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FRIGHTENED GEORGE: HOW THE PEDIATRIC-EDUCATIONAL COMPLEX RUINED THE CURIOUS GEORGE SERIES

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To contemporary tastes, the plot of the original *Curious George* story is astonishing. In the book by H.A. Rey (and Margret, his wife and uncredited collaborator), George, a small monkey and a childlike figure, is lured from his perch high up in the jungle of Africa, by a strange gun-toting man. The man springs out of hiding and binds George in a sack, up to his neck. George's kidnapper (the man with the yellow hat) then spirits him away to a boat, waiting off the coast, and ferries him across the ocean. After giving George a meal and plying him with tobacco and liquor, the man makes plans to deposit George in the local zoo. But while the man is off arranging the transfer, George plays with the phone, accidentally dialing the fire department. The firemen arrest George and detain him in a dank prison cell, overrun with mice. George escapes from prison, into the city, and rides a bunch of helium balloons through the sky. Later he is found by the man with the yellow hat and taken to the zoo, where the story ends, with George alone in captivity.¹

A children's story with such a plot could not be published today. To begin with, current political sensibilities and social mores would obviously preclude the casual and generally positive portrayal of alcohol, tobacco and firearms. Nor would a responsible contemporary publisher be likely to flirt with the disturbing overtones suggested by George's capture, which is eerily reminiscent of Middle Passage slave narratives. But aside from these matters of taste and politics, the early *George* stories fundamentally reflect the beliefs and folkways of a bygone age. The first several volumes in the series portray a protagonist who eagerly, and almost entirely without apprehension, confronts some of the most profound childhood fears imaginable, including physical danger, illness, abandonment and exploitation by adults. This portrayal was neither an accident nor a mistake; in fact the early *George's* attitude toward the challenges put in front of him was an accurate reflection of the less anxious view of childhood that was common in pre-war America, and was more common still, in the Reys' home country of Germany.²

Of course social norms and mores change over time, so it is not surprising that the first several *George* books appear dated. Very few children's books from the 1940's are still in print.³ But the *Curious George* series is remarkable because it did not remain static. By the final three books, both George and the man with the yellow hat have undergone complete transformations in their approach to the fears and dangers of childhood. This fact provides an unusual and revealing window into the profound changes in child-rearing that swept across middle-class America in the twentieth century.

The story of *George's* creators is at least as remarkable as any of his own escapades. Hans and Margret Rey were German Jews, born around the turn of the

century. After World War I, Hans began a career in advertising, while Margret studied art at the Bauhaus, whose faculty at the time included Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky. In 1935 she joined Hans in Brazil, where they founded the first advertising agency in Rio de Janeiro. The couple honeymooned in Paris and decided to stay. Hans soon published his first children's book, *Ragi et les 9 Singes* (*Cecily G. and the Nine Monkeys*). The most mischievous of the nine monkeys became a hit, and the Reys decided to devote a whole volume to him. But as the Nazis roared into France, the Reys concluded it was time to find safer ground. They loaded the drawings for George in a backpack, built improvised bicycles from spare parts and fled over the French border into Spain. From there they went to Portugal, back to Brazil and finally to America.⁴

The Reys arrived in an America that was undergoing dramatic change, as it completed its transition from a rural country into an urban and increasingly suburban society. Of the many changes in the United States, few were as profound as the revolution in the views of children, childhood and child-rearing. Peter Stearns' history of child-rearing practices in the twentieth century is entitled *Anxious Parents*, and the title aptly captures the percolating sense among middle-class American parents that their children were subject to increasing pressures and perils. Stearns convincingly shows that Victorian era parents generally thought of their children (particularly boys) as resilient, hardy and tough.⁵ Because some fears could not be avoided, parents instructed their children to face and overcome them. "Train up your children to be virtuous and fearless," wrote one author of a Victorian era parenting manual.⁶ "Fear existed," Stearns writes, "and its conquest was something boys at least should learn about; for the most part, simply presenting the standards and providing examples of appropriate reactions would do the trick."⁷ As Stearns observes, pluck, a term that has largely disappeared from the lexicon, was one of the paramount virtues in nineteenth century children's literature.⁸

