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# The Great CAT in the HAT Deception

*by Miles Mathis*

As with most all my writings, this article is an *opinion* piece and a review. Any free advice it contains is to be taken as from a trusted friend, not as from an infallible font or bonded expert.

This is a new topic for my sites. I have written about Art, Physics, Math, and Politics, but not Bookselling. If you wonder why I have entered this field as well, it is because I have recently begun buying and selling rare books. My collection of books was getting to be extensive, and I needed to move some of them out. So I went on Ebay and opened a little store, just for fun. Turns out the market for books is awful right now, so I have done more buying than selling. But I have learned a lot in the meantime. Most of what I have learned concerns old 19<sup>th</sup> century books, since these are the books that like to fall into my lap. But along the way several children's books have also fallen into my lap, and so I am learning about those as well. My readers know I like to research things online, and that I am pretty good at it. They also know I like to solve mysteries, or at least solve problems. And if I can uncloak deceptions, I like it that much better. We will find all of that here.

Many of you will already know that Dr. Seuss' *Cat in the Hat* is one of the bestselling books of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the 55 years since it first came out, it has sold upwards of 10 million copies. What you may not know is that it was released by two publishers almost simultaneously. For the story, let's go to [NPR's Lynn Neary, in an article published March 1, 2007:](#)

On June 11, 1956, he [Seuss] wrote to Random House:

Don't ever show this letter to anyone, but I've got a hunch . . . (very immodest) . . . Namely, according to Houghton-Mifflin, who will be releasing my First Grade Reader to schools early in Jan. or Feb., we've got a possibility of making a tremendous noise in the noisy discussion of Why Johnny Can't Read. The Random House trade edition won't come out until later, and the big noise may never come off.

Seuss then talked about potential press coverage in *Collier's* and the *Saturday Review* and the possibility of his making a television appearance to promote the book. He added, "Too early to tell yet, so you and I should just watch and wait. But if Houghton Mifflin is right, we'll be plumb in the middle of a great educational controversy."

As Seuss's letter discloses, Houghton Mifflin published the edition marketed to schools; Random House published the one sold to the general public. (Though their covers differed, the content of the books was the same.) This unusual arrangement came about because William Spaulding, a friend from his army days and then director of Houghton Mifflin's educational division, had asked Seuss to write the primer in the first place. As Judith and Neil Morgan report, Random House president Bennett Cerf agreed that Seuss "could write the reader" as long as Random House retained "the rights to market the trade edition in bookstores. Houghton Mifflin would publish only the school edition."

The school edition did not sell as well as the trade edition because, according to Seuss, educators considered his book too subversive. As he told Jonathan Cott, Houghton Mifflin "had trouble selling it to the schools; there were a lot of Dick and Jane devotees, and my book was considered too fresh and irreverent. But Bennett Cerf at Random House had asked for trade rights, and it just took off in the bookstores."

Now, we already have most of the evidence on the table there, and you don't even know the mystery. The mystery has to do with the first editions. The Random House first editions, printed with dust jackets, are now worth thousands. The Houghton Mifflin first editions, published without dust jackets, are worth maybe \$50. Why? Let's go to expert [Michelle Staley at Worthpoint.com](#):

The value of the green cloth cover book is \$50 or less, as there does not seem to be a demand for this particular book. Why is this book not as valuable as the trade book? I really don't have an answer for that, other than the books issued to the schools were most likely distributed in a much larger quantity than the first edition run of the trade books. Many of the school books are probably ex-library books (these are not as desirable) and show greater signs of wear.

But we already know that is false. Notice that she doesn't say books without library marks are worth more, or that clean copies are worth more. All Houghton Mifflin editions are worth very little, regardless of condition, according to her. And as for the quantities, many published articles have told us that it is actually the Random House edition that was distributed in much larger quantities. For another example, we can go to [Louis Menand at the New Yorker](#):

"The Cat in the Hat" was published in March, 1957, seven months before Sputnik. Within weeks, it was selling at a rate of twelve thousand copies a month. Random House's publisher, Bennett Cerf, contrived to sell his trade edition to the schools through jobbers, and he ended up acquiring the textbook rights from Houghton Mifflin.

So not only was the Houghton Mifflin edition not selling well to schools, those schools that did want *The Cat in the Hat* might have been buying Random House editions from jobbers. Random House gave the school market to Houghton Mifflin, but then (we are told) cheated on that deal, competing in the school market as well. And we get the same story from Philip Nel in his book *The Annotated Cat*:

The school edition did not sell as well as the trade edition. Because, according to Seuss, educators considered the book too subversive.

