
From the Instructor

In our capstone essay for WR 150: “Aesthetic Constructions of Childhood,” students were asked to produce a researched academic argument about any aspect related to children’s picture books. With a chance rereading of *Curious George*, Maya framed her approach to this essay through careful and critical research. One of the key strengths of Maya’s remarkable essay is that she understood the scholarship so intimately that she was able not merely to challenge it, but actually to *further* it. Her work of contributing to the conversation about racism in *Curious George* is not only intellectually eye-opening but also gracefully executed. With this essay, Maya crafted a nuanced argument, drawing on the picture book’s history and scholarship, contributing her voice as a certain little monkey’s popularity continues to grow well beyond the confines of that first picture book.

— Anna Panszczyk

WR 150: Aesthetic Constructions of Childhood

From the Writer

Revisiting *Curious George* was shocking and horrifying. When I had originally decided to examine the childhood classic, I was surprised by the story's upfront and unapologetic allusion to the transatlantic slave trade. This had not come to mind when I, or the many others I talked to, thought of the inquisitive, silly monkey with his friend, The Man with the Yellow Hat. However, this made sense when understood as a common symptom of systematic racism—we are conditioned to uphold societal norms while our ideas about the world are malleable. Witnessing the power dynamics between the socially-deemed “subordinate” and “dominant” in a positive manner primes us to accept and understand oppression as normal and healthy. Because of the story's relation to race, the unwavering loyalty of a captive from Africa to a profit-seeking white male proves particularly disturbing. What had scared me most as I wrote about the series was that I had never once as a child thought to question if George and The Man's relationship was wrong, much less why it was, and those who had encouraged me to read about this curious monkey had not either. Although it is appalling to think of the gruesome, racist writings that were once popular, it is more difficult to realize that in a society so many consider “post-racial,” we continue to let children's literature with such blatantly positive references to slavery and racism slip through the cracks.

This paper is a way for me to help myself and others process how our ideas regarding childhood and innocence as well as how our ability to ignore racism as a society has allowed *Curious George* to remain so popular; it is still considered a beloved classic while it maintains its association with a culture of oppression and a systematic hatred of black people. It is a way for me to explain how all these years later, this monkey transforms from a carefree, hilarious character to a victim of the oppression and dehumanization all people of color still face nearly 75 years later.

— Maya Terhune

MAYA TERHUNE

Prize Essay Winner

A GOOD LITTLE MONKEY: *CURIOUS GEORGE'S* UNDERCURRENT OF WHITE DOMINANCE AND THE SERIES' CONTINUED POPULARITY

A beloved childhood picture book series with a legacy that has withstood seventy years of technological and social evolutions, H.A. and Margaret Rey's 1941 *Curious George*, despite its blatant negative racial connotations and depictions, has remained a classic in the hyper-sensitive, highly-censored environment constructed for children. The series has spawned countless spin-offs and adaptations as a separate book series, television show, movie franchise, and video game, a classic which the media continues to revamp and reutilize in order to engage children and their parents as consumers. While in many ways the *Curious George* series proves to be the perfect childhood companion with its inquisitive protagonist and entertaining shenanigans, the earlier books in the series prove problematic with their overt references to the abduction and forced enslavement of Africans during the slave trade and their glorification of the Man with the Yellow Hat who is celebrated as a friend and protector rather than condemned as a captor and oppressor. The series' celebration of the oppression of an abducted monkey parallels the oppression of black Americans, making the books' fame seemingly contradictory to the atmosphere of innocence in which modern society has deemed it necessary for children to appropriately and healthily develop. While scholars such as professor June Cummins have addressed the books' ties to racist propaganda and negative depictions of blacks, none have explained the books' continued popularity despite a world increasingly aware of the problematic nature in which people of color are depicted in older literature. The *Curious George* series still remains such a prominent and popular American childhood classic as it is able to perpetrate the social and racial subordination associated with

childhood innocence through the power dynamics established between the Man with the Yellow Hat and George. Additionally, the commercialization of the series allows the stories and their characters to remain iconic without the need to directly engage with the original text while still supporting the original books' assertions regarding white supremacy by avoiding discussion of their problematic nature.

