

# George Washington and Slavery: Going Beyond Picture Books to Teach about Our Flawed Founders

Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, James Joshua Coleman, and Lindsay R. Cicchino

In early 2016, the children’s picture book *A Birthday Cake for George Washington* created controversy. Intended for children between the ages of four and eight, *Birthday Cake* tells the story of Washington’s enslaved cook, Hercules, and his struggle to concoct the perfect treat for George Washington’s birthday. Hercules is described as “very upset” about the lack of sugar and even “roared at the kitchen maids—*Where has the sugar gone?!<sup>1</sup>*” The harsh historical realities of enslavement in the 1700s in general, and in Martha and George Washington’s household in particular, are obscured in the storytelling.<sup>2</sup> This struggle for sugar creates a narrative that may lead young children to believe that the major issue in an enslaved person’s life was a lack of baking ingredients. It is a historical fact that Hercules escaped enslavement one year after the events portrayed in *Birthday Cake*; nowhere is that represented in the text. Neither is the fact that the Washingtons rotated their enslaved workers between the presidential residence in Philadelphia and the Mount Vernon plantation in Virginia. Under Pennsylvania law, they would have been freed if they had remained in the state for six months.

A number of critics, educators, parents, and activists denounced *Birthday Cake*. Many felt it was unethical to put a picture book in the hands of young children that portrays historical inaccuracies, while simultaneously omit-

ting less-than-desirable facts about our nation’s founding.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, critics questioned how the depiction of “smiling slaves” and an enjoyment of forced labor would affect the development of children, the way they viewed black children and adults, and their understanding of George Washington as our nation’s first president. Questions like, “What message does this send?” and “How will this make our students who are descended from slaves feel?” were asked to audiences on Twitter and in literacy education blogs. Activist and community organizer Leslie MacFadyen (@LeslieMac on Twitter) and other social media influencers coined a new hashtag—#SlaveryWithASmile.<sup>4</sup> The work of activists, critics, and scholars resulted in Scholastic withdrawing the book from print and renewed discussion around the kinds of stories for children that should be used in classrooms to teach social studies.

Although some may assert that *A Birthday Cake for George Washington* is an extreme case, benevolent presentations of the American heritage myth are fairly typical within the picture book genre and in children’s literature more generally. Many popular historical topics in children’s and young adult literature—slavery, the Jim Crow South, Japanese internment camps of World War II, and the genocide of Native Americans, to name just a few—are set in the midst of the incomprehensible horrors of

American history. As literary critic Clare Bradford notes, one of the key functions of children’s literature is to “explain and interpret national histories—histories that involve invasion, conquest, and assimilation.”<sup>5</sup> However, presenting and reading about these fraught events can prove difficult in light of key functions of children’s literature: to transmit values, convey a sense of nostalgia and wonder, and spark young imaginations.<sup>6</sup> While some may question whether young children should be exposed to the realities of our national past, a recent report from Teaching Tolerance suggests that misperceptions about slavery do not get corrected in later grades,<sup>7</sup> making the information presented in picture books that much more important.

It is worth noting that the Teaching Tolerance report also warns of the dangers of teaching about slavery without proper context, which may be a particular issue at the elementary level:

In elementary school, if slavery is mentioned at all in state content standards, it is generally by implication, with references to the Underground Railroad or other “feel good” stories that deal with slavery’s end, rather than its inception and persistence. Young students learn about liberation before they learn about enslavement; they learn to celebrate the Constitution before

learning about the troublesome compromises that made its ratification possible. They may even learn about the Emancipation Proclamation before they learn about the Civil War. Many teachers tell us they avoid teaching about slavery's violence in elementary school, preferring to focus on positive developments in American history. Yet these early narratives often form the schema by which later learning is acquired, making them difficult to undo.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, using only a picture book that depicts slavery and George Washington as *Birthday Cake* does may be deeply problematic for students long past their elementary years. *How* and *when* the topic of slavery is first introduced to children is important. Even if the topic of slavery is not introduced in the curriculum until the upper elementary or middle school grades, it is likely that students may have picked up metanarratives about slavery and the founding through other sources, such as picture books, television programs, or conversations at home.