In the early twentieth century, Americans began to reevaluate their approach to childhood fears. By the 1930's, Stearns writes, "the goal of courage itself became fairly remote."⁹ The author of one child-rearing manual phrased it as follows, "There is always the danger that the fear resulting from [simple insistence on courage] will reach the 'overwhelming' stage and leave its mark for a long time."¹⁰ Rather than simply urging their children to buck up and face their fears, parents were instructed to minimize a child's exposure to that which might scare them. When fear could not be avoided, it was the duty of a responsible middle-class parent to show the child how to air and process his feelings. As Stearns writes "coping, not courage, was the more realistic goal."¹¹ This was in stark contrast to the nineteenth century, when a boy might go to great lengths to hide his fears from his peers and, perhaps especially, from his father.¹²

Because of their age and background, the Reys undoubtedly arrived in America with more traditional views of childhood virtues and fears. Europeans, even now, but certainly at mid-century, were less likely to view children as essentially fragile and in need of special protection.¹³ Indeed, Hans Rey was a veteran of the German army in World War I, and spent his formative years in a culture that exalted masculinity.¹⁴ The early *George* stories reflect this sensibility. George's kidnapping and imprisonment are striking not so much because of the adventures themselves but because of the monkey's nonchalant response to

them. Though he is unhappy at his predicament, he appears to have little fear during his adventures.

The second book in the series, *Curious George Takes a Job* (1947), opens with George in the zoo. Bored, George escapes at the first opportunity. He leaps onto a moving bus and rides around town. After jumping off, he is caught breaking into the kitchen of a restaurant. The cook discovers him eating pasta and forces George to work to pay off his debt. George becomes a window washer, using his climbing skills to scale the skyscrapers (the story appears to be set in Manhattan). After a while, George slips into an apartment, where the painters are taking a break. Grabbing a brush, George paints a jungle scene with himself climbing a tree. And yet, in spite of this obvious manifestation of homesickness, the Reys neither explore nor indulge these feelings. Instead the scene is played for comedy. Discovered, George is chased by the painters and the police. He leaps from the fire escape, breaking his leg. The reaction of the bystanders is revealing of the Reys' casual attitude toward adventure and even serious injury. "He got what he deserved," the woman whose apartment he had painted says. "I told him he would get in to trouble," the elevator man says. "He was too curious."¹⁵

At the hospital where George goes for treatment, he is pictured lying in bed, frowning ruefully. But there is no indication that he is afraid or anxious about his injury. Instead he is sad to be stuck in bed. The caption reads, "If only he had not been so curious he could have had a lot of fun. Now it was too late. . . ." ¹⁶ Even the man with the yellow hat seems unconcerned for George's safety and emotional well being. When he reads about the accident in the paper, he phones the hospital. But he is indifferent to George's emotional state. Though he asks the nurse to take good care of George, the reasons he gives for his concern are commercial and selfish, "I want to take him to a movie studio and make a picture about his life in the jungle. Don't let him get into any mischief until I can take him away."¹⁷

When George can walk again, he finds an unattended bottle of ether. In this scene, George plays the role of buffoonish clown, sniffing the ether, hallucinating and finally passing out on the floor.

The third and fourth books show a gradual erosion of George's autonomy and independence. As the third story, *Curious George Rides a Bike* (1952), opens, we see that the man with the yellow hat has, like millions of Americans, left the city for the suburbs and started a sort of family, consisting of George and himself. And indeed they now appear to have developed a father-son relationship. The man begins the story by giving George a present, in honor of the third anniversary of the day he brought George home from the jungle. And there is a picture of George hung over the breakfast table. Still, their relationship is archaic in an important sense. When the man leaves for work he allows George to wander the neighborhood unsupervised, with only an admonition to "keep close to the house while I am gone."¹⁸ As we shall see, by the end of the series, the man supervises George's activities much more closely.

The fourth book in the series, *Curious George Gets a Medal* (1957), opens with George alone again, but this time, instead of wandering about the neighborhood unsupervised, he is engaged in a much less dangerous activity, looking at a picture book. George leaves the house and has adventures, of course, but this time, importantly, he does so only in order to repair a mess he has made, and not to

seek adventure for its own sake. Through a complicated chain of events, George winds up going to space in a rocket, and becomes "the first living being to come back to earth from a space flight."¹⁹ The mission is dangerous, and George undertakes it with a smile. But to reenter the atmosphere, George must pull a lever before the space ship floats away in orbit, with him in it. This scene is played for suspense, and while George's life is in the balance, the man is described as waiting "anxiously," and several of the technicians appear tense.²⁰ At this point in the series, George is still allowed to face risks, but the adventures are suspenseful not funny, and the dangers George faces produce anxiety and fear in the story's father figure.