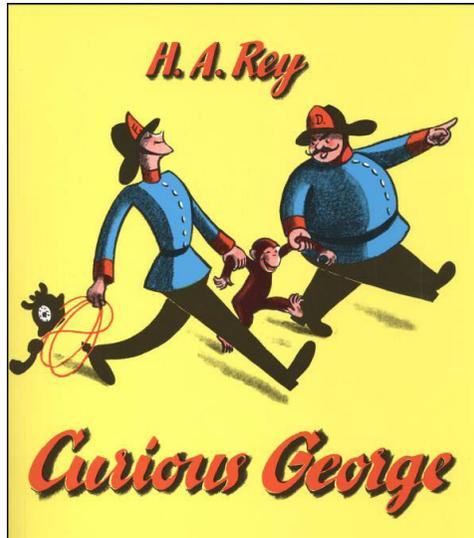


Figure 1: Cover art of *Curious George*



Figure 2: Top of page 39 of *Curious George*

The cover illustration of *Curious George*, the first book of the series, has become one of the most recognizable images of the franchise and provides an emblematic representation of the power dynamics, cultural structures, and characterizations associated with racism in America. Adorned in

vibrant blue and red in outfits which the “beholder”¹ immediately associates with policemen, the white men that dominate a predominant amount of space—especially when juxtaposed with the central character, George, who appears insignificant next the two men’s towering figures—are established as the authority in this relationship. His tiny arms clutched by the officers, George appears smiling between the two men, suggesting that he is a character not only in need of discipline and societal guidance, but joyful at the prospect of being punished for his actions and furthermore, his position of subordination. This particular introduction to George proves important given the image’s contrasting counterpart within the book itself; while the cover depicts George as gleeful, in the same image within the context of the story, he appears downtrodden and remorseful (Rey 39)² at the prospect of arrest. Numerous scholars including Cummins in her article “The Resisting Monkey: ‘Curious George,’ Slave Captivity Narratives, and the Postcolonial Condition,” have observed this disparity, speculating that the picture might “suggest that children should likewise submit to authority” and “speaks volumes about the ambivalence of the series as a whole” (79); however, none connect the racist implications of the narrative to the potential audience of the instruction to “appease [your] captors” (Cummins 79). In not only using an image that characterizes George through his breaking of societal constructions and punishment, but altering his facial expression as well, the Reys introduce a very specific and targeted conception of George, one that is not so dissimilar from common depiction of black individuals, particularly black youth, in America. Throughout the 1930s and early 1940s, the urban youth, especially that of the predominately black community in Harlem, was commonly portrayed as dangerous and delinquent-ridden (Finley 160). Riots that occurred during this time period further alienated white suburban communities from the lives and oppression of black youth with incidents such as a series of muggings and killings in the fall of 1941 by black teenagers allowing “New York newspapers to sensationalize the . . . ‘mugging[s]’ [and] suggest the Harlem youth were out of control” (Fletcher 43). As the book’s publication occurred in New York City and the story is thought to be set there as well, individuals interacting with the story during this time period would, as such, subconsciously or consciously associate George with black youth. Although the Reys, German Jews who famously fled the Nazi occupation of Paris on a bicycle, wrote the original *Curious George* manuscript in

Europe and not in New York, and consequently may not have intended this association, the book was a product of European children's literature which often villified blacks as exemplified in popular works like "Tintin in the Congo." Their book conformed to a Western expectation for dehumanizing portrayals of blacks and while possibly not intentionally racist, was due to its contextual presentation and readership. George, like the black youth of the 1930s and 40s, is similarly framed through his disobedience and accidental criminal behavior. Additionally, in literature and entertainment during this time period, black people were often depicted as monkeys and ape-like characters, harkening back to social Darwinism and the perception of blacks as inferior, animalistic, and in need of control. In presenting George as what Cummins refers to as, "enjoying his capture," the cover would seem to suggest that this depiction and treatment of George and transitively, black youth, is acceptable and welcomed—the white men in power understand how to best maintain an orderly society. Without even beginning the story, a very definitive and direct implication about the nature and treatment of George and the types of individuals he represents forms.

