SOFTWARE & TECH

# Dr Seuss The Seven Lady Godivas

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Dr. Seuss is a name synonymous with whimsical rhymes, imaginative creatures, and beloved children's classics like *The Cat in the Hat* and *Green Eggs and Ham*. Yet, tucked away in the lesser-known corners of his bibliography lies a fascinating anomaly: a risqué, adult-oriented book titled **Dr Seuss The Seven Lady Godivas**. Published in 1939, this peculiar work was Theodor Geisel's first foray into writing for grown-ups, and it stands as one of the most intriguing, misunderstood, and collectible items in his entire oeuvre. While it did not achieve the commercial success of his later children's books, it offers a unique window into Geisel's early artistic ambitions, his playful relationship with historical legends, and his willingness to subvert expectations. In this article, we will explore the origin, story, themes, and enduring legacy of **Dr Seuss The Seven Lady Godivas**, uncovering why this curious book remains a subject of fascination for collectors, literary historians, and Dr. Seuss enthusiasts alike.

## The Creation of an Unlikely Classic

Before he became the world-famous "Dr. Seuss," Theodor Geisel was a rising illustrator and advertising artist. In the late 1930s, flush with some success from his early children's book *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street* (1937), Geisel decided to flex his creative muscles in a completely different direction. He conceived a book that would be explicitly adult in tone—a cheeky retelling of the Lady Godiva legend, reimagined with a comedic twist. The result was **Dr Seuss The Seven Lady Godivas**, a title that promised both scandal and satire.

Geisel's approach was audacious: instead of one Lady Godiva, he created seven sisters, each a distinct character and each embodying a different virtue. These sisters, living in medieval Coventry, are deeply concerned about the high taxes imposed by their father, Lord Godiva. When he dies, they make a dramatic vow: they will ride naked through the streets of Coventry to shame the tax-collecting men into lowering the levies. However, there is a catch—they must first discover the "secret of the horse." This cryptic requirement sends each sister on a quest that becomes the central narrative engine of the book.

The book was published in 1939 by Random House, but it flopped almost immediately. The public, accustomed to whimsical children's tales, was not ready for a Dr. Seuss book filled with nudity (albeit tastefully covered by flowing hair) and adult wordplay. Geisel himself later expressed embarrassment about the book and refused to allow it to be reprinted for many decades. For years, it was a rare and expensive collector's item, sought after by those who knew of its existence.

## Unraveling the Plot: The Godiva Sisters and the Seven Positions

To understand **Dr Seuss The Seven Lady Godivas**, one must delve into its delightfully absurd plot. The story opens with the seven Godiva sisters—Patience, Grace, Mercy, Charity, Peace, Hope, and Prudence—each possessing a distinct personality. Their father, Lord Godiva, has been taxing the townsfolk heavily. After his death, the sisters decide to complete his unfinished mission: to free Coventry from oppressive taxes. They

conclude that the most dramatic statement would be to ride nude through the town, just as the legendary Lady Godiva did, but with a twist—they vow to ride while holding their father's secret, a riddle about horses that the men of Coventry must learn.

The sisters soon realize that they cannot simply ride naked; they need to understand the true nature of the horse. Thus begins a series of comedic episodes where each sister attempts to "find" the horse in a different way. For example, one sister tries to become a horse, another tries to capture a horse, and so on. The humor is characteristically Seussian: full of puns, alliteration, and absurd logic. Ultimately, the sisters discover that the secret of the horse is the "Seven Positions of the Horse," a satirical reference to medieval equestrian lore. Once they understand this, they ride into Coventry, shocking the townspeople and eventually winning a reduction in taxes.

The book's climax is a visual and verbal punchline: the sisters, now enlightened, ride naked (drawn with strategic hair coverage), and the men are so taken aback that they agree to lower the taxes. The message is a mix of feminist audacity and Seussian whimsy—women using wit and courage to change social injustices, albeit in a very unconventional way.