Metanarratives—stories that are told and retold over time, so that they become *the* story—have proven instrumental in cultivating conceptions of the Founders as invariably honest, brave, and ethical. A prime example is the tale of George Washington confessing that he chopped down the cherry tree. While this narrative crafted an image of Washington as inherently moral, even from childhood, it was but a fiction, created by Mason Locke Weems, one of Washington's first biographers.<sup>9</sup> Although the tale was fictitious, this story, nonetheless, powerfully influenced popular conceptions of President Washington for several decades. Accordingly, narrating the lives of the Founders in ways that young people can understand and that take into consideration the tension between historical fact,

fiction, and myth can be challenging. Later in this article we suggest ways to take on this challenge, but first we dig a little deeper into Washington's portrayal in books for young children and young adults to make clear just how challenging it is to find books that provide readers with a balanced picture of the founding fathers.

In a bibliography annually published since 1972, *Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People*, (presented in this May/June issue of *Social Education*) the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) has worked with the Children's Book Council (CBC) to provide a resource guide of selected texts for teachers of grades K-12. These books cover a range of subject matter from informational texts such as *100 Inventions that Made History* to the retelling of Native American folktales in picture books such as *The Legend of the Lady Slipper*. Unsurprisingly, the life of George Washington has been an oft-published topic. A review of the past 15 years of NCSS's recommended texts reveals that George Washington has been featured in at least 10 publications that take up his legacy in myriad ways. Texts from earlier booklists (2000 and 2002) position Washington from a bibliographic perspective, bolstering perspectives of him as a war hero (*The World Turned Upside Down: George Washington and the Battle of Yorktown*) and founding father (*Our Country's Presidents*). Aligned with popular teachings about George Washington, these texts reinforce a nationalist image of the first U.S. president by illuminating feats of military prowess and his contributions to the founding of the United States.

On a more whimsical note, in 2002 and 2005, two books were published exploring Washington's fraught dental history. Quickly debunking the myth of wooden teeth (they were more likely made of hippo ivory, gold, lead,<sup>10</sup> or even pulled human teeth<sup>11</sup>), these texts, in line with the NCSS selection criteria,

“present an original theme or a fresh slant on a traditional topic.”<sup>12</sup> Texts such as these serve as a welcome complement to more traditional histories, reinvigorating student interest by humanizing apotheosized figures. The recognition of George Washington as a man—better yet, as a man with altogether questionable oral hygiene—allows young readers to connect with that historical figure, as they see their own humanity, and their own fallibility, reflected there.

However, few biographies about George Washington for young readers raise concerns about his position on slavery. Recent publications have begun to grapple explicitly with Washington's slaveholding, which stands in contrast to earlier texts for children. For example, *George Washington: An Illustrated Biography*, recommended by NCSS in 2005, represents Washington's perspective on slavery through unframed primary source documents.<sup>13</sup> This lack of authorial framing—neglecting to explain historical context, photo and document selection, and the implications of layout in these texts—invites non-critical readings, as the documents often portray Washington quite anachronistically within a neo-abolitionist frame.<sup>14</sup> In *An Illustrated Biography*, Washington is portrayed as transformed in his final moments, with deathbed understandings positioned as redemption for a lifetime of slave ownership. Recognizing the popular mythos surrounding George Washington, young readers might interpret unframed documentary texts like these in light of metanarratives, such as the legend of the cherry tree, that disavow conceptions of Washington as a slave owner, seller, and, furthermore, as an individual who according to Richard Parkinson, a Mount Vernon neighbor, “treated [his slaves] with more severity than any other man.”<sup>15</sup>

It is worth noting that the Mt. Vernon website represents slavery at Washington's home with a heading that reflects the contested nature of the available information: “Accounts

vary regarding Washington’s treatment of Mount Vernon’s enslaved population.” During his lifetime, opinions about Washington’s cruelty were varied; for instance, one foreign visitor to Washington’s estate remarked that he was comparatively kinder to the individuals whom he enslaved than to his fellow Virginians. What is clear is that Washington frequently punished his enslaved workers via whipping, increased manual labor, and the forced separation of families; on several occasions, he is recorded to have sold family members to West Indies traders. These facts remain a part of the historical record.

