



Two Versions of Notorious RBG, Two Representations of Ruth Bader Ginsburg: How are they different and why does that matter?

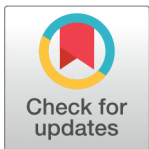
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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I am an Assistant Professor in the areas of Secondary English Education and Literacy & Second Language Studies at the University of Cincinnati. Previous to joining the faculty at the University of Cincinnati, I worked as a high school English language arts teacher and drum line instructor. My research and teaching focus on young adult literature, secondary English teaching methods, lesson planning, dialogic pedagogies, and digital literacies. My goal is to work with current and future educators to create equitable educational opportunities for middle and secondary students in the Cincinnati area and beyond. To that end, my own professional development efforts over the past six years have involved being part of a collective devoted to culturally sustaining and anti-racist pedagogy. We work on instructional practices together; read, talk, and learn together; and keep each other going. Aside from my professional pursuits, I enjoy playing drums and guitars with my little one (3 years old), who dances spectacularly and makes up the best songs about lady bugs transforming into bears transforming into goats. My wife Kara is an amazing educator, poet, and advocate for narcolepsy awareness. We're from the Midwest, so if you visit our home, we will readily admit to being bad at cooking food before serving you food that we have cooked. We will apologize throughout the meal, offering specific critiques of our own dishes. (It's really not that bad, but sorry anyway.) You don't have to say anything – just roll with it – we're truly happy you're with us.



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INTRODUCTION

The following book review is actually two book reviews. The first is about *The Notorious RBG: The Life and Times of Ruth Bader Ginsburg* and the second is about *The Notorious RBG: The Life and Times of Ruth Bader Ginsburg (Young Readers' Edition)*. Both versions of the book trace Ginsburg's ascendancy to the Supreme Court, from a young Jewish Brooklynite girl who lost her mother to cervical cancer to a law student who navigated too many layers of misogyny and anti-Semitism to name to a Columbia law professor and founder of the Women's Rights Project and finally to a Justice who would come to be known as "the great dissenter." However, these two versions of the book also come with different representations of Justice Ginsburg, raising questions relevant to social studies students: How is Ginsburg's life represented differently and why does that matter? Below, I provide a brief portrait of each version of the book and suggest that reading across the original and youth editions in the classroom opens up opportunities for critical inquiry.

THE ORIGINAL: A LIVING DOCUMENT

Notorious RBG: The Life and Times of Ruth Bader Ginsburg by Irin Carmon and Shana Sknizhnik became a book in an unusual way. Before being published in 2015, it was a Tumblr blog. Sknizhnik, then a student at NYU Law, created the blog in the wake of the *Shelby County v. Holder* decision in 2013. *Shelby* was about the constitutionality of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, particularly the part holding states accountable for racial discrimination. Under Chief Justice Roberts, the Supreme Court decided that the country was different now – after all, the election of 2008 brought President Barack Obama to the White House in large part due to high Black voter turnout, so the Voting Rights Act was more fitting to the racially divided time of 1965 than of 2013. Justice Ginsburg dissented, along with three other justices, and took the rare step of reading the dissent from the bench. Ginsburg's dissent was incisive, likening the Court's decision to "throwing away your umbrella in a rainstorm because you are not getting wet" and extending MLK's famous line that "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice" by adding "if there is a steadfast commitment to see the task through to completion." For onlookers committed to voting rights, the diminutive figure of Ruth Bader Ginsburg in a black robe and jabot, reading razor-sharp words softly and steadily with a voice textured by experience, who had now served on the Supreme Court for over two decades and remained a steadfast liberal justice amidst the Court's conservative shift, became a symbol. Memes proliferated. As did hashtags. And Facebook posts. One post styled Ruth Bader Ginsburg after the rapper Notorious B.I.G. as "the Notorious R.B.G." – a nickname as ironic as it was catchy – and Sknizhnik's *Notorious R.B.G.* Tumblr blog was born.