Though there were subtle changes in the first four books, the fifth volume in the series, *Curious George Flies a Kite* (1958), marks a decisive turning point. With this story and the two subsequent books, the Reys ceded important aspects of creative control to the experts who made up the pediatric and educational establishment. Their reasons for doing so were probably a mix of noble intentions, commercial prospects and their own evolving views of children and childhood. By the late fifties, as Stearns' lucid account makes clear, the Victorian view of children as resilient and tough had been supplanted by a new consensus among educators and pediatricians that rendered children as vulnerable and fragile.²¹ In light of this new consensus, the early *George* books, with their unapologetic portrayal of danger, now seemed too frightening. The Reys responded accordingly, and in the final three books George evolves from a bold mischief maker to a frightened, anxious figure who sees peril all around, and is content to stay safe at home. In short, in the final three books, by turning over the reins of the series to the pediatric-educational complex, the Reys allowed their most famous creation to be transformed from a lovable scamp into a nervous, anxious child.

In addition to this general trend, by chance, the year separating the publication of the fourth and fifth books, 1957, saw two seminal events that reshaped the world of children's literature. First was the publication of Dr. Seuss's landmark *The Cat in the Hat*. As is well known, *The Cat in the Hat* was written with a limited vocabulary, intended to aid in the teaching of phonics. The modern phonics movement had been inaugurated two years earlier with the publication of Rudolf Franz Flesch's *Why Johnny Can't Read*, which denigrated the word recognition theory that was the basis for the Dick and Jane readers. The enormous success of *The Cat in the Hat* convinced publishers that the once barren landscape of children's literature was fertile ground for profits.²²

The second earth-shaking event in the world of children's literature was the launching of Sputnik into orbit, by the Soviet Union. Panic about American educational deficiencies ensued, and education leapt to the front of the nation's agenda. The National Defense Education Act of 1958 proclaimed, "The national interest requires . . . that the Federal Government give assistance to education programs which are important to our defense."²³ This focus on education gave the phonics movement, already underway, a sense of urgency, and, as Louis Menand has argued in *The New Yorker*, the pediatric-educational complex began to view children's literature as another battleground in the Cold War.²⁴

So, for the fifth book in their series, *Curious George Flies a Kite* (1958), the Reys took the advice of the experts and, like Dr. Seuss, employed a restricted vocabulary list of 219 words.²⁵ Alas, Margret did not have Seuss's flair for verse (but

then who does?). The book is tedious and (perhaps weighed down by the import of its mission to further literacy) interminable—at 79 pages it's 75 percent longer than the original story. Margret later acknowledged that the restricted vocabulary was a mistake: "It was a fad then, and many educators thought first-graders could learn to read quicker that way. Like so many things, it proved to be nonsense and was given up after a while."²⁶

But in addition to the problems with length and style, the fifth story marks the dawn of the new, timid George. With this volume, the Reys appear to have at last fully absorbed the ethos of the vulnerable child sweeping across Dr. Spock's America. On the first page we learn that the gradual erosion of George's freedom that began in the third and fourth books is now nearly complete. The man goes off again, but, before he does so, he gives George explicit instructions about where and how to play, "Have fun and play with your new ball, but do not be too curious."²⁷ But George forgets his instructions, and a complicated series of events culminates with him flying a kite. A gust of wind propels him aloft, and when the man hears that George is floating in the air, his face projects a look of utter panic. "I will get him back," he says, as he springs into action. "I must get him back."²⁸ Gone are the days when the man looks on George's madcap escapades as good-natured fun. George has adventures, yes, but they are frightening, unsanctioned and unintentional. "George was scared," reads the caption, "What if he never got back? Maybe he would fly on and on. Oh he would never, never, be so curious again, if just this one time he could find a way to get home."²⁹

As for the man, he goes to extraordinary lengths to ward off danger. He pilots a helicopter and rescues George. When his monkey is safe again, the man says, "I am so happy to have you back, George . . . I was scared, and you must have been scared too. I know you will not want to fly a kite again for a long, long time."³⁰ The *George* stories have evolved from wild, vicarious thrills to a neutered, cautionary tale. Even something as innocuous as flying a kite turns out to be fraught with danger. The story ends with George returning the kite, which he exchanges for a baby bunny. The last page shows George playing tamely with the bunny indoors.

True to his promise in the fifth book to be less curious, for the rest of the series George never again attempts anything remotely adventurous. We never even see him pictured out of doors again.