In *Master George’s People: George Washington, His Slaves, and Revolutionary Transformation*, Marfé Ferguson Delano attempts such criticality through directly addressing Washington’s slaveholding at Mount Vernon.<sup>16</sup> Described by Kirkus Reviews as “a revealing portrait of the father of our country as a slave owner,” this text weaves together biographical sketches of enslaved individuals with period illustrations and reenactment photography of Mount Vernon historical interpreters.<sup>17</sup> Knit together with lively narrative, this text moves through the history of enslavement at Mount Vernon by blending physical and temporal locales. In *Master George’s People*, enslaved childhood becomes a space interwoven with both work and play, and the treatment of adulthood slavery is presented as mutable, changing relative to Washington’s evolving ideas regarding the ethicality of slavery. Intended to expand young readers’ knowledge about George Washington, this book, while thoroughly researched, nonetheless garnered critique that calls attention to the text’s often bucolic representation of slavery. Howard University professor Clarence Lusane, writing for the Zinn Education Project, notes that the reenactment photography—photography hailed by Delano as a defining feature of the text—misrepresents the

brutal realities of slavery: “Many of the pictures in the book are of slave reenactors.... Most are smiling or have neutral faces. You would be hard-pressed to find an unhappy person.”<sup>18</sup> Recalling the smiling slaves of *Birthday Cake*, this trend reinforces the distinction between intention and impact.<sup>19</sup> While intended to illuminate Washington’s “radical transformation” regarding slave ownership, *Master George’s People* nonetheless reinforces problematic notions of slavery—#SlaveryWithASmile. Whether unframed or candidly addressed, the propensity for misrepresentations of slavery in children’s literature highlights the need for social studies education that cultivates critical perspectives toward any text, document, or composed literary work. Using a critical multicultural lens to read children’s stories may offer a way to provide a balanced perspective of the past.

### Using a Critical Multicultural Lens to Read Children’s Stories about George Washington

Addressing the need for critical perspectives in the teaching of texts for children and young adults, Botelho and Rudman’s *Critical Multicultural*

*Analysis of Children’s Literature* provides a way forward. In chapter 1, “Metaphors We Read By,” Maria José Botelho and Masha Kabakow Rudman explain that “critical multicultural analysis focuses on the reader as the midwife of meaning.”<sup>20</sup> Both a set of tools and an orientation toward texts, critical multicultural analysis is a useful framework for readers, moving them from a position of passive consumption to critical engagement. This approach addresses the debate of intention versus impact by equipping readers with skills to surface issues of power and privilege. To address social inequality engendered by asymmetries of power, Botelho and Rudman position strategic inquiry as central to the deployment of critical multicultural analysis and provide a list of “critical questions—as originally proposed by Nathalie Wooldridge<sup>21</sup>—to guide exploration of such power in children’s literature (see Table 1, Column 1). Recognizing both the conventions and features specific to many social studies texts, in Column 2, we provide alterations to Wooldridge’s heuristic that align with the specific needs of social studies educators (See Table 1, Column 2).

Table 1. Questions for Critical Engagement

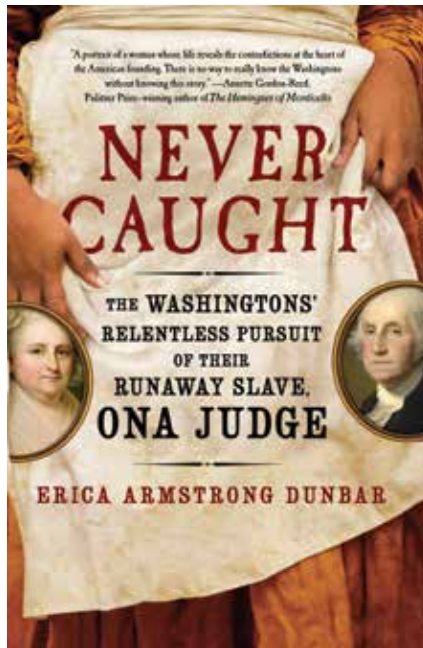
Wooldridge’s Questions	Social Studies Specific Questions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why is the text written that way? How else could it have been written?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How have documentary sources been curated and for what purposes? How else could they have been curated?</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How else could it have been written? Who is silenced (and heard) here? What are the possible readings of this situation/event/character?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How have primary sources been framed? Who is silenced (and heard) by this framing? What are the possible readings of these documents?</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What (or whose) view of the world, or kinds of behaviors are presented as normal by the text?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do annotations of photos and documents lead us to conclude as to what is posited as normal within the text?</li> </ul>