Sknizhnik's blog gained an international following and the attention of HarperCollins Publishers. Journalist Irin Carmon teamed up with Sknizhnik to write the book, which includes material from the original *Notorious RBG* blog as well as original reporting based on research and interviews of Ruth Bader Ginsburg along with classmates, colleagues, and family members. As explained by the authors, this blog-turned-book was a way to transform



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a digital tribute into something physical: “We are both #millennials who like the Internet but wanted to make something you could hold in your hands—or at least keep on your device for longer than a browser tab” (p. viii). Soon after its publication, *Notorious RBG* gained a spot on the New York Times Bestseller list. But the book is not just a book. It’s the physical counterpart to a thriving digital community energized by the legacy of Ruth Bader Ginsburg. The original Tumblr blog is still running (<https://notoriousrbg.tumblr.com>) and has expanded to other social media platforms as well: Twitter (@NotoriousRBG), Instagram (@notoriousrbg), and Facebook (@notoriousRBG).

Notorious RBG does not feel like a standalone book as much as a living document. Legal strategy is foregrounded along the way, with important court decisions annotated by legal scholars, as well as timelines, charts, and interview excerpts through which Ginsburg describes – and provides a roadmap for – the building of a legal infrastructure that could ensure women’s rights. What the book makes clear is that while Ginsburg laid important groundwork for reproductive rights, gender equality, protections against pay discrimination, voting rights, among many others, the groundwork cannot be completed or maintained by one person alone. Throughout *Notorious RBG*, Ginsburg builds coalitions to achieve legal wins; and in that spirit, the book is a way to enter into a coalition with Ruth Bader Ginsburg, to tap into a community of like-minded people who appear in the pages of the book through their imaginative work and digital advocacy: memes, pictures, cartoons, coffee mugs, songs, Lego creations, and Halloween costumes. While Ginsburg is the central figure from the first chapter to the final appendix, the book is not simply a biography. Ginsburg is both an individual and something beyond: a movement that blends pop culture, legal strategy, and the pursuit of justice.

THE YOUTH ADAPTATION: A SANITIZED BIOGRAPHY

The Notorious RBG: The Life and Times of Ruth Bader Ginsburg (Young Readers’ Edition) is substantively different than its original counterpart. First, a brief comment about books adapted for youth. Contemporary youth adaptations have proliferated since about 2010. Writing on some of recent examples, [Delecroix \(2020\)](#) writes,

“These new books present cutting-edge scholarship in history, critical race studies, gender studies, queer studies and more. Accessible and developmentally appropriate, they insist that young readers deserve to critically engage with the world around them, and they model what that engagement might look like” (para. 9).

The promise of youth adaptations, however, should be weighed against a starker reality. Youth adaptations are an artifact of publishing processes, so educators should always be wary that complex topics, complex people, complex histories are being reduced to serve a group of buyers harboring limited views of what youth are ready for as readers and thinkers. In tracking this phenomenon, my colleagues and I have documented how adaptations transform the thoughts and actions of Navy SEALs into sanitized accounts of hero-



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ism (Sulzer et al., 2018), avoid engagement with systemic racism in favor of narratives of meritocracy (Thein et al., 2013), downplay cultural difference through Americanized imagery (Thein et al., 2019), and smooth over the opioid epidemic to emphasize the progress made rather than action needed (Sulzer, Colley, Hellmann & Lynch, forthcoming). Youth adaptations, however, need not compromise the complexity of original content. Sonia Nazario's *Enrique's Journey*, for example, features lots of notable changes in the adaptation, but Nazario does not sanitize the complexities of migration or Enrique's experiences as a Honduran immigrant to the United States (Sulzer, 2020).

