A Makeover for the ‘Cat in the Hat’? How About That.

To bring Dr. Seuss’s accessorized feline back to the big screen, animators gave the beloved character a vibrant look.

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“The Cat in the Hat” is one of the most beloved children’s books of all time and the signature creation of the literary world of Dr. Seuss. But while other Seuss classics have spawned successful films and shows, including the Peabody Award-winning TV special “Horton Hears a Who!” and the enduring 1966 holiday classic “How the Grinch Stole Christmas!,” the Cat in the Hat has had a more checkered path on the move from book to screen.

It’s not for lack of talent. Some of the biggest names in animation and children’s programming have tried their hand at the property, from the Looney Tunes legend Chuck Jones (the 1971 animated TV musical) to the Jim Henson Company (“The Wubbulous World of Dr. Seuss”).

And then there was the 2003 live-action adaptation starring Mike Myers, pilloried by critics when it was released. In his New York Times review, the critic A.O. Scott called it a “grueling, chaotic stew of forced whimsy.” After the fiasco, Seuss’s widow refused to authorize future live-action adaptations of her husband’s works.

This is the legacy that the creators of the new “The Cat in the Hat” (in theaters) had to contend with.

For this animated retelling, Seuss’s Cat, voiced by Bill Hader, gets a vibrant (and much-needed) makeover.



For this animated feature, the film’s designers gave the cat’s face a more triangular, catlike shape. Warner Bros. Pictures

Given the popularity of the book, with more than 16 million copies sold since its publication in 1957, how is it that the Cat has never led an animated movie?

Part of the problem is that, unlike Seuss favorites like Horton, the Grinch and the Lorax, the Cat doesn’t come with much of a story: He breaks into a house, messes up the place, cleans it up, and then leaves.

Amos Sussigan, the film’s art director, grew up in Switzerland and didn’t read the American classic until 2019, when he was first called upon to help develop it. “I was like, whoa, it’s a short book,” he said.

It didn’t help that the Cat isn’t all that visually expressive (in the book, he spends much of the time with his eyes closed). He’s an odd-looking character. In fact, one of the most famous felines in children’s literature doesn’t look much like a cat at all.

“He’s not a cat,” said the production designer Aidan Sugano. “He’s this weird mix of cat and human. So we brought a lot more cat into him.”

And a lot more character, beginning with big, expressive eyes and a happier, wider smile. In Seuss’s original, the Cat has just one sort of smile — a sly, knowing grin. “If you want a really big, genuine grin, you have to show teeth,” said Olivier Staphylas, the film’s head of character animation.

The problem: The Cat doesn’t appear to have teeth. So the film’s creators simply added them. “That’s the beauty of animation,” Staphylas said.

They also gave his face a more triangular, catlike shape. Seuss famously reused facial structures across people and species, giving the same face to a fish as, say, a dog. In the book, the Cat’s face is indistinguishable from those of the humanoid Thing One and Thing Two.

“A lot of the Seuss language had very shared tenets,” Sugano said. “So we knew we had to make the characters visually distinct.”

For the body, however, the creators stuck with the less-than-svelte, bottom-heavy profile of the original.

“It’s a strange body,” Staphylas said. “His hips are wide, his chest and neck are very narrow. But for me, it’s a dream. In animation, it’s a very, very beautiful silhouette.”



Character movement sketches for the Cat in the Hat for the new film. Warner Bros. Pictures

Key to the Cat’s overall look were the splashes of red (his bow tie) and white (the gloves) and red-and-white (his striped stovepipe hat). The film opens with the book’s limited hues before exploding into an ocean of different colors and palettes.

At the beginning of the film, the red-and-white stripes of the Cat’s hat are mirrored in the twisting tube that brings him to our world.

“The hat became the core idea for the color script,” Sussigan said. “We wanted to follow the color red as this idea of what the Cat is bringing into the world, which is this sense of connection.”

Despite the changes, the creators aimed to stay faithful to the original Cat in the Hat’s boisterous, fun-loving spirit — even for those who maybe had never read the book as a child, like the Swiss-born Sussigan, or Staphylas, who grew up in France.

“You don’t have to know every page of the book,” said Bill Damaschke, the president and chief creative officer of Warner Bros. Pictures Animation. “But people know the cat with the red-and-white hat. They know the Things. Year after year, it’s one of the most popular Halloween costumes.”

“It’s in the world, even if you don’t have a relationship with the book itself,” he added. “And the idea of a cat in a hat, that’s just funny.”