

# Making History

Is Ron Lamothe the next Ken Burns? BY BARI WALSH

There's a certain rite of passage that first-time filmmakers go through," says Ron Lamothe. "Basically, max out thirteen credit cards, go into incredible debt, and take huge risks, with the hope that everything works out in the end. In this case, it did."

And how. Last October, Lamothe found himself precisely where every novice documentarian longs to be: on PBS, with a subject who fascinated him—and who also happens to be a national icon. Lamothe's first full-length documentary, *The Political Dr. Seuss*, aired nationally on the PBS series *Independent Lens*, adding considerable nuance to our understanding of the beloved children's author, in the process helping to burnish a legacy that lately has fallen prey to both commercialism and Hollywood.

What separates the thirty-six-year-old Lamothe from other filmmakers, though, isn't just his rookie good fortune. It's that he

and it captivated him. Returning home, he taught high school history for three years and moved with his wife to the Amherst area when she enrolled in a doctoral program in anthropology. On a lark, he took a 16mm film class at UMass, and he was hooked. "I knew that summer that I wanted to spend the rest of my life doing this, and I had to figure out a way to do it." Suspecting that film school wasn't right for him, and feeling "too old to go to Hollywood and get people coffee," he chose documentary; for someone who'd spent years entertaining friends and family by setting slide shows to music, it made sense.

Another class spurred him to take his historical leanings to the next level. The course was "The Scramble for Africa," and it provided fodder for what he thought would be his first film, a piece on European imperialism in Africa. That "magnum opus," as

depictions of Japanese-Americans are racist by today's standards. Exploring all of that, and finding ways to put it on film, was profoundly fulfilling and helped sustain him through the "not fun" parts of the process: finding funding, negotiating the licensing rights, navigating the labyrinths of PBS.

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Lamothe aspires to the role of public historian, bridging the gap between the academy and the kind of popular but shoddy history that cable television seems to proffer at every turn on the dial. "I want to make films that have academic credibility but that understand the requirements of putting forth history to a broad public. Too often they're in opposition—on the one side you have filmmakers putting out bad history and veering too far in the direction of entertainment, and on the other side, historians who only play

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managed to air the film while juggling two other commitments that, alone, could make full-time gigs: marriage and fatherhood (he has two young daughters), and graduate school (he's pursuing a Ph.D. in African history at BU). Phew.

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Lamothe looks back on the four years it took to make the film and laughs, describing the process as "every cliché: odyssey, roller coaster ride, labor of love, and all these things combined."

The project took shape in the spring of 2000 while he was working and studying at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, the site of his first serious steps as both historian and filmmaker. He'd graduated from Tufts University in 1990 and then traveled for several months in Africa, having the kind of Indiana Jones adventures that only a twenty-two-year-old can have. He hadn't studied or known much about the continent previously,

Lamothe calls it with a smile, remains unfiled, but he enrolled in an M.A. program in history and began pursuing both his passions. He credits a job in the UMass audio-visual department as giving him an invaluable filmmaking apprenticeship.

The *Seuss* film arose from conversations with UMass historian Richard Minear, who Lamothe says was one of the first people to cast Theodor Geisel in a political light. When Lamothe saw the edgy cartoons that Geisel, in his pre-*Seuss* life, drew for *PM* magazine during World War II, he started playing with the idea that this little-known side of Dr. Seuss could make an intriguing documentary.

He became fascinated by the enigmatic Geisel, by the extraordinary care he took with his work (he rewrote extensively, and spent a year and a half on *Cat in the Hat*, for example), and by what Lamothe calls his "blind spots." Although a liberal and humane man throughout most of his life, Geisel's war-time

the cop role, nitpicking and critiquing, rather than being part of the process."

It was the History Channel, in fact, that triggered the epiphany that led him to BU. "I remember watching a documentary that had something to do with the Mel Gibson movie *Signs*. It was such bad history. It wasn't history at all. It was advertising. I was so disgusted that I realized I would never fit into that world. That was one of the things that made me go on to the Ph.D., wanting to continue to become a better historian.

"Good history and good storytelling don't have to be mutually exclusive," he says. "I remember hearing these stories about people in bars asking the bartender to flip the channel from *Monday Night Football* to the Ken Burns *Civil War* series when it was first out. That tells me you can have both." +

*The Political Dr. Seuss is available from Lamothe's film company, Terra Incognita Films, at [www.terraincognitafilms.com](http://www.terraincognitafilms.com).*