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REDE BRASILEIRA
DIREITO E LITERATURA

LAW AND *GREEN EGGS AND HAM*¹

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ABSTRACT: This paper uses *Green Eggs and Ham*, the fourth best-selling children’s book of all time, as a case study to argue that non-didactic children’s literature is a fundamental source of law. It frames such literature as constitutive of internal behavioural rules in the child-reader and these rules as central to guiding human behaviour. It argues that the rules of behaviour which can be synthesised from non-didactic literature meet all of the main characteristics of law and are more fundamental than traditional sources of law. It, finally, offers two examples of behavioural rules which can be synthesised from *Green Eggs and Ham*, one regarding the importance of persistence and the other regarding the importance of open-mindedness.

KEYWORDS: Dr. Seuss; *Green Eggs and Ham*; children’s literature; didacticism; persistence.

1 INTRODUCTION

This paper uses *Green Eggs and Ham* as a case study to frame non-didactic children’s literature as a fundamental source of law (Seuss, 1998). *Green Eggs and Ham* is Theodor Seuss Geisel (Dr. Seuss)’ best-selling book and the fourth best-selling children’s book of all time (Ahuvia,

¹ This research was in part supported by a grant from Canada’s Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

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2011)³. The book was first published in 1960 and has sold more than eight million copies (Roback, 2001; Hannabuss, 2007). This paper builds upon the work of other scholars of the law and literature movement and defends the movement's relevance by arguing not that law merely echoes in children's literature but rather that children's literature is a fundamental source of law.

Section I explores *Green Eggs and Ham* and its main characteristic, non-didacticism. Section II delves into the heart of the argument and argues that the rules of behaviour that can be synthesised from non-didactic works such as *Green Eggs and Ham* are very *legal* in nature, meeting the main characteristics of law. Sections III and IV offer specific examples of behavioural rules which can be synthesised from *Green Eggs and Ham* by the child-reader⁴: Section III addresses the importance of open-mindedness, and Section IV explores the importance of persistence. The sections also explore how the two concepts – open-mindedness and persistence – are more broadly foundational to legal agency⁵ and legal systems.

2 GREEN EGGS AND HAM AND NON-DIDACTICISM

This section explores non-didacticism as the main characteristic of *Green Eggs and Ham*. It also explores the effects of the book's non-didacticism on its relationship to the child-reader.

In *Green Eggs and Ham*, the author, Dr. Seuss, uses repetition: the book only contains fifty different words (Kopf, 2015). Each page bears an illustration, and the illustrations are the author's (Hannabuss, 2007). The plot of *Green Eggs and Ham* is quite simple. Sam-I-am, the protagonist, erupts into the story while an unnamed creature, the antagonist, is sat and

³ Seuss was born in 1904 and died in 1991. Although Seuss used the prefix doctor, he did not hold a doctoral degree.

⁴ I use the word child-reader throughout this paper to refer to the child in her relationship to the book which I study. The word helps qualify my conclusions, whose applicability may be limited beyond their context.

⁵ I define legal agency as the behaviour of various actors who interact with legal systems.

reading. The unnamed creature, visibly frustrated, expresses their dislike for Sam-I-am. The latter goes on to offer the unnamed creature green eggs and ham on a tray, an offer which the unnamed creature declines. The unnamed creature states that they do not like green eggs and ham. Throughout the book, Sam-I-am repeatedly offers the unnamed creature green eggs and ham, each time in a different context (in a house, with a mouse, in a box, with a fox). Each time, the creature refuses. The unnamed creature eventually capitulates and accepts to try green eggs and ham, provided that Sam-I-am stops his requests. The unnamed creature likes green eggs and ham and goes on to thank Sam-I-am.

Green Eggs and Ham differs from other major works of children's literature by its non-didacticism. Most children's books arguably seek to impart a lesson upon their reader. Didacticism (or lack thereof) may, therefore, seem to be a difference in form, one which is easily overlooked. This difference is, however, not merely one of form. The learning process and, thereby, the child-reader's relationship to the book is fundamentally different with non-didactic literature. A prime example of didactic literature is Aesop's fable *The Hare and the Tortoise*, which reads as follows:

A Hare one day ridiculed the short feet and slow pace of the Tortoise, who replied, laughing: "Though you be swift as the wind, I will beat you in a race." The Hare, believing her assertion to be simply impossible, assented to the proposal; and they agreed that the Fox should choose the course and fix the goal. On the day appointed for the race the two started together. The Tortoise never for a moment stopped, but went on with a slow but steady pace straight to the end of the course. The Hare, lying down by the wayside, fell fast asleep. At last waking up, and moving as fast as he could, he saw the Tortoise had reached the goal, and was comfortably dozing after her fatigue.

