

HEY, MR. REY

Hey, Mr. Rey,

Why does Curious George have no tail?

He is a monkey, after all. Mostly they have tails. You drew him, wrote him. You're the expert, bro.

What can a tail do? A tail can cling. A tail can climb. A tail can lash. A tail can rhyme?

A tail can tell, you know. It tells me what a monkey was.

A tail without a monkey is pure will.

Mr. Rey, you're good at making George look like joy. Red, yellow, blue—it is all primary. Look at what a joyful George can do: wash skyscraper windows. Hide in laundry hanging from a clothesline. Float above a city by balloon. Go home in a sky-brave roadster. Let all the pigs loose!

Is George only a four-year-old with fur?

After all, he can ride a bike, like a kid. He can swallow golden soup. He can sleep. He can call you up.

He cannot fly. But he can try.

He can be good, or bad. Which is which?

You and monkeys went way back. Born Hans Augusto Reyersbach in 1889, you rewrote yourself as a young guy living far from Hamburg, your first home. Your idea: go to Brazil! Adopt some marmosets! Earn a livelihood “by selling bathtubs up and down the Amazon,” you said!

There you changed your name. “Rey” was easier to say, especially by a marmoset.

On your honeymoon, you sailed from Rio to London. Mrs. Rey, sensing future hardship, knitted sweaters for the seagoing marmosets. They caught cold anyway, and died on ship.

Later you replaced them with pet turtles, Claudia and Claudius.

Mr. and Mrs. remained childless.

Mr. Rey, was your wife the monkey first? She said she modeled for you when you began sketching simians. Your debut monkey was named Fifi, to please the French.

While she modeled, what did Mrs. Rey do? Swing? Whoop? Splash?

Since she had no tail, could George have none? Must a tail be a man's? Who was more man, he or you?

George was your boy, maybe. You cared for him. He kept you safe. His books are the tokens of this.

On June 12, 1940, invading Nazis forced you and George and Mrs. Rey to flee your home in Paris; you were Jewish. From Paris you three biked south, sailed to Lisbon, decamped for Rio, embarked to New York.

Along the way, you were stopped often by Germans. Whenever the authorities searched your few belongings, they learned the charms of monkey, ASAP. Your drawings of George, unwrapped from luggage, disarmed everyone who laid eyes on them. Again and again, George brokered your freedom.

In 1941, the first Curious George book was published in the U.S. by Houghton Mifflin. By then, you and George and Mrs. Rey were living at 42 Washington Square South in New York City.

But before that, the first edition in England of your first "curious" book took George's name away from him. Think of all the trouble a limey monkey could have gotten himself into, if King George VI were assumed to be the namesake of your scampering protagonist. Should Curious George mock a monarch? Call him Zozo, instead!

Mr. Rey, why don't we miss the tail in him? I didn't, long before I did.

Is it because George is too much like us?

Is it because we're ignorant of monkeys?

Is it because we're unimaginative?

I can't picture life with a tail, or life without it for someone whose family all once had one. To me, the tail is just a wraith, nature's joke or—if we must—its mystery. Upon this mystery, or upon its lack, we fix our eyes in order to make up, perhaps, for what we haven't got yet: tail. Know-how. Knowing how to be. Knowing who. Knowing where.

These are the consolations of the edgy and inept observer who can live almost anyplace with anyone, as just a smartish lout.

Mr. Rey, you finally said your monkey was a concocted species, with no real-life primate equivalent. So we might as well conclude now that talk of tail verities is more or less meaningless.

But that's too rational. And I'm still curious.

Kisses,
Molly