

# Valuing Life in *Horton Hears A Who*

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Published in 1954, almost a decade after World War II, *Horton Hears a Who!* was written in response to what Dr. Seuss had seen and experienced during that war. Many vicious leaders, such as Hitler and Mussolini, had persecuted and even killed those who looked different or had different religious beliefs. For example, the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Jews were forced to live in concentration camps, where they dealt with unsanitary conditions, gas chambers, illnesses, and forced labor. Dr. Seuss wrote this story to criticize the actions of these powerful and ruthless dictators, who did not value the lives of those who were different from them.

The book tells the story of an elephant named Horton, who lives in the Jungle of Nool. While lounging in a pool, Horton hears noises coming from a dust speck. Horton realizes that the noises are actually voices that belong to people who reside on the speck. One of the voices belongs to a Mayor, who informs Horton that a town called Whoville resides on the dust speck. The Mayor and Horton quickly become friends, and the Mayor requests that Horton protect the Whos from harm. Protecting this town proves to be difficult, and Horton endures ridicule from the other inhabitants of the Jungle, who do not believe that life actually exists on the speck because they are unable to hear them. However, Horton is able to hear the voices because of his large ears that give him a heightened sense of hearing. The animals continuously mock him and threaten to dispose of the dust speck, but Horton continues to protect the Whos from danger. Eventually, the Whos succeed in making enough noise to prove their existence, and their lives are spared.

The main theme of the book is the importance of valuing life, and the idea of inclusion, no matter what differences may exist. On various occasions, the animals of the Jungle of Nool attempt to take the speck of dust away from Horton and dump it into "beezle-nut juice." This is because the other animals of the jungle had immediately assumed that Horton was out of his mind, simply because they lacked the ability to hear the Whos. They did not even consider the possibility that a community of tiny inhabitants could reside on the dust speck. The animals of the Jungle of Nool can be seen as a metaphor for the ruthless leaders of World War II; the "beezle-nut juice" was also a metaphor for the poison gas used to kill many during that time. Additionally, the Wickersham Brothers imprisoning Horton allude to the concentration camps many were forced to live in.

Dr. Seuss repeats the refrain "a person's a person, no matter how small" throughout the story, to enhance his theme of inclusiveness. The rhyme scheme of the story, *aabbccdd*, also helps to enhance the story's message, by creating rhythm. This rhythm is most apparent when Horton pleads with the Whos to make more noise, as clearly shown in the following lines (*italics added for emphasis*):

“And you very small persons will not have to <i>die</i>	(a)
if you make ourselves heard! So come on, now, and <i>TRY!</i> ”	(a)
The mayor grabbed a tom-tom. He started to <i>smack it.</i>	(b)
And, all over Who-ville, they whooped up a <i>racket.</i>	(b)
They rattled tin kettles! They beat on brass <i>pans,</i>	(c)
on garbage pail tops and old cranberry <i>cans!</i>	(c)
They blew on bazookas and blasted great <i>toots</i>	(d)
on clarinets, oompahs and boom-pahs and <i>flutes!</i> ”	(d)

In this section, the Who must make enough noise to prove their existence, or they will be burned alive. The rhyme structure helps to create momentum within the story, emphasizing the dire situation that the Whos were in.

This story was written sixty-six years ago, but it is still applicable today. Indeed, although this book is intended for children, it contains many underlying themes that highlight and criticize the horrors that have occurred in history. The lesson learned from *Horton Hears a Who!* is universal, as it highlights an issue that we still face. Currently, many are still looked down upon because of their skin color, background, or nationality. Mass shootings have occurred in multiple establishments, because the shooter disagreed with the beliefs of the people harmed.

Additionally, there was a time in my life when I shared the same sentiments as Horton. In elementary school, once, a new student entered my class. She had arrived from a foreign country, and did not dress the same way that I and my classmates did. She also had trouble speaking English, doing so with a heavy accent. These differences caused my classmates to alienate this student, who was often left alone and became withdrawn. I took the initiative to speak to and befriend her, trying to include her in all the activities that we did in class, and on the playground. Eventually, my classmates realized that the new student was extremely talented, and a joy to be around. They began to include her in more activities, and she became one of my best friends.

Dr. Seuss shows us that society has not taken the steps to create a more inclusive society. While intended for children, the message found in *Horton Hears a Who* is beneficial for all ages. At the end of the book, when the animals of Nool are finally convinced of the presence of life on the speck, they immediately realize the importance of protecting the Whos. Even the Kangaroo, the book’s main antagonist, states: “And, from now on, you know what I’m planning to do?... From now on, I’m going to protect them with you!” Horton’s perseverance not only spares the lives of the Whos, but also promotes unity amongst the animals of the Jungle. He shows that all forms of life are important, “no matter how small.”

Dr. Seuss. *Horton Hears A Who!* 1954. Random House, 2008.