We tend to approach children’s books as if they were simple or straightforward—as if they had only one moral voice and not a chorus. As Mikhail Bakhtin tells us, “Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions” (293). To compress any work into a single, overt or intended “moral” would be a fallacy. Words do not carry fixed meanings; texts do not have fixed interpretations. Bakhtin also points to the “socially charged” nature of words—the “taste of their context and contexts”—calling to mind other critics who have recognized this interface of culture and text. One such critic is Stephen Greenblatt, who says,

...if an exploration of a particular culture will lead to a heightened understanding of a work of literature produced within that culture, so too a careful reading of a work of literature will lead to a heightened understanding of the culture within which it was produced. (227)

Greenblatt describes how one flavor can be extracted from the “taste” of a text—one context extracted from the layers of contexts—allowing us to examine a culture specific to a time and place.

Curious George is a canonized text in American children’s literature: the beloved monkey protagonist of the story has become an icon of childhood. Though read by many, Curious George is not a work approached with scholarly gravity. “The man-in-the-street puts it in simple terms: children’s literature cannot amount to much because ‘it’s kid’s stuff’” (Fadiman 9). If, according to Bakhtin and Greenblatt, literature is a rich hunting ground for cultural values, children’s literature is no exception. As Clifton Fadiman describes it in his article, “The Case for a Children’s Literature,” “[W]e must not be too quick to pass from the dimensions of length and breadth to that of depth, and say that children’s books can never be as ‘deep.’ The child’s world is smaller than the grown-up’s; but are we so sure that it is shallower?” (16). There is little to no scholarship that treats Curious George as a serious text with serious implications, but the book offers a useful case study in terms of examining cultural values. Some might argue the specific culture in which it was produced cannot be pinned down. George, originally The Adventures of Fifi, was written in France by two German-born Brazilian citizens in the midst of World War II. Wary of Nazi forces approaching Paris, authors Margaret and H.A. Rey left France, bringing the manuscript for George with them. They traveled through Spain and Portugal to Rio and ended their journey in the United States where the book was published in 1941 (Borden). Though the culture that produced it cannot be located in a single country, Curious George can be situated as a text that has absorbed Western cultural values. When those Western values are examined, distinct parallels to Edward Said’s theory of Orientalism, the way in which the Western world interacts with the East, surface in Curious George.

“Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed...as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said 873). While the unique history of interactions between Eastern and Western cultures should not be dismissed, Orientalism is not limited to describing the relationship between those regions. Said calls Orientalism “a Western style” of asserting dominance, and the object being dominated—the Orient—can vary. In Curious George, the relationship between George, an African monkey, and the man in the yellow hat is one such iteration of Orientalism. Using Said’s theory as a model, we can interpret Curious George as an Orientalist text—it participates in the discourse, it illustrates the discourse, and, ultimately, it is a victim of it.
One of Said’s foremost objectives in *Orientalism* is to examine the authority the West imagines itself to possess and the ways this authority is acquired and put into practice. “Above all,” Said writes, “authority can, indeed must, be analyzed” (874). Western authority is built on a foundation of presupposed intellectual authority. The West conceives of itself as intellectually superior because it has accumulated a vast body of knowledge about the Orient. In *Curious George*, the zoo that George is ultimately brought to is an example of a physical accumulation of knowledge in the form of “exotic” animals.

When we are first introduced to the man in the yellow hat, he is wearing what appears to be a matching khaki (yellow) outfit and wielding a camera and a shotgun. He emulates the Western explorer braving the jungles of Africa in search of an explanation of its wild mysteries. The man’s arrival appears motivated by a desire to learn, to make familiar what is inherently considered foreign and strange. When the man in the yellow hat decides to bring George “home” with him to the zoo, we see the impulse to add to the Western body of knowledge.