While the correlations between the book's cover and depictions of black Americans and their so-called place within society may seem unsubstantiated, these assertions prove justified when the text itself is explored. George, introduced as "a good little monkey" (Rey 4) from Africa, is spotted by a man with a yellow hat who proclaims "What a nice little monkey . . . I would like to take him home with me" (Rey 6). The Man proceeds to place the hat on the ground and lure George towards it. After watching George put on the hat, the Man "popped him into a bag" (Rey 8). Only pages into the book, the story of George's capture eerily mirrors that of the millions of Africans who, from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries, were forcibly stripped from their homes and, like cattle, were packed into ships and transported across the Middle Passage portion of the Atlantic slave trade. References to the enticement of the native Africans appear in The Man with the Yellow Hat's deception. Although the book and the entire series' treatment of George's capture remains lighthearted and lacking any anger towards the Man who ripped George from his home, the drawing that accompanies the description of George being forced into a sack shows George with his head poking outside of the bag,

gasping for air and obviously in pain. The narrative continues with the Man immediately asserting his dominance, stating that George is being taken to a zoo and that he “will like it there” (Rey 14). Already stripped of the choice to not like the zoo, George accepts this as true, never questioning the Man or the situation. The image adjacent to the Man’s instruction shows the Man, in his yellow costume—which mimics that of a safari outfit, an emblem of white entitlement and colonization—with a pipe in his mouth, patiently instructing the little monkey who sits politely on a small stool in awe. In constructing the interaction between the two in such a way, the beholder immediately associates their relationship with that of a son and father. The Man with the Yellow Hat is instantly absolved of any blame and evolves from captor to paternal figure; he transforms into simply a man who “popped” George into a bag to take him to a place he will like. The book continues to glorify the slave trade as George accidentally falls off the boat and into the ocean, as if mocking the suicides of slaves who threw themselves off the ships on their journey to be sold into slavery. Additionally, the Man’s ultimate goal consists of robbing George of his freedom and placing him in captivity, an objective that encapsulates the intentions of slave traders. The similarities continue as the narrative reinforces George’s status as a child-like character and as a monkey. The Western world portrayed indigenous peoples as naïve, unsophisticated, subordinate, and often, especially from a religious perspective, in need of guidance. George adopts all of these characteristics, requiring the Man as a leading force in dealing with his inability to comprehend the societal constructs of the human world. Likewise, the traditional association of apes and monkeys with Blacks in comics and political cartoons throughout the twentieth century materializes with the Reys’ choice of George as a monkey, reaffirming his bestiality and his inferiority that results from being less than human. In ignoring the dehumanizing nature of the slave trade and slavery itself and instead celebrating their prevalent existence in American history by employing stereotypes and negative racial depictions, the book proves disturbingly problematic, especially given its wide-reception and popularity nearly seventy-five years later.

The authors continue to promote racial oppression in the second book in the series, *Curious George Takes a Job*, as well as in the rest of the Reys’ original seven installments. While the series’ utilization of positive

