the books are avidly read and enjoyed by pre-schoolers. and learner readers of all ages, and are particularly valuable for older children who do not find reading easy. They work at all these levels because their humour is universal; the comic-like nature of the characters and illustrations is an instant motivation; the language is living language rejoicing in word play and at times deliberately inelegant: the disposition of tile words on the page is uninhibiting: Seuss manages to create hilarious situations using just two or three words. The unmistakable message from these books - probably above all others - is that learning to read is fun.

Four of Seuss's books: **The Foot Book** for Beginning Beginners (0 00 171274 8), **The Shape of Me and Other Stuff** (0 00 171278 0) for Beginning Beginners. **In a People House** (0 00 171276 4), illustrated by Roy McKie for Beginning Beginners, **Great Day for Up** (0 00 171279 9), illustrated by Quentin Blake for Beginning Beginners, together with two titles from the Berenstains - **The Bears' Holiday** (0 00 171330 2) and **He Bear She Bear** (0 00 171269 1) - the only other author/artists who really measure up to Seuss's own work in the series, have recently been issued in paperback by Collins (£1.25 each).

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