But Said demonstrates that this knowledge, what the West thinks is “truth,” is only a series of representations: “The exteriority of the representation is always governed by some version of the truism that if the Orient could represent itself, it would; since it cannot, the representation does the job, for the West, and faute de mieux, for the poor Orient” (875). And so, the body of knowledge is compromised, and any conclusions drawn from that body of knowledge are compromised as well. This idea of circulating representations is symbolically evident in the camera the man in the yellow hat carries with him. It implies that the only souvenirs he will bring home with him are photographs. As it turns out, he brings George home with him too. George will metonymically act as a representation of the monkeys in Africa, if not as a representation of Africa as a whole, when he is brought back to be displayed in the zoo. The book *Curious George* itself will also serve as a representation of monkeys and Africa for its readers. Though *George* does not profess to be a factual, objective account, it could very well be a young child’s introduction to monkeys from Africa.
“To have such knowledge of such a thing is to dominate it, to have authority over it. And authority here means for ‘us’ to deny autonomy to ‘it’—the Oriental country—since we know it and it exists, in a sense as we know it” (Said 879). Once knowledge has been acquired and authority built on that knowledge, implementing Western authority means denying autonomy to the Orient. The man in the yellow hat consistently denies George’s autonomy in the story. When the two characters first meet, the text describes the man’s point of view: “‘What a nice little monkey,’ he thought. / I would like to take him home with me” (6). And so the man decides to capture George and “take him home.” No one was consulted in making this decision except for the man in the yellow hat himself; implicit in the text is that he “thought” to himself and himself alone. It is the whim of the man that determines the events that follow. After “popping” (10) George into a bag and rowing him out to a large ship, the man in the yellow hat tells George what he plans to do: “George, I am going to take you to a big Zoo / in a big city. You will like it there. / Now run along and play, / but don’t get into trouble” (14). The man does not ask if George would like to go to the zoo, he tells him. The man also presumes to know what George will “like” after knowing him for only a short time, the majority of which George spent in a burlap sack. In other words, the man speaks for George. We are reminded of Marx’s quote in Said’s Orientalism: “They cannot represent themselves; they must be spoken for” (875). Ultimately, George is brought to the zoo, a world separate from the man’s own, where the man in the yellow hat has determined he belongs.
The characterization of the man’s relationship with George as that of an adult and child appears to justify immediate patronizing. The man takes on a paternalistic tone when he tells George to “run along and play, / but don’t get into trouble” (14). He assumes a position of superiority, dictating George’s freedom and implying punishment should George misbehave. The man in the yellow hat is constructed as a father figure; the illustration where he sits George down to talk on the ship emphasizes this role. The man smokes a pipe and wags his finger—talking down to George—as George sits obediently, eager to listen.

Their relationship is also a gendered one. In Orientalist thought, the West feminizes the Orient and justifies its own authority by constructing itself as masculine in opposition. Though George is not necessarily feminized, he is clearly demasculinized in many ways.1 The text frequently calls attention to the masculinity of the man in the yellow hat. His “name” serves as a constant reminder: he’s called “the man” as if to assert that his intrinsic manhood trumps anything a proper noun could ever tell us. The yellow hat affirms the man’s identity in a similar way. Diana Crane writes in Fashion and Its Social Agendas that hats were crucial indicators of social status for men up until the 1960s (82). Identifying as part of a higher social class substantiates one’s masculinity. To say man and hat in the same breath, as a singular identifying phrase, seems to equate the importance of the two. The hat—referred to as “large” (6) and “big” (12)—can also be interpreted as a phallic symbol. The man’s shotgun and pipe have analogous symbolic significance though they are not invoked nearly as often.

Where the man in the yellow hat is characterized by phallic presence and masculinity, George is characterized by phallic absence and a consistent inability to accomplish the same masculinity as the man. Though he is given a traditionally male name, George is drawn as neutered. He does

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1 The distinction between the two processes—feminization and demasculinization—is that the former ascribes feminine qualities to a being while the latter emphasizes that one being is not as masculine as another; in other words, his or her masculinity is inadequate and cannot compete. In both cases, one being subordinates another on the basis of gender.
not have a hat—a physical symbol of status and masculinity—to speak of. At one point in the text, George tries on the man’s hat, a symbolic attempt to try on the man’s masculinity: the shoe, so to speak, does not fit. There are other instances when George is shown trying to imitate the man in the yellow hat. In one illustration, we see George at the dinner table, lounging in a chair, smoking a pipe, and dressed in men’s pajamas.

But an imitation is all that George will ever be. He is unable to become a man, and it is not simply because he is a monkey. George is clearly humanized, but he is humanized in a way that does not allow him to accomplish the same masculinity as the man in the yellow hat. As a literary character, his story arc can be read as an incomplete Bildungsroman: George is positioned for personal growth, to learn from all the negative consequences he faces because of his curiosity, but by the end of the book, he has not changed. George is a character who never “comes of age” or becomes a man. He is forever trapped in a state of unrealized masculinity.