Slow but steady wins the race (Aesop, 1998, p. 198).

The distinctive aspect is, of course, the last sentence of the fable, which formulates its moral. The child-reader is presented with the story's purpose: she need not find it on her own. This approach fails to encourage

critical thinking. It is, further, anchored in much broader socio-legal attitudes and structures. Didactic literature introduces the child to a framework where rules are formulated by *others* and where learning is didactic rather than experiential. The child's relationship to didactic literature is closer to her relationship to a teacher or parent than it is to her relationship to her own experiences. Parents and teachers issue edicts defined by a combination of positivity and authority. Their rules are clear, and disobedience is sanctioned. Critical thinking is neither necessary nor rewarded. Didactic literature may not be as coercive (or authoritative) as parents and teachers, but it is just as positive. This framework of positivity and authority is central to our society and is underlain by assumptions about how human beings best function, as individuals and as groups. Our education system is, for example, similarly more didactic than experiential (Johnes, 2006; Hogan, 2006). The framework is, further, not limited to children: it exists, albeit differently, throughout one's life. Parents and teachers eventually make way to governments and head offices⁶. We are perpetually guided by *others*, who lay down rules *for us*, with varying degrees of authority and legitimacy.

The book's non-didacticism defines its relationship to the child-reader. The child-reader approaches a non-didactic book more open-minded, with a less rigid and distrustful attitude (Repp, 2012). *No one, after all, enjoys being instructed – whether about what to do or what to conclude* (Harburg *et al.*, 1979; Baumlin & Weaver, 2000). We see a dual effect: it may, first, be harder to draw a conclusion of general applicability from the story, as such a conclusion needs to be drawn independently; yet, second, the conclusion, once drawn, is likelier to be accepted, as it is independently drawn (Repp, 2012, p. 271). As didacticism yields close-mindedness, the latter effect arguably outweighs the former.

⁶ On abstract embodiments of authority, see Kukathas (2014).

The next section further addresses the child-reader's drawing of conclusions and delves into the heart of my argument by exploring the nature of these conclusions and their normativity.

3 RULE-MAKING

I explored above how didactic works convey, like other authority figures such as parents and teachers, conclusions (rules) which are positive and authoritative. These rules closely match the definition of *law*. While law has been defined in many ways, with varying degrees of breadth, the foundational elements of the definition are widely accepted (Ratnapala, 2009, p. 58; Bentham, 1970, p. 1; Hart, 2012, p. 91-95). A law is a (mandatory) *rule* – a (1) positive and (2) authoritative statement – of conduct – (3) designed to guide behaviour. The associated sanction and the fact that the rule is often laid down by the state are simply elements which help lend a law its authoritativeness. The closest match to this definition is, of course, a law as conventionally pictured, a state-emanating, state-sanctioned, rule of conduct. Most individuals, from an early age, would know that such a rule *outlaws* murder, the intentional killing of another. This rule is found across legal systems and traditions. The rules laid down by parents and teachers, to which the rules found in didactic works are similar, closely match the same characteristics: positive, authoritative, and behavioural – even if most would consider them non-canonical. These rules are, therefore, quite *legal*⁷.

How do these rules, which seemingly fit a traditional definition of law, compare to the non-didactic rules which the child draws from her reading of books such as *Green Eggs and Ham*? These latter rules are just as, if not more, *legal* than the positive and authoritative statements which

⁷ This phrasing is borrowed from Desmond Manderson, who mentioned in passing during an interview that he finds children's literature "very legal, very jurisprudential." See Sherwin (2012, 5m:58s).