## Recommendations for Teachers

George Washington's legacy is far from the only one that warrants reconsideration as social studies and English teachers prepare lessons on historical figures. In addition to the tools of critical multicultural analysis, the following recommendations for teachers can expand our knowledge base of historical children's literature and supplementary material. This new information can equip teachers to combat the single narratives that can be perpetuated in schooling and in society, think critically about the books currently in our classroom libraries, and facilitate discussions that allow students to analyze multiple historical perspectives.

We can:

1. **Get informed:** Primary sources are readily available online. The Mount Vernon website provides useful materials for teaching about George Washington, as does the Smithsonian, National Museum of African American History and Culture, and the National Archives. Educational blogs and social media sites on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Tumblr also provide useful information about history, although these sites must be evaluated for accuracy. Finally, the weekly #sschat on Twitter is a good forum to talk with other teachers about best practices in social studies education.
2. **Get critical:** We can take some time to go through the books on the shelves of our classroom libraries, asking ourselves questions like: Whose story is being told in this biography? What information is being left out in these stories? Is there more to this historical figure than is being portrayed? This will help us figure out what types of books need to be added to our collections, as well as what types of discussions need to be had when using these books with our students.



**Contrasting *Never Caught* with a Jane Addams award-winning picture book published a decade earlier, *The Escape of Oney Judge: Martha Washington's Slave Finds Freedom*, reveals how picture books can unwittingly obscure Washington's complicity in slavery.**

3. **Get more of the story and get talking:** Curriculum restrictions do not always make it easy to present a more well-rounded depiction of historical figures, but it is essential for students to interrogate our world in order to figure out why we teach history in the ways that we do. We can plan for time to read a primary source, look at photographs, view video clips, or listen to speakers who show sides of historical figures that are not shown in social studies textbooks.

It is troubling that our review of *Notable Social Studies Trade Books*

for *Young People* published through 2016 did not bring up a single title that mentions that Washington's treatment of those enslaved at Mount Vernon was typical for the time period, or that several people attempted to escape to freedom—historical knowledge omitted from recalled stories like *A Birthday Cake for George Washington*. While we appreciate newer offerings, such as *Master George's People*, we share Lusane's aforementioned concerns about its depictions. Children must learn about the realities of enslavement beyond #SlaveryWithASmile. It is our hope that new books addressing Washington and slavery will inspire authors of historical children's literature to reshape picture books to address the realities of enslavement and the contradiction inherent in the founding of the United States of America.

One such new title that may be of interest to teachers for background knowledge is Erica Armstrong Dunbar's *Never Caught: The Washingtons' Relentless Pursuit of Their Runaway Slave, Ona Judge*, which was a finalist for the 2017 National Book Award for nonfiction.<sup>22</sup> Contrasting *Never Caught* with a Jane Addams award-winning picture book published a decade earlier, *The Escape of Oney Judge: Martha Washington's Slave Finds Freedom*, reveals how picture books can unwittingly obscure Washington's complicity in slavery.<sup>23</sup> Albeit a vivid depiction of the life of Ona Judge, *The Escape of Oney Judge* does more than omit historical information that might be troubling for younger children. It tells a slightly different story: in the picture book version of this tale, Martha Washington *alone* owns Oney, although this somewhat elides the complexity of her mother's status as one of the Custis dower slaves.<sup>24</sup>

A look at both titles shows how the authors' approaches to their audiences vary. *Never Caught's* subtitle alludes to the fact that, legally, Ona Judge was

