

*Keedle, the Great and All You've Ever Wanted to Know About Fascism.* By Deirdre and William Conselman, Jr. Illustrated by Fred L. Fox. Afterword by Jack Zipes. Little Mole and Honey Bear, 2020.

*Yussuf the Ostrich.* By Emery Kelen. Afterword by Jack Zipes. Little Mole and Honey Bear, 2020.

Reviewed by Jan Susina

"Nazis, I hate these guys." This memorable line spoken by Harrison Ford as Indiana Jones in Steven Spielberg's *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989) neatly summarizes the message of these two picture books. They are part of the series edited by Jack Zipes that puts into print neglected children's fairy tales with a political message.

Given the rise of Fascism in Europe and the United States in recent years, there has been an increased interest in adult and children's books published in the 1930s and 1940s. Consider the renewed popularity in Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here* (1935) after the 2016 election of Donald Trump as President of the United States. *Keedle*, originally published in 1940, and *Yussuf the Ostrich*, originally published in 1943, fit into this publishing trend. Either of these picture books would fit comfortably with the children's material reprinted in *Tales for Little Rebels: A Collection of Radical Children's Literature* (2008) edited by Julia L. Mickenberg and Philip Nel; their anthology includes selections from well-known children's authors, including Dr. Seuss, Munro Leaf, Carl Sandburg, and Langston Hughes.

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These reprinted picture books remind readers that children's books have always been political, and that this did not begin with contemporary books, such as Michael Ian Black's *A Child's First Book of Trump* (2016). It is also true that children's books have always had the dual audience of children and adults. Many parodies of well-known children's picture books are intended primarily for adults, such as Faye Kanouse's *If You Give a Pig the White House* (2019) or John Lithgow's *Trumpty Dumpty Wanted a Crown* (2020). There are also borderline books: Dr. Seuss's *Marvin K. Mooney Will You Please Go Now!* (1972) took on a political meaning in 1976, when Seuss crossed out the name of his protagonist and inserted the name of Richard Nixon in a copy of the picture book. More recently, readers following Dr. Seuss's modification can easily update and insert Donald Trump's name for Seuss's orange-colored protagonist. Sadly, when it comes to political children's books, it seems that everything old is new again.

*Yussuf the Ostrich* was written and illustrated by Emery Kelen, a self-described "violent pacifist" who served in World War I. After the war, he teamed with Alois Derso, and as Derso & Kelen they became famous for their satirical caricatures of politicians. With the rise of Nazism, they fled to the United States in 1938, and continued to publish political illustrations for *Esquire*, *Fortune*, and *The New York Times Magazine*. Kelen branched out on his own and produced two children's books, *Yussuf the Ostrich* and *Dr. Owl* (1945), as well as *Mr. Nonsense: A Life of Edward Lear*

(1973) while working at the Public Information Office for the United Nations.

Yussuf, unlike other ostriches in North Africa, does not hide his head in the sand about the dangers of the invading Nazi army. After attending school with his child owner, the clever Yussuf volunteers to be a messenger for the US Signal Corps. Captured by the Nazis, Yussuf faces execution, but is saved by the general's pet dachshunds, who secretly hate the Nazis and help him escape. Returning with plans of an attack, Yussuf saves the US Army and becomes a hero. Kelen's use of animals fighting against the Nazis is reminiscent of the propaganda films produced by the Walt Disney studios during World War II.

*Keedle* was written by the son and daughter of William Conselman, who wrote the popular comic strip *Ella Cinder* (1925–1961), and illustrated by Fred Fox, who illustrated the strip. *Keedle* is a cartoon verse of Adolf Hitler, who hates laughter more than anything. He grows a mustache, writes *Keedle's Kampf*, and rises to power realizing people are like sheep. He threatens world peace but is defeated when people begin to make fun and laugh at him. If it were only so easy.

*Keedle* brings to mind Tony Kushner's *Brundibar*, illustrated by Maurice Sendak (2003), a picture book based on Hans Krása's opera that was performed by children in the Terezin concentration camp. In *Brundibar*, the bully, who is also a cartoon figure of Hitler, is run out of town by the singing of children. Significantly *Brundibar* does not conclude with the defeat of Brundibar, but with a postcard that

he sends that warns that, "Bullies don't give up completely. One departs, the next appears, and we shall meet again, my dears!" The republication of *Yussuf the Ostrich* and *Keedle* confirms this timely warning of the return of political bullies.

### **Work Cited**

Kusher, Tony. *Brundibar*. Illustrated by Maurice Sendak. Hyperion, 2003.

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