can be found in didactic works. To support this counterintuitive conclusion, I resort to the definition, used above, of a law as an authoritative and positive rule of behaviour. When the child-reader reads *Green Eggs and Ham*, she is presented with a narrative from which she can draw conclusions. This process is quite similar to what we might call *learning by experience*. Our experiences throughout our lives cause us to draw conclusions about our behaviour. Through induction, we formulate rules of general applicability, which later guide our behaviour (Pankhurst, 2010; Hardie, 1975). The child who touches fire and gets burnt learns that touching fire causes pain. Through successive such events – or an especially painful one – the child formulates a rule: *I should not touch fire (or I will experience pain)*. The rule is formulated, and it guides the child's future behaviour. When faced with fire, the child chooses to refrain from touching it. The narrative in *Green Eggs and Ham* offers an opportunity for children to learn as they would from their own experience. Unlike a didactic experience, where the child is presented with a rule, *Green Eggs and Ham* presents the child with the building blocks from which a rule is synthesised: experiences – albeit fictional ones⁸.

The rules of behaviour which are synthesised from experience or imitation (of others' experiences) are as positive as the rules of behaviour found in didactic works and settings: they take the form of clear, articulated statements such as the rule mentioned in the previous paragraph, *I should not touch fire (or I will experience pain)*. They meet two of the characteristics of law. Whether they could be considered law would depend on how they meet the third characteristic: authoritativeness. To inquire into this point is to ask fundamental questions about what motivates human behaviour. Didactic statements from traditional and less traditional, authoritative sources (such as parents or governments) are generally authoritative through brute force:

⁸ The analogy between experiential and imitative learning has been confirmed by psychologists. See Offerman & Sonnemans (1998) and Williamson *et al.* (2010).

failing to abide by them causes pain, for instance through a loss of one's freedom or financial resources. In section I, I stated:

The book's non-didacticism has a dual effect: it may, first, be harder to draw a conclusion of general applicability from the story, as such conclusion needs to be drawn independently; yet, second, the conclusion, once drawn, is likelier to be accepted, as it is independently drawn. As didacticism yields close-mindedness, the latter effect arguably outweighs the former.

Authoritativeness makes a rule a rule. An unauthoritative rule of behaviour will not guide behaviour and could, therefore, hardly be called a rule. Yet that is not to say that brute force is the primary or most effective driver of human behaviour. The authoritativeness of a rule derives not from its sanction but from its internalisation.⁹ Human beings – or, at least, the majority of human beings – do not refrain from murdering fellow human beings to avoid being put in jail. They do so because they have internalised the rule prohibiting murder and accepted its legitimacy (i.e. its consistency with their personal values). The effect of so-called internal controls on human behaviour has been studied by sociologists. In sociology, control theory addresses how internal and external controls curb an individual's tendency to deviate. Walter C. Reckless was a pioneer in studying the effect of internal controls on crime. Reckless concluded that the behaviour of non-delinquent youth is driven by self-perception rather than external controls. He states:

"Insulation" against delinquency on the part of [non-delinquent] boys may be viewed as an ongoing process reflecting an internalization of non-delinquent values and conformity to the expectations of significant others. Whether the subjects, now largely unreceptive to delinquent norms of conduct, will continue to remain "good" in the future remains problematic. The answer to this question, it is felt, will depend on their ability to

⁹ I am referring here to an external rule of behaviour, such as a statute. A rule of behaviour synthesised from children's literature is formulated internally and need not be "internalised."

maintain their present self-images in the face of mounting situational pressures (Reckless *et al.*, 1956, p. 746)¹⁰.

Non-delinquent individuals, who make up a majority of the population, likely refrain from engaging in delinquent behaviour primarily because they identify as law-abiding or because they have internalised certain rules of behaviour, which they have found to be consistent with their values (and, thereby, identity). Engaging in delinquent behaviour – breaking the rules – would lead to internal conflict and a sense of loss of their identity. It would also lead to social opprobrium, to an inability to engage with significant others who share the same value system and a similar identity.