And the same thing again from [Donald Potter at blendphonics.org](#):

As Houghton Mifflin's Richard Gladstone, assigned to market *The Cat* to schools, recalls: "The reader was essentially a Houghton Mifflin project, but we never knew how many we sold. Thousands [of Random's trade edition] went into schools through jobbers ... Random was making more money from this than we were. [and] very

rarely in reports of Beginner Books was there any mention of Houghton Mifflin or of Bill Spalding.” Bennet Cerf had lent his author to Houghton Mifflin and then run away with the book.

So is Ms. Staley at Worthpoint lying, or is she just mistaken? We can't know, because we can't prove intent, but regardless of her intention, she is giving false information as advice, which shows incompetence if not intent to deceive. She isn't the only one. If you consult [firstedition.net](http://firstedition.net), which seems to be the premier site on the internet for Seuss first edition information, you wouldn't know the Houghton Mifflin edition even exists. All the information posted concerns only the Random House trade edition. Firstediton.net recommends a 2002 publication by Younger, Younger and Hirsh entitled *First Editions of Dr. Seuss Books*, and we must assume that book gives the same advice, pushing Random House first editions and ignoring Houghton Mifflin first editions. If recent books were honestly mentioning the Houghton Mifflin edition, its status wouldn't be so moribund.

We find the same bad advice at [justanswer.com](http://justanswer.com), where we discover someone asking an expert about a Houghton Mifflin book they have onhand. The expert “Michelle” tells her

The issue you have was distributed to every school library in the U.S. in significant numbers. The value of these books is \$20-\$30 USD. If it shows the usual ex-library markings and usual signs of wear of an ex-library book that value will drop depending upon the amount of wear. I am not sure why an ex-library/school book in excellent condition does not have a higher value or why it is not as collectible as the first trade edition of the book unless it is just sheer numbers in the amount of each that were first distributed.

That is curious, because it is just what Michelle Staley told her client, above, except that the value has dropped from \$50 to \$20. Is this the same Michelle? Why doesn't this expert give her last name? The wording here is also a clue, since it looks more like an outright lie. “The issue you have was distributed to every school library in the US in significant numbers.” That doesn't read like an error, it reads like a bold lie. The word “distributed” makes it sound like the government was dropping off sacks of these books for free, as some sort of public service. As we know, the book wasn't “distributed,” it was sold, and most schools didn't buy. Not only did “every school library in the US” *not* get “significant numbers” of this book, most schools didn't get any. If Michelle is just making an honest mistake here, she is certainly doing it with gusto.

We may begin to understand why this is happening if we consider several factors. One, Houghton Mifflin soon sold all interest in their Seuss books to Random House, as we have seen above. They then went bankrupt in 2001 and were sold to the French company Vivendi. So they haven't been around in a long time to keep booksellers honest. Two, the main Seuss site on the internet, [Seussville.com](http://Seussville.com), is owned by Random House. They would prefer you forget that Houghton Mifflin ever existed, especially in regard to their Seuss.

But the greatest reason the Houghton Mifflin edition has been buried by booksellers is that booksellers sell books. As we have seen, there are a lot more Random House editions that exist and a lot more that are on the market. You can see that immediately just by going to Ebay or Abebooks or any of the other big sellers. On any given day, you will find dozens of Random House first editions (today, there are 50 at Ebay alone). You will look hard to find one Houghton Mifflin edition.\* Since these are what booksellers have, this is what they will naturally push. Good Houghton Mifflin editions are so rare that booksellers almost never have any. So at some point, I suppose booksellers agreed to call the Random House edition the real first edition and to bury the Houghton Mifflin edition. If you think about it, you can see why they did this. Say they tell the truth and collectors discover that the Houghton Mifflin edition is not only far far rarer, but that it actually precedes the Random House edition. At that point,

the Houghton Mifflin edition price soars, and the Random House edition price plummets. Since Random editions far outnumber Houghton Mifflin editions, a huge amount of value in the market has just evaporated.

I happen to be both a collector and a seller, but I suppose I am a collector at heart. Therefore, what I most want is true information. Sellers mainly want money, but collectors mainly want the rarest books. Collectors know that the most expensive books are expensive because they are both good and rare. It is the rarity that you are really paying for. Therefore, if the Houghton Mifflin first editions are far rarer, they should be priced above the Random House editions. This would indicate a solid market based on solid information. As it is, we simply have a manipulated market, one based on false information.

