

Curious George (4 stars out of 5)

Little George is as curious -- and entertaining -- as always in the new big-screen adaptation of the beloved character

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That George. He is Every Toddler, that eternal 2-year-old who needs "suicide watch" parenting because every minute of every day is an accident waiting to happen, as in "What'll he get into next?"

Curious George, the new children's cartoon based on the beloved H.A. Rey character, gets George -- his comical inquisitiveness, his cheerful innocence. It's a feather-light take on this magically simple formula -- a young monkey, curious about his world, stumbling into ours.

George, who doesn't speak, gets along fine in Africa, chasing bubbles underwater, making mischief with the elephants and hippos. Then the Man in the Yellow Hat shows up. He has been sent to find a huge lost idol for his museum, which is in financial trouble. He's in for a rude surprise when he reaches the idol. And he's in for a funny one when he gets home. George, who narrowly avoids being named "Washington" by this science nerd (he's voiced by Will Ferrell), has stowed away, following his new peek-a-boo pal back to New York.

Ted, as the Man in the Yellow Hat has been named, was gullible enough to buy a yellow suit and hat for his expedition, and is addled enough to miss the fact that fetching Miss Maggie, the schoolteacher (Drew Barrymore), brings her class to his failing museum, time and again, because she has a crush on him. She makes her kids use the buddy system when they visit.

"Everybody needs a buddy, right?"

Ted, that's a pick-up line. Pay attention.

He has a lot on his mind -- anthropology, paleontology, saving Mr. Bloomberry's (Dick Van Dyke) museum, getting evicted because a monkey has moved into his "no-pets" apartment.

Ferrell has the right gifts to do animation voices. He gives Ted an offhand goofiness and put-upon whine. He drops his ship's peanuts through the grates in his stateroom -- "Oh nooooo. NOT the honey-roasted goodness!"

He's understated, as is the movie around him. George turns his micro-second attention to balloons, fireflies, dinosaur bones and rolls of toilet paper, and the animators follow him there.

The delightful opening and a bit involving George's first encounter with fireflies were created by Orlando animation house Project Firefly, alumni of the Disney studio that made Lilo & Stitch and one of several studios to animate this Matthew O'Callaghan project. It's a clean, uncluttered cartoon of lovely primary colors and timeless gags that any child (this is an 8-and-younger movie) will adore.

It loses something in its pursuit of a big finish, but this is an adaptation that is absolutely faithful to the child's-eye-view books, down to the name of the ship that brings George from Africa -- the H.A. Rey.

Best of all, there's a credo to learn here -- "Let your curiosity lead you." And that makes Curious George pretty much the perfect first trip to the movies for your inquisitive 3-year-old.