racist imagery can be scrutinized and cataloged—and have been by scholars such as Cummins—the repetition of certain behaviors and plot points within the individual books validate the oppressive and demeaning practices they reference and encourages their incorporation within “civilized” society. During the time of the series’ publication in the 1930s and 1940s, media and entertainment outlets utilized traditions such as blackface and the character trope of the barbaric, uncivilized African native, capitalizing on the supposed humor that could be derived from the humiliation and dehumanization of blacks. With traditions of placing blacks on display attaining persistent popularity in American culture during this time period, films and features such as *Tarzan the Ape Man* and *Kids ‘N Africa* popularized the jungle craze of the 1930s and Western comics like “Tintin in the Congo” and their limited cast of Black characters—of which included a character by the name of Whitewash Jones—condoned the depiction of blacks as incompetent, illiterate, idle, wide-eyed, and thick-lipped. These influences present themselves throughout the series especially given the presentation of George’s story in a cartoon-like style, his yearnings for Africa, and the Man’s constant push to display the monkey’s life to an audience. In *Curious George Takes a Job*, after his broken leg has healed in the hospital, George decides to investigate a “big blue bottle” of ether and the debilitating effects of the drug are shown in a set of panels (37). The panels, alluding specifically to the comic genre, display a loopy George with large eyes, wandering about until he eventually falls to the floor in deep sleep, a sequence that uses stereotyped physical comedy common in Western comics like “Tintin in the Congo”: George fails to understand that the bottle contains ether despite its label because of his inability to read and his inhaling of the drug renders him useless and dysfunctional in the same way that the broken English and incompetence and laziness of the natives in performing specific tasks drives the humor of “Tintin in the Congo” (Hergé). Additionally, the Man’s motivation for interacting with George consists solely of a desire to place him on display; he only comes to George’s rescue when he deems it will benefit himself. Upon hearing of George’s injury, the Man rushes to a telephone and directs that they “[p]lease take good care of him so that he will get better quickly. I want to take him to a movie studio and make a picture about his life in the jungle” (35). His concern exists not because he genuinely cares for George, but because once again, he saw the opportunity to exhibit George’s life

as a form of entertainment. In fact, the film he produces begins with the capture of a smiling George, whose abduction is a form of amusement and pleasure for the audience. The Man's filmic focus on Africa juxtaposed with George's constant yearning for his African home adopts the 1930s jungle craze, once more belittling the true nature of George's experience and establishing the country and its people as something to be gawked at and understood as primal and uncivilized, a subject of observation. In not only employing these tactics, but promoting them as normal, the books reinforce the ideals of inferiority that accompany racism and white supremacy and standardize them as acceptable parts of society.

The parent-child relationship between *Curious George* and *The Man with the Yellow Hat* additionally homogenizes homogenizing these ideals of racial superiority, embodying the paternalistic aspects of white supremacy and racism and the way in which childhood innocence is racialized. In his introduction to the essay collection *The Children's Culture Reader*, Henry Jenkins describes Viviana A. Zelizer's reevaluation of the American child at the turn-of-the-century and how the image of children and their relationships with adults adjusted with the mobilization of the middle class and increased pressures to create stricter child labor laws and resulted in the construction of the sentimental notion of childhood innocence (19). In this conception of the innocent child, the role of the parental figure involves protecting the ideological pure child from contamination by their surrounding environment. The obligation to maintain innocence in childhood denies any opportunity for autonomy and independence in this developmental stage and relies predominately on the limitation and oppression of the child's freedom. Indigenous people deemed "backward" during colonization were often described as "underdeveloped . . . because of their childlike natures," (Cummins 71), many of their characteristics and behavior likened to those of children in "need . . . [of] education and technology" and often, God, "in order to gain access to the Western, Christian, adult world" (Cummins 71). During the colonial period, in the same way that the oppressive, white, male-dominated community perceived African Americans and native Africans as immature and child-like, that same community also branded children with a similar negative societal understanding; as Robin Bernstein asserts in her book, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights*, children were

predominately thought of as “inherently sinful and sexual—even more so, potentially, than adults, who had learned, through rationality and self-discipline, how to control their damnable impulses” (4). Especially given that childhood innocence is “itself raced white, itself characterized by the ability to retain racial meanings but hide them under claims of holy obliviousness” (8), George’s portrayal as not only a child, but as non-white—and for that matter, non-human—accentuates his need for the superior figure of The Man with the Yellow Hat to socially condition him and instruct his perception of socially acceptable behavior while obscuring the presence of “blacker” and “darker” evils. Of these two varieties of innocence—the Christian, Western, white innocence denoted by religion, access to technology, and being shielded from the world as described by Jenkins, and the “Native,” “Heathen” innocence denoted by godlessness, being “backwards”—therefore, “lacking” technology and Western culture—and being a part of the sinful, sexual world the other children are shielded from as described by Bernstein—George is a depiction of the latter. He is sheltered to the point that his innocence finds further expression in his inability to communicate through speech—he is not even permitted to voice his opinions. Combined with the unfamiliarity of the Man’s world and his lack of context with which to understand it, George is forced as a result to be wholly dependent on a white, entitled, masculine figure. The relationship presented in *Curious George* is inherently harmful because it relies on a racialized history of the concept of childhood innocence and readings of this book perpetuates these hierarchies and affirms these power dynamics. While issues regarding racial power dynamics shift into the subtitles of childhood innocence in the second and third series of the books, the established father-son relationship and associated levels of authority between The Man with the Yellow Hat and George persist in enforcing the subordination of children.