The only thing that speaks in favor of the Random House edition is its dust jacket. Because dust jackets are fragile, the older ones are rare, and rarity drives up the price. Before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most books didn't have jackets, but starting in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a large part of the price of a rare book would be in its jacket. That is one of the first things I learned as a bookseller. If you price first editions of Steinbeck or Hemingway, for example, 9/10's of the value in the jacket. If you gave a smart bookseller a choice between a pile of first editions and a pile of first edition dust jackets, he would take the dust jackets every time. A good bookseller can always find a first edition to go in a jacket, but the reverse is not true.

We also have to include the fact that the Seuss books, being children's books, will be subject to a lot more rough handling. This makes the dust jackets even rarer. Dust jackets don't normally last too long in the hands of a child. For this reason, I think the problem is not that the Random House editions are overpriced. If they have nice dust jackets, they are very rare and should demand high prices. The problem is that the Houghton Mifflin editions are very underpriced. Booksellers don't need to suppress the prices of these books to protect their Random House editions. They need to tell the truth, which is that the Houghton Mifflin editions are far rarer. Since they are school editions, they have also been subjected to rough handling, which makes the clean copies even rarer. Those that have avoided library stamping would be even rarer. There is absolutely no reason the value of these books should be under \$50, and we must assume the only reason the value is that low is that the market has been manipulated. Collectors have believed the experts when the experts told them these books were printed by the truckloads and are a dime a dozen. It simply isn't true, and I have shown you the links proving it isn't true.

What about precedence? Did the Houghton Mifflin edition actually precede the Random House edition by a few weeks? The books themselves tell us the publications were simultaneous, but were they strictly simultaneous? "Simultaneous" could be read either loosely or strictly. We see from the quote above that Seuss himself thought the Houghton Mifflin edition was coming out first, and that the Random House edition was coming out "later." But that was six months before the release, and perhaps they changed the dates. Researching this online didn't yield a firm answer to this question. I only got a couple of hints, but these may simply be mistakes:

1 Jan 1957. "The Cat in the Hat" is an unusual publication venture by Houghton Mifflin and Random House. Houghton Mifflin asked Dr. Seuss to write a children's primer book using only 225 "new reader" vocabulary words. Random House kept the publication and trade rights while Houghton Mifflin kept the school rights.

That is from [Timetoast.com](http://Timetoast.com). If that date is correct, it would mean the school edition came out before the trade edition. We know the Random House trade edition wasn't released until March 12. This matches Seuss' own words, since he thought the school edition was coming out in January or February.

And many books are released on the first of the year, for obvious reasons.

Wikipedia also gives precedence to the school edition:

[March 1, \*Cat in the Hat\* first published in US.](#)

Wikipedia doesn't assign that to the school edition, but since it assigns March 12 to the trade edition, it is possible they are telling us something came out before the trade edition.

Without further evidence, I would assume Houghton Mifflin had demos printed by January 1, and that their salesmen were taking orders from schools in January and February. Whether the final Houghton Mifflin first version was delivered to any school before March 12, I can't say. I am sure the information exists, but I don't happen to have it. The only indication I have that orders were filled before March 12 is the form of the book. As soon as Houghton Mifflin saw the snazzier Random House version in bookstores, its designers immediately went to work upgrading their version, adding the decorated endpapers and changing the covers. It is therefore logical to assume that the more a Houghton Mifflin version differs from the Random House version, the earlier it is. I would say there is a high probability that the earliest Houghton Mifflin version came out in small numbers before the Random House release on March 12, and some schools may have seen these as early as February. It would appear that there are some very undecorated copies of the Houghton Mifflin edition floating around, and these may even be sales demos used by the traveling salesmen. They would be very valuable if that is true. With other books, these things are known, even when the titles are far older than *The Cat in the Hat*. I have a feeling someone has done this research, but it has been buried along with everything else to do with the Houghton Mifflin version. If you can add any light on this, I encourage you to drop me an email.

In the meantime, I wouldn't sell any early Houghton Mifflin version to Michelle Staley or any other dealer for \$50. Assuming the market for books in general comes back, and that the facts get sorted out here, the rarest Houghton Mifflin versions will be worth many thousands.

\*And many of the books sold as Houghton Mifflin editions are really Random House editions that the seller has mistaken for Houghton Mifflin, due to the confusing copyright wording.