

George and Martha Go Camping: James Marshall's Radical Minority

At 8 inches by 8 inches and mostly circulating in soft cover, James Marshall's *George and Martha* books are easy to lose on a shelf. Each slender book further divides into five miniature stories, some as short as four pages, leaving little room for moral lessons or even, at times, narrative. *George and Martha* are hippos, but they take up remarkably little space. Similarly, as Maurice Sendak lamented in his 1992 obituary, Marshall was admired-but-overlooked: the literary establishment never recognized him with a major prize. My paper argues that Marshall's minor status was a feature, not a bug, of his literary innovations. Like his friends Sendak and Arnold Lobel, Marshall's identity as a gay man marginalized him within the dominant culture and within the marginalized (by mainstream literary standards) genre of children's literature. A person not granted full rights writing within a genre denied full artistic recognition, Marshall, to quote Pierre Bourdieu, made a virtue of necessity. He embraced minority, rejecting the contemporaneous conventions of successful picture books, instead creating his own alternative tradition of children's literature, which he goes so far as to represent on the bookshelves of the stories themselves. Susan Sontag's 1964 theorization of camp helps us understand Marshall's project of the 1970s and 80s. To "camp" is to create space for yourself in a culture that doesn't want you, to find joy and creativity on the margins you've been consigned to. In *George and Martha*, we see a camp version of children's literature, in which Marshall jettisons didacticism for the pleasures of wit, beauty, and friendship. *George and Martha* seem so fresh and contemporary today because Marshall's version of children's literature has steadily gained authority in the 25 years since his death. But our current moment obscures Marshall's revolutionary labor of creating his own literary history and community on the margins.