Did the Bombs Just Fall from the Sky?
Examining Agency in a Text Set of World War II Children’s Literature

James S. Damico
Indiana University, Bloomington

Mark Baildon
National Institute of Education, Singapore

Karen L. Lowenstein
Boettcher Teachers Program, Denver, Colorado

This article examines the ways in which the authors of a text set of children’s literature constructed the United States government’s decision to drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki during World War II. Analysis of this text set reveals the ways agency is mostly absent, displaced, or obscured through the grammatical devices of nominalization and passivization. Nominalization refers to an author’s use of verbs as nouns, and passivization refers to an author’s use of passive verbs without the presence of agents. To support teachers and students toward investigations of how authors use nominalization and passivization to construct historical events in different ways, five guiding questions about agency are presented. Grappling with these kinds of questions can engender critical reading practices of which readers can more actively enact their own agency as readers of history and as citizens in a democracy.

Introduction

The primary goal of this article is to explore ways of cultivating the critical use of children’s literature in social studies classrooms. Toward this end, we examine a collection of texts about the American atomic bomb attacks of Japan during World War II. By considering the ways authors employ two grammatical devices, nominalization (using verbs or adjectives as nouns) and passivization (using verbs passively to imply subjects as being acted upon rather than acting) (Thompson, 1990), we read across this set of texts to raise key questions about agency. We define agency as a term to identify who or what is performing or carrying out the actions in a story or historical account. By focusing on issues of agency, we consider methods that teachers and students use to deepen their understandings of the ways historical events are shaped. Like Levstik and Barton (2001), we contend that ignoring historical agency can leave students with a view of the past as inevitable and even immutable. Thus, it is incumbent upon us as educators to raise questions and cultivate our students’ collective capacities to wonder about the ways and reasons why historical events are constructed in different ways. Moreover, although we ground our analysis in a text set of children’s literature for upper elementary students, we believe that examining issues of agency can empower teachers and students to engage critically with any type of text. Toward this end, the article concludes with five guiding questions to support this kind of learning.

Agency and Children’s Literature in Social Studies

The concept of agency is crucial to social studies education, especially the teaching and learning of history, because what makes
histories “coherent and intelligible is the presence within it of human agents reasoning, making choices, and exercising their will” (Roberts, 1997, p. 257). However, scholars have found that issues of agency — people carrying out actions to shape historical events — are often obscured in textbooks used in social studies classes (Fitzgerald, 1979; Loewen, 1995; Werner, 2000; Wineburg, 1999). As Levstik and Barton (2001) note, social studies textbooks typically depersonalize and “deproblematize” history by removing issues of agency and presenting the past “as the result of inexorable forces seemingly beyond human control” (p. 108). We believe that issues of agency in children’s literature — another genre of text prevalent in elementary school classrooms — also merit critical scrutiny. Young readers need to be guided to critically view the ways a children’s literature author, as with an author of any type of text, deals with issues of agency when describing historical events (Segall, 1999; 2006). Social studies scholars, however, have paid much less attention to issues of agency within children’s literature.

A Set of Children’s Books: Multiple Ways of Constructing Agency

Seven texts, four picture books, and three chapter books aimed for upper elementary school readers, comprise our set of children’s literature. We selected these books primarily because we witnessed their use in undergraduate courses designed to help preservice teachers consider the challenges and possibilities of facilitating literature responses with young readers. (We acknowledge Laura Apol at Michigan State University for her leadership with these courses). Because the books deal with provocative subject matter (i.e., war, the destruction of cities, and the loss of many lives), they often generate intensive class discussions during the course about what counts as appropriate literature for children. The picture books are Faithful Elephants (Tsuchiya, 1988), The Miracle Tree (Mattingley, 1985), Shin’s Tricycle (Kodama, 1995), and Hiroshima No Pika (Maruki, 1980). The chapter books are Mieko and the Fifth Treasure (Coerr, 1993), Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes (Coerr, 1977), and Hiroshima (Yep, 1995). Information about each of these texts is summarized in Table 1.

Our choice to examine a set of texts, as opposed to any single book, is intentional. Considering multiple books helps reveal similarities and differences in the ways authors construct agency. The analysis in this article shows how agency can be a slippery concept; it is rendered absent in some of the texts, assumes non-human forms such as bombs in other texts, and comes in the form of particular people and countries in two of the books. Laying out these different constructions of agency helps us as we offer some guiding principles for classroom practice.

