



Classics in Short No.52: Inside Outside Upside Down

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Brian Alderson on Stan and Jan Berenstain's **Inside Outside Upside Down**.

We all know the Cat in the stove-pipe hat

but what of the bear who went to town?? <!--break-->

Inside Outside Upside Down

Oh, Mr Hutchinson ,

what a bog-up. You were probably dead at the time, so some latterday minion may have been responsible (could it have been Jane Carruth?) but you would have known it was a bog-up.

The date was 1957

and you published, fresh in a smart dust-jacket, the first English edition of **The Cat in the Hat** by Dr Seuss, also known as Theodore Geisel, Theo LeSieg and Rosetta Stone. It does not seem to have been a success (one can hear the lady-librarians of those days deploring the intrusion of comic books into our culture) and although you tried again with **The Cat in the Hat Comes Back** these works did not seem to take.

Too soon, Mr Hutchinson, too soon .

Within months along came Billy Collins and his henchmen, who knew a bit about comic books, and took the titles over. Perhaps too they knew that in the United States the success of the first book in stimulating children's urge to read had led to the second one assuming a divisional publishing imprint 'Beginner Books' where it was at once joined by several companion works by other comedians, such as P D Eastman and **Sam and the Firefly** , potentially a lucrative package.

And perhaps they also looked at the Doctor's previous concoctions for bored readers.

For **The Cat in the Hat** was by no means his first venture into Zanyland. That had been **And to think that I saw it on Mulberry Street** which appeared in 1937. (An English edition was published by Blackwell's and Beatrix Potter, who was given a copy, commented 'What an amusing picture book?') Between then and 1957 Dr Seuss had published at least a dozen books that were harbingers of future events ? **On Beyond Zebra** (1955), for instance, which played with the idea of adding letters to the alphabet (The Yuzz, say or The Slikk) and thus made you think about the alphabet itself.

This was the evidence

that led to a suggestion that Dr Seuss was the man to counter the baleful influence of the 'pallid primers' of educational reading schemes, so described by John Hersey, who had come to national fame as chronicler of the Hiroshima raid*. Exercising his genius on a controlled vocabulary of 220 word, Ted Geisel exploded the notion that single syllable words

and multiple repetitions must necessarily be boring. (He exploded it even more comprehensively in **Green Eggs and Ham** in 1960 when the vocabulary ran to only 50 words and the book became one of the bestsellers of all time.)

?Old hat about the cat?

may well be your judgement on that brief history, especially since, with Dr Seuss's centenary occurring last year, we have been well supplied with retellings of the legend and with variant editions of the works; audio books, a CD, miniature editions, a jigsaw pack, and a celebratory **Complete Cat in the Hat** hardbound in something that may well be the skin of a Flunnel (?a softish nice fellow who hides in a tunnel?). But despite the author's fame, and the proliferation of garbage, attempts creatively to systematize and promote the Beginner Books to fulfil their original purpose seem to be in retreat. The educational pundits with their weird reservations about 'real books' (about most of which they seem to know little) and the publishers themselves no longer recognise that there was method in such madnesses as 'hopping on pop' or that this was capable of exploitation within the framework of a teaching programme ? as well as being a recreational joy. (The same thing happened with such ingenious series as Leila Berg's 'Nippers' and Allan Ahlberg's 'Red Nose Readers'.)

Nowhere is this better exemplified

than in the neglect of Stan and Jan Berenstain whose reputation has diminished as Dr Seuss's has risen. They first appeared on the scene in 1968 with the arrival of the series planned as preliminary to the already established Beginner Books: 'The Bright and Early Books for Beginning Beginners'. The first tranche consisted of four books whose minimal vocabulary was combined with wild illustrations to give maximum impact: **The Eye Book** and **The Foot Book** by Ted Geisel, **The Ear Book** by Al Perkins, and **Inside Outside Upside Down** by the Berenstains.

All four gave unalloyed delight

but **Inside Outside Upside Down** remains for me the greatest of all books in the 'Beginner' enterprise and perhaps of all picture books at this elementary level. It employs only 23 different words (counting 'in' and 'inside', 'out' and 'outside' etc as two each), but there is poetry in the dramatic curve of the 'story' and this is enhanced by the comedy of the illustrations. How is it possible to get so much expression into two dots within two circles, representing eyes peering out of a box? The Berenstains were to follow it up with the first of several books about bears, a frantic counting book called **Bears on Wheels** (1969) and their peerless **B Book** (1971) in which every word bar three begins with that letter. They might not have found the resources to create such follies if the behatted cat had not first opened the door; but they were not copying that cat, and in **Inside Outside Upside Down** they produced a gem of which the good Doctor himself would have been proud.

PS ? This article breaks editorial rules by commending a book not currently available. HarperCollins list the Berenstain books in their 2005 Stocklist but (predictably, these days) report that all are out of print, with reprints 'under consideration'. But would Mr Hutchinson have done any better?

* His article, based on interviews with survivors of the atomic bomb, was published in **The New Yorker** magazine in 1946.

Inside Outside Upside Down , as illustrated, is currently o/p but hopefully this article will encourage HarperCollins to reprint.

Brian Alderson is founder of the Children's Books History Society and children's book consultant for **The Times** .

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