The existence of a formal legal system with external enforcement mechanisms is, therefore, arguably of relatively minimal relevance. The existence of a formal rule of behaviour within such a legal system is, similarly, of minimal effect in guiding behaviour unless the rule is or has been internalised by non-delinquent individuals. If behavioural control is primarily internal, there is no reason to differentiate between internal rules which also happen to be external rules and other internal rules. The example of the internal rule of behaviour against committing murder is just as likely to compel individual behaviour as another internal rule which is not part of the formal legal system, a rule such as the one explored in the previous paragraph: *I should not touch fire (or I will experience pain)*. The rules be may be as authoritative to the individual, or either may be most authoritative. We can, therefore, conclude that the rules of behaviour synthesised from books such as *Green Eggs and Ham* are as *legal* as the didactic rules found elsewhere. They equally meet the

¹⁰ See also Reckless *et al.* (1957), which concludes that non-delinquent youth in high delinquency areas are similarly “insulated” from engaging in delinquent behaviour, and Reckless (1937).

three characteristics of a law as a positive and authoritative rule of behaviour.¹¹

While the potential authoritativeness of both types of rules may be the same, the child is more likely to be driven by rules synthesised from non-didactic materials. As the child consumes non-didactic materials more open-mindedly, she is likelier to synthesise rules from these materials than to internalise didactic rules from other sources. Most internal behavioural rules are, therefore, likely to arise from non-didactic sources or experience.

This section has argued that the rules of behaviour which can be synthesised from *Green Eggs and Ham* meet the main characteristics of laws. The next sections provide specific examples of the rules of behaviour which can be synthesised from the narrative of *Green Eggs and Ham*. Section III considers the importance of open-mindedness, and Section IV addresses the importance of persistence. While the resulting rules of behaviour are intrinsically *legal*, the sections also address how their related concepts (open-mindedness and persistence) are more broadly foundational to legal agency and legal systems.

4 OPEN-MINDEDNESS

The most obvious takeaway from the plot of *Green Eggs and Ham* regards the importance of trying new things. The dish which Sam-I-am offers the unnamed creature is green eggs and ham. It is a dish which is unknown to the child-reader, as it is to the unnamed creature. We know that the dish was initially unknown to the creature, as the creature ultimately accepts to try the dish and enjoys the experience. The plot comes to its climax as the unnamed creature, visibly exhausted, states: “Sam! If you will let me be, I will try them. You will see” (Seuss, 1998, p. 54). At the end of the book and as a result of having eaten green eggs and ham, the creature thanks Sam-I-am. Both hug and smile – hinting at a

¹¹ While this position matches the definitional characteristics of law set forth in this section, it is not supported by the majority of legal positivists cited above (Ratnapala, 2009, p. 58; Bentham, 1970, p. 1; Hart, 2012, p. 91-95).

future relationship. The creature states: “Sam! I like green eggs and ham. [...] I do so like green eggs and ham! Thank you! Thank you, Sam-I-am” (Seuss, 1998, p. 59-62). The book teaches the child-reader that trying new things is important, most notably as one cannot have a fully formed opinion about something they have not tried. The child-reader is likely to formulate a rule of behaviour such as *I must try new things, for I cannot know their nature before I have done so*.

A willingness to try new things is synonymous with open-mindedness. Open-mindedness is crucial to the creation and stability of legal systems. Stable legal systems are built through inclusion and engagement – through input and participation of the governed. They involve a broad range of groups in their creation and derive their stability from their legitimacy to the governed (Fagan, 2008; Cheng, 2018).

A lack of open-mindedness is, conversely, detrimental to the stability of legal systems. Legal policies which disproportionately affect certain minority or marginalised groups tend to rely on mistaken assumptions about others and on irrational fears of otherness. Political commentator Matthew Norman states, “People do not need lessons in fearing and hating. For whatever ancient survivalist reasons, we are naturally suspicious of otherness, and only with luck learn either to suppress or master it before the fear and hate follow” (Norman, 2017)¹². This point is supported by academic research (Hartelius, 2015; Lianos, 2013). Stigmatising legal policies are a result of a fear of otherness which can only exist without open-mindedness and engagement.

This section has given the example of the importance of open-mindedness as a rule of behaviour which can be synthesised from the narrative of *Green Eggs and Ham*. The next section addresses a second such rule of behaviour, one regarding the importance of persistence.

¹² See also Khrebtan-Hörhager & Avant-Mier (2017).