In the sixth book, *Curious George Learns the Alphabet* (1963), the Reys decided, as the title suggests, to continue their efforts on behalf of literacy by writing an alphabet book. The plot, such as it is, consists of George learning to read and write, and his adventures are limited to making a minor mess in the living room and tricking the baker into giving him extra donuts. For each letter the man teaches George, he gives an example. Revealingly, the examples often emphasize the dangers that suddenly seem to be everywhere. Alligators eat you, bees sting, crabs pinch, riding a dromedary makes you dizzy. This book, too, is overly earnest, and, at 71 pages, like its predecessor, seemingly endless.

The final story in the series, *Curious George Goes to the Hospital* (1966), was a collaboration by the Reys with officials at Boston's Children's Hospital. In the story, George has to have a stomach operation, and he is terrified. He brings a rubber ball (his transitional object) with him to the hospital, and the man accompanies him up the stairs as George "held his big rubber ball tight."³¹ Inside

the hospital, every procedure is explained to George, step by step, to allay his fear. The man's sensitivity toward George is in striking contrast to his attitude in the first two books. He assures George he will be back first thing in the morning, and he tells him, "Nurse Carol will tuck you in when it's time to sleep." Still, when the man leaves, "George just sat there and cried."³² The most illuminating passage is when the man says, "Don't worry, George, you have been there before when you broke your leg."³³ It is little wonder that George needs reminding of his earlier trip to the hospital, because the contrast between the two scenes could hardly be more stark. The man is referring to the second volume, in which George breaks his leg after jumping from a fire escape. That scene, discussed above, is jovial, punctuated by George's hallucinatory episode with ether. The difference in tone in the two hospital visits encapsulates the transformation of George, from adventurous and bold to frightened and meek. This shift, of course, mirrors the transformation in American middle-class child-rearing practices during the twentieth century, as chronicled by Stearns. It is therefore unsurprising that the impetus for the meek portrait of George in the final book came from the pediatric establishment. The idea for the story came not from the Reys, but from officials at Boston Children's Hospital, who wanted a book to prepare children for a hospital stay.³⁴ Unfortunately, the demands of the pediatric-educational complex for a reassuring story, where anxiety and fear were validated and processed, happened to be inconsistent with George's signature character traits.

The final three Curious George books were undertaken for laudable goals. But in spite, or more likely because, of their lofty intentions, these books fail at their primary duty, to entertain. As Margret Rey observed, "George can do what kids can't do. He can paint a room from the inside. He can hang from a kite in the sky. He can let the animals out of their pens on the farm. He can do all these naughty things that kids would like to do."³⁵ What's fascinating about the George series is how, as it progressed, just how unnaughty he became. Ultimately, the lesson of George's evolution is a familiar one. When literature, even children's literature, subordinates itself to larger social aims, it often does so at the expense of its own vitality.

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ENDNOTES

1. There are numerous editions of the *Curious George* stories in circulation. For summaries and quotations, I have relied on *The Complete Curious George*, published in 2001. In addition to all seven stories, this 60th anniversary volume contains some helpful biographical material about the Reys. Margret Rey and H.A.Rey, *The Complete Curious George* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001).

2. Peter N. Stearns, *Anxious Parents: A History of Modern Childrearing in America* (New York, 2003), 13, 23–25.

3. Anita Silvey, "Publisher's Note," in Rey, Margret and H.A.Rey, *The Complete Curious George* (Boston, 2001) unpagued.
4. Leonard S. Marcus, in "Introduction," in Rey, Margret and H.A.Rey, *The Complete Curious George* (Boston, 2001) unpagued.
5. Stearns, 23.
6. Ibid., 23.
7. Ibid., 23.
8. Ibid., 23.
9. Ibid., 24.
10. Ibid., 24–25.
11. Ibid., 25.
12. Ibid., 24–25.
13. Ibid., 13.
14. Ibid., 13.
15. Rey and Rey, 88.
16. Ibid., 89.
17. Ibid., 91.
18. Ibid., 111.
19. Ibid., 198.
20. Ibid., 196.
21. Stearns, 17–56.
22. Louis Menand, "Cat People," *The New Yorker*, December 23 and 30, 2002, 148–154.
23. Quoted in Menand, 152.
24. Menand, 151–154
25. Dee Jones, "Retrospective Essay," in Margret Rey and H.A.Rey, *The Complete Curious George* (Boston, 2001) 410.
26. Ibid, 410.
27. Rey, 204.
28. Ibid., 265.
29. Ibid., 267.

30. Ibid., 272.

31. Ibid., 363.

32. Ibid., 372.

33. Ibid., 363.

34. Jones, 410.

35. "Curious about George," Houghton Mifflin Web Site <http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/features/cgsite/curiousaboutgeorge.shtml> (accessed December 10, 2003).