Although the books and their promotions of child subordination still compose the basis of the George empire, the franchise has expanded to encompass a number of motion pictures, a video game, and a toy store dedicated to George which sports a plethora of merchandise, and as a result, the series’ popularity cannot be attributed singularly to the books themselves; however, in rebranding George’s curiosity as conducive to teaching mathematics, science, and engineering education and altering

George's origin story while simultaneously maintaining a positive ambience about the original text, all subsequent George products continue to celebrate the first books, and therefore perpetuate their original messages. Released in 2006, *Curious George*, the first full-length feature film created of the series, rewrote George and The Man with the Yellow Hat's meeting, scratching the Man's plot to capture George and transport him back to America and instead having George, acting as his own entity, steal the hat and then, out of curiosity of course, sneak onto the Man's boat. This important distinction in transforming George from a victim to an instigator acknowledges the controversial nature of the original storyline. However, this drastic alteration receives little attention or commentary by the media, the director, or the producer. The Curious George community in this act of acknowledgement fails to actually condemn or address the series' negative implications regarding race; stance, or lack thereof, which reflects the characteristic response adopted by Americans while glossing over persistent racial issues. The television program that spawned as a result of the film's moderate success avoids the topic in a similar manner, instead shifting its focus to "inspire children to explore science, engineering, and math in the world around them" while additionally "show[ing] parents and caregivers how to foster the development of science and math literacy in children" (PBS Parents). With several episodes loosely based on some of the original stories, the program does not provide an explanation as to how George and the Man met, an omission that once again recognizes that the books' direct comparisons to the slave trade and the implications regarding race and power are unacceptable, but refuses to actually discuss the issue. Even if the show's creators use the series as a continuation of the film, they still avoid having to speak to the problematic nature of the books as the movie itself circumvents this as well. Furthermore, all Curious George movie and television program merchandise are marketed alongside the original series, particularly the first installment, only adding insult to injury. Interestingly, the other items sold consist majorly of stuffed toys, which themselves are rooted in a history of violence and objectification of blacks.³ While the series has evolved away from the ideas of oppression and dominance asserted in the first books, transforming into a major platform for effective science mathematics education⁴, in failing to address the issues of these books and still actively marketing the story of "the curious monkey . . . [who] is taken from the jungle by the man in the yellow hat to

live in a new home” (The Curious George Store: Harvard Square)⁵, these additions by association implicitly support the racist ideals presented in the books and continue to promote their inclusion within children’s literature, and therefore, children’s mentality.