The youth adaptation of *Notorious RBG* is situated within this developing trend in the publishing industry. In the adaptation, the original authors Carmon and Sknizhnik are accompanied by children's author Kathleen Krull, who has written many biographies for youth audiences, including one about Justice Ginsburg. Overall, the young readers' version feels more narrowly biographical than the original. The adapted text has additional features, such as a glossary of legal terms and information about the Supreme Court, which would be helpful for introducing facts and concepts to youth readers. However, adapted content throughout the book positions Justice Ginsburg more straightforwardly as a role model for youth rather than a symbol for change in the legal system. The youth adaptation seems to cater to conservative gatekeepers of youth readers. For example, Justice Ginsburg's stances on a range of topics are covered, but reproductive rights, it would seem, remain mostly off-limits, a happy omission for parents who might believe that such topics have no place in school curricula. Justice Ginsburg in the original version is a coalition builder and legal architect who worked a legal strategy over decades to secure progress for gender equality; Justice Ginsburg in the youth adaptation is a devoted judge who was very smart and solved cases like Nancy Drew, finding clues and outsmarting her foes – with essentially no mention of reproductive rights whatsoever. In fact, the entire topic of abortion is stripped out almost entirely. One mention remains, buried on p. 132 among of list of “controversial” topics that are never elaborated on. These changes go far beyond surface level adjustments in vocabulary or sentence length. They signal an ideological shift in how Justice Ginsburg's legacy is remembered and represented. With this shift comes opportunity. In the section below, I argue the original-to-adaptation ideological shift provides an ideal context for critical inquiry in the social studies classroom.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR EDUCATORS

Although the two versions only differ by a mere three words based on the titles, they are, simply put, very different books. The original version emerged from an active digital community rallying around Justice Ginsburg as a symbol for progress; the young readers' version emerged as part of trend in adapting books for the youth market. The young readers' version cuts out major portions of Ginsburg's legacy, especially with respect to legal strategy and reproductive rights, and therefore presents a different Ruth Bader Ginsburg than the original version. For social studies educators, using both versions of *The Notorious RBG*, in full or with excerpts, would provide opportunities to engage students with the disciplinary



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knowledge and skills articulated by the [NCSS \(2013\)](#) C3 framework. Below is a brief sketch of an instructional sequence. It is meant to show one possibility among many for taking up youth adaptations in the classroom.

Objective: Students will evaluate two versions of *The Notorious RBG*, noting differences in textual representation and interpreting the differences by considering perspective, purpose, and audience.

Rationale: Shortly after Ruth Bader Ginsburg’s passing was the confirmation of a polar opposite Justice; a pro-Trump insurrection at the United States Capitol was promoted by sitting Senators and Representatives; and the legal ramifications of Trump’s conduct, including a decision on emoluments and his part in an apparent coup attempt through the Department of Justice, will take years to play out. That is, the Supreme Court has recently experienced a tectonic shift, and it is this Court that will make decisions that will shape law in the United States for generations. By understanding Justice Ginsburg’s life, students have opportunities to gain knowledge about the innerworkings of the Supreme Court, and by evaluating textual representation of Ginsburg across two versions of *The Notorious RBG*, students have opportunities to gain critical awareness about how history gets told and why.

Activity: Have students work in pairs or groups. Select areas of the texts to compare, list differences, and interpret the listed differences. The activity could focus on the main body of the text as well as peritextual features such as the book covers. For example, the back cover of the original includes a summary, quotes from book reviews, and author information, and the back cover of the adaptation includes only one quote from Ginsburg surrounded by blank space. In the main body, students might read the first few paragraphs in each book and start collecting differences, repeating the process through p. 9 in the original and p. 7 in the adaptation. Students could develop interpretations by considering the following questions: How might we characterize the differences in representation of Justice Ginsburg? What’s the same? What’s different? What perspective is coming through in each text? Why?

Discussion: Have the groups or pairs share with the class. Who was the “real” Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg? What relationships do you see among perspective, purpose, and audience? How do we evaluate the information we read, see, hear?

Q&A WITH MARK SULZER

Question #1

Teacher’s Question:

What advice might you give to teachers in very conservative districts about using these resources? What educational opportunities might exist for conservative and liberal teachers alike to engage their students with these texts?

