Since it opened on Broadway in 2015, Hamilton: An American Musical, the Tony Award–winning show written by MacArthur genius grant recipient Lin-Manuel Miranda (T. Kail, director), has been a phenomenon among students—and their teachers—around the United States. Using Ron Chernow’s award-winning biography of US founding father Alexander Hamilton (2005) as his foundational text, Miranda chose to use nontraditional casting for the play. The only visibly White actor with a speaking role in the original Broadway cast was Jonathan Groff, who played a comical yet ominous King George III. The rest of the characters, including Alexander Hamilton, Aaron Burr, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and the Schuyler sisters were all magnificently played by actors of color. While the historical accuracy of the musical has been questioned by some scholars (cf. Monteiro, 2016), the popular allure of the hip-hop-infused score cannot be denied.

My niece, herself a frequent lead in her middle school’s musicals, was quite compelled by the music and the message of Hamilton as a seventh and eighth grader. While she loved the fun songs by the Schuyler sisters during the first act of the play, like “Helpless,” I found myself most compelled by the songs of the second act, including “One Last Time,” “It’s Quiet Uptown,” and the unforgettable final number, “Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story?” Founding father George Washington begins this piece:

Let me tell you what I wish I’d known
When I was young and dreamed of glory
You have no control . . .
Who lives, who dies, who tells your story?
(Miranda, 2015, track 23, C. Jackson)

One by one, the characters who revolved around Hamilton’s life like satellites sum up the grandeur of the story through song. There is a moment when the spotlight falls upon the stage and a lyric soprano begins to sing as the chorus announces her identity:

(Eliza…)
I put myself back in the narrative
(Eliza…)
I stop wasting time on tears
I live another fifty years
It’s not enough…
(Eliza…)
(Miranda, 2015, track 23, P. Soo)

Hamilton’s widow narrates her story of life after his death beautifully, becoming the true heroine of the play, moving from victim of her dead husband’s philandering to victorious curator of his legacy, benefactor of orphans, and mother of the Republic. While elsewhere, I have been critical of the hagiographic depiction of founders like Washington and Hamilton, obscuring their legacies of slaveholding (Thomas, Coleman & Cicchino, 2018), it is significant that much of the play’s viral reception has been facilitated through social media. Although most youth and young adults cannot afford to attend the Broadway show, a libretto on Genius.com, as well as lively hashtags from #Hamiltunes to #Hamiltrash, have encouraged discourse about the founding fathers, not as distant and lofty Great Men of History who invented the world as we know it, but as everyday people who had many of the same concerns as people living in the contemporary United States. Positioning Hamilton himself as an immigrant from the Caribbean is a way of, in Eliza’s words putting one’s self back into the narrative and
controlling who lives, who thrives, who tells one’s story.

One need not look solely toward Broadway to find ways that the realm of story is starting to transform for the better. Middle grades literature itself is starting to include mirrors, windows, and doors of many different children’s lives. As I write these words, I am reflecting upon the most recent American Library Association annual convention, which awarded its top honors for books appropriate for middle grade readers to several authors of color. Erin Entrada Kelly won this year’s Newbery Medal for her beautifully diverse adventure story Hello, Universe. Renee Watson was awarded both a Newbery Honor and a Coretta Scott King Medal for the lovely and reflective Piecing Me Together, which is wonderful for older middle schoolers. Perennial fave Jason Reynolds won a Newbery Honor for his verse novel Long Way Down. Truly, we have come a long way.

Are all middle graders’ stories being told? Even a cursory glance at the larger children’s media landscape shows how far we still have to go. Although this year’s statistics on multicultural children’s literature from the University of Wisconsin’s Cooperative Children’s Book Center (CCBC) show some movement, we are far from a time when all middle schoolers are able to see their own experiences mirrored in the books that they read (Bishop, 2012). During the most recent year for which statistics are available, the CCBC received 3,700 books from publishers in the United States and abroad (Tyner, 2017). Among these:

- 340 had significant African or African American content/characters.
  - 100 of these were by Black authors and/or illustrators. (29.41% #OwnVoices)
- 72 had significant American Indian/First Nations content/characters.
  - 38 of these were by American Indian/First Nations authors and/or illustrators. (52.78% #OwnVoices)
- 310 had significant Asian/Pacific or Asian/Pacific American content/characters.
  - 122 of these were by authors and/or illustrators of Asian/Pacific heritage. (39.35% #OwnVoices)
- 216 had significant Latinx content/characters.
  - 73 of these were by Latinx authors and/or illustrators. (33.8% #OwnVoices)

Most of the books that we use with our middle graders do not yet feature the rich diversity of their experiences and lives, those of their friends, or those of children around the country.

Who lives? Who thrives? Who tells one’s story? These sobering statistics reveal a profound diversity gap in children’s and young adult literature, including those specifically for the middle grades. It means that most of the books that we use with our middle graders do not yet feature the rich diversity of their experiences and lives, those of their friends, or those of children around the country. Truly, if stories matter, (Fox & Short, 2003), we should ask what happens to raising the next generation of readers in today’s separate and unequal literary landscape.