## Themes and Controversy: Nudity, Respectability, and Seussian Humor

Perhaps the most talked-about aspect of **Dr Seuss The Seven Lady Godivas** is its depiction of nudity. For a book by the beloved Dr. Seuss, this was shocking to many readers. Yet Geisel handled it with the same innocent mischief he applied to all his work. The sisters are never explicit; their bodies are covered by long, flowing hair, strategically placed horses, or objects. The nudity is more suggested than shown, making the book a study in suggestion rather than explicitness. Still, in 1939, a "dirty" Dr. Seuss book was a commercial liability. The book's failure may have been partly due to this controversy, but also because it was simply too strange for a mainstream audience.

Another key theme is the subversion of the classic Lady Godiva story. In the traditional legend, Lady Godiva rides alone to protest taxes, and the only person who peeks is Peeping Tom. Geisel turns this into a group effort, giving each sister agency and a specific role. The book can be read as a proto-feminist text—women taking direct action using their bodies and intellect. Of course, Geisel's playful tone prevents it from being preachy. Instead, the work feels like a silly, irreverent parody of medieval romance and morality tales.

The rhymes and illustrations are unmistakably Seussian. The sisters are drawn with exaggerated features—long noses, wide eyes, and elegant postures. The horses are equally whimsical, with intricate patterns and expressive faces. The language, too, is pure Geisel: "They rode through the streets in a glorious way / With never a blush or a word to say." The rhythm and rhyme are polished, reminiscent of his later classics but with an adult vocabulary and innuendo.

## Why Did It Fail? A Commercial Post-Mortem

There are several reasons why **Dr Seuss The Seven Lady Godivas** was a commercial disaster. First, it was a departure from what readers expected from the author of *Mulberry Street*. That book had been a colorful, clean children's hit. An adult book with nudity confused his brand identity. Second, the timing was poor—the Great Depression was still lingering, and World War II was on the horizon. Expensive, lavish picture books for adults were a luxury few could afford. Third, the subject matter was too risqué for general bookstores; many refused to stock it. Finally, Geisel himself did not promote it aggressively, perhaps sensing its awkwardness.

As a result, the book went out of print quickly. Only 2,500 copies were printed in the first edition, and many were remaindered or destroyed. For decades, the book became a legend among collectors, with pristine copies fetching thousands of dollars. It was not until 1987, late in Geisel's life, that he allowed a limited reprint, but even then, he was reluctant. The book never became a mainstream success, but its rarity made it a holy grail

for Dr. Seuss collectors.

## The Illustrations: A Showcase of Seussian Art

One cannot discuss **Dr Seuss The Seven Lady Godivas** without appreciating its artwork. Geisel illustrated the book in his signature style—black ink with occasional color plates. The lines are fluid, the characters dynamic, and the composition often theatrical. The Godiva sisters are drawn with distinctive hairstyles and dresses (when they are dressed), and their nudity is handled with masterful discretion. For example, in one illustration, a sister's back is to the viewer, and her hair cascades down to cover everything below her shoulders. In another, a horse's mane strategically obscures. The effect is more playful than pornographic, a fact that likely confused contemporaneous critics.

The book also features detailed medieval-themed borders, intricate patterns, and Seussian imaginary creatures that populate the margins. The typography is large and expressive, often bending and curving to match the illustrations. These design elements make the book a visual feast, even if the narrative is thin. For art lovers, **Dr Seuss The Seven Lady Godivas** is a brilliant example of how Geisel could adapt his style to a more mature subject without losing his charm.

## Collectibility and Legacy

Over the decades, **Dr Seuss The Seven Lady Godivas** has become one of the most sought-after rare books in the world. First editions in good condition are valued at tens of thousands of dollars. A signed copy can go for even more. The book's scarcity is part of its allure, but so is its position as a cultural oddity—a "dirty" book by the man who wrote *Hop on Pop*. It has been the subject of scholarly articles, literary debates, and fan conspiracy theories. Some see it as a hidden gem; others view it as a failed experiment that reveals Geisel's broader creative struggles.

In recent years, the book has gained a new audience through digital reproductions and limited print runs. A 1997 reprint by HarperCollins brought it back into print, but even those copies are now becoming collectible. For contemporary readers, the book offers a fascinating counterpoint to the sanitized, family-friendly image of Dr. Seuss. It reminds us that Geisel was a complex artist who never stopped experimenting, even when the market said no.

## Comparing to Other Seuss Works

How does **Dr Seuss The Seven Lady Godivas** fit into Geisel's larger body of work? It is one of only two adult books


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