5 PERSISTENCE

In *Green Eggs and Ham*, open-mindedness is inextricably linked to persistence. The unnamed creature only accepts to consume green eggs and ham after significant persistence from Sam-I-am. The entirety of the book portrays Sam-I-am's persistence. Sam-I-am repeatedly offers the unnamed creature green eggs and ham, under varying sets of circumstances portrayed in the illustrations – in a house (Seuss, 1998, p. 19), with a mouse (Seuss, 1998, p. 19), in a box (Seuss, 1998, p. 22), with a fox (Seuss, 1998, p. 22). The first fifty pages of the book (of sixty total pages) set out these various circumstances. As mentioned in the previous section, the plot comes to its climax as the unnamed creature accepts to try the dish, stating, “Sam! If you will let me be, I will try them. You will see” (Seuss, 1998, p. 54). The creature eventually thanks Sam-I-am, stating, “Sam! I like green eggs and ham. [...] I do so like green eggs and ham! Thank you! Thank you, Sam-I-am” (Seuss, 1998, p. 59-62). The child-reader is invited to conclude that persistence can yield favourable results – formulating a rule such as *I should be persistent*.

At first sight, the *type* of persistence depicted in the book may not seem to be the type of persistence which children should be encouraged to learn about or engage in. Sam-I-am's persistence appears to be non-dialectic.¹³ Throughout the book, Sam-I-am never engages in a true discussion with the unnamed creature. He repeatedly offers the same dish, in different sets of surrounding circumstances. One could argue that the only valuable type of persistence is persistence in attempting to convince the other through active dialogue and, therefore, listening. The type of persistence depicted in *Green Eggs and Ham* is nonetheless highly valuable.

This persistence is foundational to legal agency and legal systems. It is at the root of many social movements which have defined our culture and society. The book depicts persistence in the face of adversity. When

¹³ Many scholars and business leaders have argued that the key to convincing others lies in listening. See Bregman (2015); Corazzini *et al.* (2012) and Conger (1998).

contextualised by the concept explored in the previous section, open-mindedness, non-dialectic persistence is both justifiable and suitable. *When one is not being listened to, they must persist, rather than adapt.* The unnamed creature's ultimate decision to try the dish suggests not only that open-mindedness is a virtue (as explored in the previous section) but also that they were not listening to Sam-I-am throughout the discussion. Discussion is, arguably, unproductive when one is not being listened to. The other party cannot engage in a productive discussion to yield mutual understanding or agreement before actively listening to the first party. The relevance of this type of persistence to social movements is echoed in the following short essay, written anonymously by a *Black Lives Matter* activist. *Black Lives Matter* is a social movement which was constituted following several racially-charged incidents of police violence against African-American citizens in the United States (Black Lives Matter, 2020). I am compelled to reproduce it in full. To be faithful to the author's voice (and its intrinsic value and relevance), I do not adorn the essay with grammatical or syntactical corrections, or with "sic" mentions. The essay, titled "Stop Talking And Listen To What Oppressed People Have To Say: Why Your Opinion Doesn't Matter," reads as follows:

Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge, Louisiana and Philando Castille in Falcon Heights, Minnesota were both black men killed by police officers this past week. Neither of them were acting aggressively or giving the officers any reason to think they were dangerous. They would not have been treated the same if they were white. This is not the first time something like this has happened, and I doubt it will be the last.

As these stories were unfolding, there seemed to be a "debate" about them on social media. I use the word debate loosely because I don't think there's anything to debate, but some people would disagree. I noticed that despite black people saying how this was a pattern of institutionalized racism, and how sad and angry they were that this was happening again, some white people were not listening. They kept trying to defend the officers who shot these men, or saying that black people should really be focused on black on black crime, or saying that all lives matter, or saying that not all cops are like this. I know that maybe nothing will ever change these people's minds or make them think any other way. Many times, these people think they are above black people and that their voices are more important. But I've got to think that if they were really

truly listening to what the oppressed group have to say, that they wouldn't feel the same.

The opinion of the group in power does not matter. White people don't get to decide what's racist and not racist. Men don't get to decide what's sexist and not sexist. Straight people don't get to decide what's homophobic and not homophobic. The list goes on and on. We have to let oppressed groups speak on their experiences and their feelings. We shouldn't talk over them or for them, because we don't know what it's like.

If something like this happens and you're not sure what to think and whose side to take, listen to the those who are oppressed. They are the ones who are affected by this every day. Simply the fact that they are scared for their lives and for the lives of their loved ones should tell you exactly what you need to know.