Table 2. **Getting More of the Story Through Classroom Talk**

Excerpt from <i>The Escape of Oney Judge: Martha Washington's Slave Finds Freedom</i>	Supplementary Resources (Accessible to Upper Elementary Students)	Example of Student Rephrasing
<p>"When the Revolutionary War finally ended, General Washington came home to Virginia, safe and sound, a hero. People were calling him the Father of His Country. He was the father of Mount Vernon, too, keeping a stern eye on all the work that had to be done."</p>	<p>"Ten Facts About Washington &amp; Slavery," <i>George Washington's Mount Vernon</i>.*</p>	<p>"General Washington was the Father of His Country. But he was more than the father to many of the people at Mount Vernon. He owned them."</p>
<p>"Liberty means the people are free," he said.</p> <p>"But we're not," Oney said.</p> <p>"Be careful what you say," he scolded.</p> <p>"You're lucky to be in the Mansion."</p>	<p>"President's House Site: Enslaved People in the Washingtons' Household," <i>Independence National Historical Park, Pennsylvania</i>.**</p>	<p>"Liberty means the people are free. But, at the time, this freedom was not for all."</p>

\* "Ten Facts about Washington and Slavery," George Washington's Mount Vernon, n.d. [www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/slavery/ten-facts-about-washington-slavery/](http://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/slavery/ten-facts-about-washington-slavery/).

\*\* "President's House Site: Enslaved People in the Washingtons' Household," Independence National Historical Park, Pennsylvania. [www.nps.gov/inde/learn/historyculture/enslaved-people.htm](http://www.nps.gov/inde/learn/historyculture/enslaved-people.htm).

both George and Martha Washingtons' slave: *The Washingtons' Relentless Pursuit of Their Runaway Slave*. In contrast, McCully's picture book version of the same story refers to Martha Washington as Oney Judge's owner, since she came to Mount Vernon as part of the Custis household. While the story told in *Never Caught* focuses on the harsh treatment that Ona and the other enslaved people of Mount Vernon received, *The Escape of Oney Judge* positions Ona, through word and image, as a relatively privileged house servant, singled out for special treatment.

Although *Never Caught* was published 10 years after *The Escape of Oney Judge*, the information about George Washington's slaveholding has been known to historians for quite some time. Heretofore, such information was not viewed as suitable for young children—creating an information gap. One way of bridging these gaps is to "get more of the story" and "get talking." Teachers can use resources like the Mount Vernon website and books like *Never Caught*

to create a chart like the one above to build bridges of understanding for their students.

After examining picture books like *The Escape of Oney Judge* along with our students, we can talk with them about why certain kinds of stories about historical figures are commonly known, while others are not. Along with the critical questions from the previous chart, we may discuss: How does this story affect our current understanding of this person? How do stories of historical figures affect our understanding of the world today?

### Conclusion

In his farewell address, George Washington advised the fledging United States of America to "Observe good faith and justice towards all nations. Cultivate peace and harmony with all."<sup>25</sup> Advocating peace, Washington warned the country away from conflict, explaining, "The nation which indulges towards another a habitual hatred ... is in some degree a slave." These are moving words, indeed. The irony is that,

in his final days as president, George Washington still owned slaves. Children and adults alike deserve to explore this paradox.

Secondary—and elementary—teachers serve a powerful role as intellectual gatekeepers of our nation's history. If we use flawed picture books to teach about our nation's founders, we can still embrace critical stances to challenge single stories about our nation's founding, as well as honor the lives, stories, and experiences of those enslaved under the oppressive institution of American slavery. We do not live in a binary world. Teaching the complicated truth about George Washington—both nuanced and critical—will help develop our students' historical thinking, as well as their empathy and imagination. 🌍


### Notes

1. Ramin Ganeshram, *A Birthday Cake for George Washington* (New York: Scholastic, 2016).
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3. Edith Campbell, "Book Review: *A Birthday Cake for George Washington*," *Crazy QuiltEdi*, blog, (Jan. 13, 2016), <https://campbele.wordpress.com/2016/01/13/book-review-a-birthday-cake-for-george-wash>

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  - Ibid.
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  - Kathryn Gehred, "Did George Washington's False Teeth Come from Slaves?: A Look at the Evidence, the Responses to That Evidence, and the Limitations of History," *Washington's Quill*, <http://gwpapers.virginia.edu/george-washingtons-false-teeth-come-slaves-look-evidence-responses-evidence-limitations-history/>.
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