Mark Sulzer’s Response:

I used to have an idea about the general meaning of “conservative” and “liberal,” but in 2021, I’m not sure that I do. For me, thinking about education in these terms tends to evoke

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images of the WWE-style format of faces and heels and pure spectacle. But if education is a spectacle, we all lose. Current examples might be battles over the 1619 Project or Critical Race Theory, which the national discourse tends to divide into a “conservative” side and “liberal” side. It’s spectacle, and spectacle distracts from content. I don’t have solutions, but my advice would be to avoid thinking with and through these terms if they are not helpful. For “liberal” teachers working in “conservative” districts (and I would count myself in that group as a former high school teacher in Iowa), I would shift away from the conservative-liberal spectacle in favor of thinking with and through concepts about accuracy, representation, and ethics of interpretation.

Question #2

Teacher's Question:

Do adaptations of this sort differ if the subject is a long deceased, historical figure?

Mark Sulzer's Response:

To my way of thinking, historical figures are adapted for youth all the time through textbooks, speeches, and other media that students might encounter in school spaces. George Washington often appears without mention of Ona Judge, Abraham Lincoln often appears without mention of his violent policies toward American Indian tribes, Rosa Parks often appears without mention of Claudette Colvin, and so on. Historical figures are particularly susceptible to being wrapped in inaccuracy and myth. Contemporary nonfiction books about these figures are being adapted and marketed to youth more and more, and some of these books offer opportunities for youth to access more complete and complex historical accounts, but given how historical figures are always being adapted for various purposes and audiences, it’s important to approach youth adaptations of historical figures with a sense of criticality.

Question #3

Teacher's Question:

How might teachers and teacher educators make use of the RBG youth adaptation? Should they?

Mark Sulzer's Response:

I think educators definitely should make use of it. But to qualify that answer, I believe all books are worthy of critical inquiry. To me, that means educators should make use of the RBG youth adaptation by framing it as just that, an adaptation. It’s a representation to a youth audience, and it’s that notion of to (to-ness, implied reader, audience, purpose) that provides inroads for interpretative practices. I offer a brief sketch of an activity above as an example, but there are lots of ways to think about using this adaptation depending on the context, goals, purposes of the instruction.

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Question #4

Teacher's Question:

What kinds of questions can teachers and teacher educators use with any non-fiction book that will help sensitize students to the constructed, selective nature of all representation of figures or events in the past?

Mark Sulzer's Response:

An analogy that I've used with my students begins with a picture of a horizon. We spend time individually writing about the horizon: what we see, hear, smell, and so on. When we share these writings, we inevitably have different takes on the picture in front of us. We take note of what's there and what's missing and raise questions about the choices we've made in our writing. The analogy then goes further by imagining a student who gets to experience the picture of the horizon but only through the writing of one person in the class. And then we imagine it's not a horizon anymore, but a historical figure or period. I've found this analogy helpful in engaging concepts of representation.

Question #5

Teacher's Question:

Social studies instruction focuses on having students wrestle with compelling questions, evaluate sources, develop claims from evidence, and take informed action. How might these texts present those opportunities for inquiry-based instruction in social studies? For example: What might these books make students think and wonder? What topics might that help students investigate through teacher directed inquiry?

Mark Sulzer's Response:

I think these texts present a great opportunity to engage the question of what is "appropriate for youth." This phrase is highly charged, and in my observations and experience, young people are willing and able to engage this phrase with sound argumentation. I've observed a 10th grade class, for example, as they read *Looking for Alaska*, which was a challenged book in the district. For the final project, students read newspaper articles about the book being challenged in their community and wrote their own arguments in response. Youth adaptations provide space for this type of critical engagement and argumentation. How is Ruth Bader Ginsburg represented to the reader through these texts? How do we know the "real" Ruth Bader Ginsburg? What version of the "real" is appropriate for youth? Why? These questions could lead students to investigate other youth adapted materials and/or challenged curricular materials in order to develop arguments about their own educational opportunities.

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