#BlackLivesMatter (Converse, 2016)

As the passage suggests, the central need of those who are oppressed – and not being “listened to” – is the need to be listened to. Discursive engagement is valuable and effective, but only after one has fully been listened to. Listening is a sign of respect and, therefore, acknowledged equality. Seen this way, Sam-I-am may well be the fictional equivalent of consequential social movement leaders, such as Martin Luther King or Rosa Parks, who have embodied the requisite persistence when being ignored.

This section has given the example of the importance of persistence as a rule of behaviour which can be synthesised from the narrative of *Green Eggs and Ham*. It has also argued that persistence is more broadly foundational to legal agency and legal systems.

6 CONCLUSION

This paper has used *Green Eggs and Ham* as a case study to argue that children's literature is a fundamental source of law. Section I explored *Green Eggs and Ham* relative to other works of children's literature. Section II reached the heart of the argument and argued that the rules of behaviour which can be drawn from non-didactic works such as *Green Eggs and Ham* are very *legal* in nature, which helped frame children's literature as a fundamental source of law. Sections III and IV offered specific examples of internal behavioural rules which can be synthesised

from *Green Eggs and Ham*, regarding the importance of open-mindedness and persistence. The sections also explored how the two concepts – open-mindedness and persistence – are more broadly foundational to legal agency and legal systems, how they help shape or reshape legal systems. This aspect of the two concepts helps frame children’s literature as more than a source of law. Desmond Manderson once remarked in an interview, “I think that what we live in is like a myth, is like a spider’s web, it’s like this beautiful [interplay] of threads that we can’t even see. But you touch one part of it, and the whole thing vibrates” (Sherwin, 2012, 6m:02s). The interplay between sources of law, legal systems, and legal agency (the behaviour of the actors who constitute and reconstitute legal systems) is complex and likely cannot be fully comprehended – and will certainly be the subject of much further research.

Studying seminal works of children’s literature is an exercise in legal pluralism (Manderson, 2003, p. 93; Griffiths, 1986). Finding law in unexpected and overlooked places is an intrinsically valuable exercise, which helps uncover the complexity and poetic nature of law. Doing so helps us see law as infinitely complex, omnipresent, and transcendental. This paper has sought to do more than find law in children’s literature. It has sought to reframe our collective conception of law and legal sources, defining normativity as mainly internal and framing children’s literature as a fundamental source of law. In doing so, it has given centre stage to the child-reader – the citizen-to-be. More importantly, it has defended the relevance of the law and literature movement. If children’s literature is a fundamental source of law, studying it is necessary to understanding human behaviour. The movement is more than an opportunity to broaden the scope of legal sources: it is a study of a fundamental source of law, one which simply cannot be overlooked.

Long before *Green Eggs and Ham* was ingrained in popular culture¹⁴, it was ingrained in the identity of those who constitute popular culture. Tracing our identity back to our childhood teaches us about ourselves. It also reminds us of the ultimate simplicity of the fundamental truths about the world we live in. These truths can be communicated to children and encapsulated in just fifty different words (Kopf, 2015). We gain perspective by seeing the simplicity of fundamental truths about social interaction, the human experience, and the pursuit of happiness.

Law is, at its core, about *rules*. Rules guide our behaviour, to help us pursue and hopefully find happiness. They help us avoid mistakes and pain. They help order our lives and our social interactions. Rules are our way to interact with and understand others, the world we live in, and, ultimately, ourselves. They emerge from our very existence – from our interactions with our environment. Rules are about the foundational blocks of the human experience: otherness, agency, fear, pain, power, and many more. Perhaps rule-making ought to simply be called *existing*. And if rule-making is existing, perhaps we ought to look for law in the places where we most *exist*: in churches and restaurants, on playgrounds and in amusement parks, in the depths of pain, the exaltation of success, the loneliness of old age, and the fascination of childhood. We find rules in stories because stories are about *existing*. To exist is to write stories – our own and our collective. As we exist, we share in the human experience, found in stories and in life experience, and shared by our fellow human beings. As we exist, “the whole thing vibrates” (Sherwin, 2012, 6m:02s).

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¹⁴ See C-SPAN (2014); United States (2007), where a judge renders a judgment in a style inspired by *Green Eggs and Ham* and Salomon (2011), where prominent artist Will.i.am suggests that his stage name was inspired by *Green Eggs and Ham*.

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Idioma original: Inglês

Artigo convidado

Recebido: 26/07/20

Aceito: 30/07/20