In a 2003 press release, the Houghton Mifflin Company asked, “Who isn’t smitten by Curious George? Whether you’re seventy, forty seven or four years old, the inquisitive little fellow who always seems to get into one scrape after another in all likelihood, captured your heart.” Unfortunately, they are not incorrect; the Curious George series occupies a reserved space in the heart of American childhood classics and its enduring legacy is one that has persisted over many decades and through many developments in technology and children’s literature. As Margaret Rey observes, the appeal of the monkey has always been that he “can do what kids can’t do...He can do all these naughty things that kids would like to do” (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt) and perhaps the largest impression the series has made on the youth it has touched does not revolve around societal limitations and indoctrinations George must learn, but rather on his insatiable curiosity that results in his seemingly endless amount of freedom. However, while the series has evolved to transcend beyond the racist archetypes and playful banter about the slave trade, it is still anchored in this framework and it still refuses to condemn the implications made by these themes. While the series’ transformation would seem to absolve the “new” brand of its early insinuations about race and dominance, the franchise, in simultaneously ignoring these assertions, which form its basis, and embracing and marketing themes of oppression and objectification, reinforces the implications about race and power that appear within the books. It is therefore impossible for the series to promote its themes of responsibility, discovery, and friendship wholly if it refuses to fulfill its obligation to educate, it ignores the history that has defined who can receive a math and science education, and it promotes diversity in friend groups, racially and characteristically, along with the oppression of non-white individuals. This is not to say that this classic should be removed from children’s literary consciousness, but that the discussion of the problematic nature of these books needs to occur in much the same way as it does with literature such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. These books provide an essential understanding of the institutional and social racial hierarchies that persist

in American culture and in ignoring their problems, society continues to indoctrinate children with the perception that these power dynamics are acceptable and normal. Especially given the culture of regarding racial disproportionalities as “historical” within the classroom and “post-racial” society, educating children about the problems with the series forces a discussion about race in its present context, something that the American youth still desperately needs. While curiosity killed the cat, it led George to an oppression that society celebrates and that children internalize.

NOTES

1. The term author Jane Doonan of *Looking at Pictures in Picture Books* uses to encompass the simultaneous literary and pictorial reception of picture books which traditional definitions of “reader” and “viewer” does not sufficiently describe (9).

2. Where page one is considered to be the title page of the book.

3. In her article “Children’s Books, Dolls, and the Performance of Race; or the Possibility of Children’s Literature,” professor Robin Bernstein articulates that “[n]ineteenth-century doll manufacturers invited enactments of racial violence when they made Black dolls of materials, especially rubber and cloth, that could withstand rough usage that would destroy dolls of ceramic or wax” (164). Often these dolls were marketed as “prompts toward violent play” with advertisements such as “What child in American does not at some time want a cloth ‘Nigger’ dollie—one that can be petted or thrown about without harm to the doll or anything that it comes in contact with” (Bernstein 164), equating the abuse of these dolls with desirability. Beatings, whippings, and hangings were common in children’s play with these dolls and often games were constructed revolving around slave auctions and mob hangings of the dolls.

Even when these dolls were not subjected to ritual abuse, scholar Philip Nel observed as a child, his doll Golly, a racial caricature he grew up with, his innate dislike for the toy reveals “the fact that I was, unawares, absorbing messages about race and power, and that in its otherness, this doll was affirming my own whiteness as normal.” Because of the

doll's characteristics that contrasted the white, heteronormative figure, the doll "invites certain kinds of play" and although the doll's material would inspire a warm, intimate connection, the unsettling comparison of black with "thing" and its particular contrast to the more delicate, fragile porcelain dolls that often represented white girls and boys did not necessarily promote that instinct. While numerous children's toys currently are plush and made of soft, pliable material, given George's distinct connections to race and power, the exclusivity of the Curious George series' marketable non-game items as toys that have historically been associated with racism, violence, and oppression, proves interesting and worthy of note.

Robin Bernstein, "Children's Books, Dolls, and the Performance of Race; or the Possibility of Children's Literature," *PMLA* 126, no. 1: 160-169. 16 April 2015 Philip Nel, "The Archive of Childhood, Part 2: The Golliwog," *Nine Kinds of Pie*, last modified 13 January 2015. 16 April 2015.

4. Although the study regarding the improved math and science skills conducted by the Public Broadcasting Service for Kids interestingly predominately sample white families of average financial income where the highest household degree of education was typically a Bachelor's or a Master's degree, a demographic that does not include low income families, minority families, and less formally educated families.

Christine Paulson, "Evaluation of Curious George," *Concord Evaluation Group*, last modified May 2012.

5. An excerpt from the description of the plot of Curious George provided by the World's Only Curious George Store in Harvard Square which uses the choice phrase "is taken," an acknowledgement of George's lack of decision and passivity in his removal from Africa.

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