Given the need to incorporate stories that reflect all children’s lives into middle grades curricula, where should we begin if there are not enough diverse books in the classroom or school library? Every year in my children’s literature classes at Penn, I assign the first chapter of Botelho & Rudman’s Critical Multicultural Analysis of Children’s Literature, “Metaphors We Read By,” itself inspired by another book, The Metaphors We Live By (Lakoff & Johnson, 1981). Botelho and Rudman write, “Critical multicultural analysis focuses on the reader as the midwife of meaning. The theoretical constructs of discourse, ideology, subjectivity, and power lead the reader to locating how the power relations of class, race, and gender are exercised in text” (2009, p. 3).

In addition to focusing on decoding and comprehension, instead of concentrating solely on leveling and assessment, I ask current and future teachers to consider how metaphor shifts the lenses by which we read.

One answer to the question of who gets to tell stories is one Botelho and Rudman pose: What are the metaphors we read by? This invitation prompts us to think about not only what we read and why we are reading it, but also about what happens during the reading process itself. In the first chapter, my students encounter critical questions that we spend the balance of the semester thinking about. These questions expose some of these previously hidden “metaphors we’ve been reading by” all our lives.

- What (or whose) view of the world or kinds of behaviors are presented as normal by the text?
- Why is the text written that way? How else could it have been written?
- What assumptions does the text make about age, gender, [class], and culture (including the age, gender, and culture of its readers)?
- Who is silenced (and heard) here?
Whose interests might best be served by this text?

What ideological positions can you identify?

What are the possible readings of this situation/event/character? How did you get to that reading?

What moral or political position does a reading support? How do particular cultural and social contexts make particular readings available (e.g., who could you not say that to)? How might it be challenged?

(Botelho & Rudman, 2009, p. 4, as quoted from Wooldridge, 2001)

This way of reading stories is new for many people. That’s because when we first encounter books as children, we are focused on learning how to read “the word and the world” for the first time. Of course, it may not occur to us to ask critical questions of most stories when we are young. Author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie notes that “we are most vulnerable and impressionable in the face of a story, particularly as children” (2009). Generally, we are taught to accept the book, the story, the film, the comic strip, or the television program as presented. Thus, we form expectations for stories, those expectations become norms, and those norms become the metaphors that we read by.

Not all of today’s middle scholars are uncritical as they read. Some young people have always had to imagine themselves into stories that have, for the most part, excluded them. This was because, historically, stories that were sanctioned as appropriate for children assumed a White upper-class readership as the sole audience. In the past, it was necessary for people from the margins to identify with and comprehend these officially sanctioned stories just to be educated. Whether literary prose, religious metaphors, or edicts and laws, would-be readers and writers from nondominant groups have had to accommodate textual erasure and misrepresentation while reading for centuries. Thus, communities from the margins developed alternate metaphors to read by—forming critical lenses for reading the word and the world.

Who lives? Who thrives? Who tells one’s story?

One way of bridging the gaps in the books that we give to our middle school students is by encouraging them not only to tell their own stories about their lives but to restory the books they are reading, much like Lin-Manuel Miranda did with Hamilton. Just as Miranda recast the “ten dollar Founding Father” in his own image, our students can do so as well. Restorying is a process by which narratives are reshaped to represent a diversity of perspectives and experiences that are often missing or silenced in mainstream texts, media, and popular discourse (Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016). While people have always restoried narratives, the social media age has encouraged many more people to engage in this kind of work, from fandom communities where fan writers retell the most popular movies from the Marvel Cinematic Universe to Star Wars to hip-hop, which provides alternate stories about life in marginalized communities to those sanctioned by news reports and politicians.

Here are some of the ways that we can encourage our students to engage in restorying after reading a good book together:

- Retell the story in another time and/or place—perhaps even your hometown!
- Retell the story from the point of view of a character other than the protagonist, especially a character from nondominant backgrounds and perspectives.
- Retell the story in another format. Make a comic, film a book trailer, turn it into a picturebook for younger readers. (What’s lost? What’s gained? What did you learn?)
- Retell the story by changing the ending, or even the beginning.
- Retell the story by writing what happens next.
- Retell the story by writing yourself, your family, and your friends into the action.

Who lives, who thrives, who tells a story depends upon the storyteller. Teaching students that they, too, are authors and have power over their words is important, for the work of making new worlds always begins in the imagination.

Teaching students that they, too, are authors and have power over their words is important, for the work of making new worlds always begins in the imagination.

Imagining alternate points of view—and transforming the metaphors we read by—has proven to be quite difficult, as a mere cursory glance at today’s social, cultural, and political landscape reveals. But when we encourage young people to “put themselves back into the narrative” as they read middle grades literature, we open new realms, new opportunities, and new possibilities for them. If a historical figure like Eliza Schuyler Hamilton can be reimagined through the eyes of a young male Puerto Rican American creator, the potential for our young people to restory the world around them is limitless.
References


2018 NCTE Outstanding Middle Level Educator Award

Yolanda Gonzales from The Joe Barnhart Academy, Beeville, Texas, received the 2018 NCTE Outstanding Middle Level Educator in the English Language Arts Award. This award recognizes exceptional English language arts teachers of grades 6 through 8 who have demonstrated excellence in teaching English language arts and inspired a spirit of inquiry and a love of learning in their students.

The award was presented at the Middle Level Luncheon during the 2018 NCTE Annual Convention in Houston, Texas. Learn more about Yolanda and how you can nominate an outstanding educator for the 2019 award at http://www2.ncte.org/awards/outstanding-educator-middle/.