After some analysis, we find that the implicit age-centered and gendered justifications for the man in the yellow hat’s authority are constructs. But those constructs, and ultimately the man’s authority, are naturalized in the text. Said is adamant that “[t]here is nothing mysterious or natural about authority” (874). If we fail to accept this, authority loses visibility, and we lose our ability to recognize or analyze it. In Curious George, the authority of the man in the yellow hat is never questioned. Rather than acknowledging the man’s role in taking George away from Africa—and thus his assumed ability to do so—George is blamed for his own capture. After the man puts George into a bag, the text passively reads, “George was caught.” The plot summary on the book jacket further claims “being a monkey, his curiosity led him to be captured by a nice man with a yellow hat who wanted to take him home from Africa to the zoo” (front flap). George’s unplanned, transatlantic journey is euphemistically described as “things [that] begin to happen” (14). George does not question the man’s authority, the book does not question the man’s authority, and a child reader will not either. The only autonomy George is allowed is the autonomy to cause his own downfall.

The man’s authority is also described as something that benefits George. The text calls the man in the yellow hat George’s “friend” (50). But stuffing George into a burlap sack does not sound like being a “friend.” Forced immigration and patronizing do not sound like friendly things either. Furthermore, the zoo—George’s final destination and permanent confinement—is described...
as “a nice place for George to live!” (54). Here the text of *Curious George* speaks on George’s behalf. The illustrations also consistently “speak” for George’s attitude—they are representations representing another representation. George is often drawn smiling—perhaps a result of his naïveté, optimism, or both—but this can be interpreted as “confirmation” that George is happy with the way that things have turned out for him. Even when the text says he is “sad” (12) or “frightened” (48), these emotions are trivialized by drawings of George with a smile.

“. . . Orientalism was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, ‘us’) and the strange (the Orient, the East, ‘them’)” (Said 883). In this way, Orientalism is a means by which the Westerner can define the Self as well as the Other. By Orientalizing George and normalizing the man in the yellow hat, the Self is constructed, the “normal” culturally defined and transmitted to the reader. But how exactly are these messages transmitted to a child reader and a beginner reader at that? When a child has not yet learned or experienced what a word can signify, the illustrations—as I have shown through this essay—play a major role in shaping and specifying what is signified by a term. In this book for example, a beginning reader will associate the word “man” with the drawing of a white man in a yellow suit. She will associate “Africa” with a bright, green jungle. She will associate “prison” with a small room made of concrete, a place where you are sent if you fool the authorities, and the only place where George is ever drawn as truly sad.

You could argue that the illustrations signify an idea or cultural value independent of the word they are associated with, and whatever conclusions the child reader draws from the dissonance or congruence of the two signifiers will result in the meaning she interprets. This reader-response process of closing the gap of representation is narrowed by the presence of illustrations, but a gap exists nonetheless. Peter Rabinowitz writes that “reading is never an unmediated encounter between reader and text. Rather, reading is always reading in a particular cultural context, which to a greater or lesser (but always significant) extent predetermines the nature of that reading experience” (141). In reader-response, however, the cultural context is brought to the text by the reader. For a child who may not have expansive cultural understanding, the text can bring cultural context to the reader. *Curious George* can teach Western children, among other things, how to see difference—to see what is strange and what is familiar. This children’s book is decidedly not a
“neutral relay station in the circulation of cultural materials” (Greenblatt 230).

So, what is the moral of this story? I do not think we should stop reading *Curious George* to children for fear of sending subliminal cultural messages. As much as the text can teach the child reader certain cultural values, that child still checks those values against the culture they live in. Readers today might not accept George’s capture, his journey to the zoo, or the so-called benevolence of the man in the yellow hat without any doubts. Moreover, exposing the Orientalist parallels in *Curious George* exposes a pattern of Western Othering. Once the “us” becomes defined—in *George*, as white, adult men (with hats) in power—*everything* that does not fit that narrow description becomes the “Other.” In *George*, we see an Oriental, an African, an animal, an immigrant, a monkey, a child, a prisoner, and so on. The power hierarchies in which the West dominates are endless. But rendering this process of Othering visible—much like Said’s rendering of authority in “Orientalism”—allows us to analyze and question what we would otherwise take part in unknowingly.
Works Cited