Examining Agency: Nominalization and Passivization

To help teachers and students examine agency, we borrow from Thompson’s (1990) work on syntactic and grammatical devices authors use to address issues of agency. Two of these devices are nominalization and passivization, which Thompson explains:

Nominalization occurs when sentences or parts of sentences, descriptions of action, and the participants involved in them, are turned into nouns, as when we say “the banning of imports” instead of “the Prime minister has decided to ban imports.” Passivization occurs when verbs are rendered in the passive form, as when we say “the suspect is being investigated” instead of “police officers are investigating the subject.” Nominalization and passivization focus the attention of the hearer or reader on certain themes at the expense of others. They delete actors and agency and they tend to
represent processes as things or events which take place in the absence of a subject who produces them. (p. 66)

We now explore some of the ways these grammatical devices are used by examining a set of texts dealing with the American atom bomb attacks on Japan during World War II. Before proceeding, however, a caveat is in order. Four of the texts selected for analysis are picture books, which involve readers in the negotiation of two sign systems of comparable significance: words and pictures (Mikkelsen, 1999; Nodelman, 1988). We recognize the contribution that illustrations in each picture book make to overall meaning-making and, specifically, to possible questions these illustrations engender about agency. Illustrations in three of the texts (Faithful Elephants, Hiroshima No Pika, and Shin’s Tricycle) are particularly evocative in their depictions of the devastating effects of the bombings (e.g., elephants dying, yellow flashes from the explosion, a father wrenching a beam that has trapped his three-year old son, etc.). Yet, to sharpen the analysis in this article, we focus solely on linguistic features, namely two grammatical devices, nominalization and passivization. A key next step would be to conduct a visual or semiotic analysis of the illustrations in relationship to the printed text.

Table 1

| Texts’ Focus on the American Atomic Bomb Attacks of Japan |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| **Book** | **Year** | **Author** | **Translator** | **Illustrator** | **Synopsis** |
| Faithful Elephants: A True Story of Animals, People, and War | 1988 | Yukio Tsuchiya | Tomoko Tsuchiya Dykes | Ted Lewin | A zookeeper tells how elephants were starved to death rather than have them face the bombings. |
| The Miracle Tree | 1985 | Christobel Mattingley | Marianne Yamaguchi | | A husband, wife, and mother are separated by the bombing and are reunited at Christmas by a “miracle tree.” |
| Shin’s Tricycle | 1995 | Tatsuharu Kodama | Kazuko Hokumen-Jones | Noriyuki Ando | A 3-year-old boy, riding his tricycle, dies buried beneath the rubble of the bombing. |
| Hiroshima No Pika | 1980 | Toshi Maruki | Toshi Maruki | | A survivor escapes the bombing, helps her husband and child, but later finds few sympathetic to her experience. |
| Mieko and the Fifth Treasure | 1993 | Eleanor Coerr | | | A little girl injured in the bombing fears she has lost her “5th treasure,” her ability to do artwork. |
| Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes | 1977 | Eleanor Coerr | | | A young survivor of the bombing faces leukemia by folding 1000 paper cranes. |
| Hiroshima | 1995 | Lawrence Yep | | | A novella that presents both Japanese and American perspectives on the bombing and its effects. |
Invisible, Displaced, and Disappearing Agents

Agent in Abstentia

Several authors in this set of texts employ the grammatical device of nominalization, electing to use nouns rather than verbs or descriptions of actions. In Shin’s Tricycle, author Tatsuharu Kodama describes the American atomic bomb attack without active verbs: “An explosion so terrible, a flash so blindingly bright, I thought the world had ended. Then, just as quickly, everything went black.” Moreover, the verbs — “thought,” “ended,” and “went” — do little to describe the action. Similarly, in the books Hiroshima No Pika (Maruki, 1980), Sadako (Coerr, 1977), and Hiroshima (Yep, 1995), authors describe the atom bomb attack on Japan as “the flash of a million suns” or “the explosion.” The description of the action, i.e., American pilots dropping the bomb, has been reduced to “an explosion,” “a flash,” and “a blinding light” — nouns that depict and convey less action than the verbs “explode” or “blinded” might. In each of these examples, the agency of the bombers, e.g., American pilots or the U.S. government is missing. Yep writes that the bomb “is the most powerful weapon ever made” with no reference to any agents who made such a weapon.

The grammatical device, passivization, occurs in writing when verbs are rendered in passive rather than active form, which also renders issues of agency invisible. On the third double-page spread in Faithful Elephants, Yukio Tsuchiya begins the tale: “At that time, Japan was at war. Gradually, the war had become more and more severe. Bombs were dropped on Tokyo every day and night, like falling rain.” Similarly, in The Miracle Tree, on the first double-page spread, author Christobel Mattingley describes the American atom bomb attack by saying, “an atom bomb had been dropped on Nagasaki.” In Mieko and the Fifth Treasure, author Eleanor Coerr writes in her description of the thoughts of the young Japanese girl, Mieko: “She would never forget the day when the Thunderbolt — the atom bomb — was dropped on Nagasaki, sending shock waves out to her town” (p. 43). With a focus on the grammatical devices of nominalization and passivization, examples of how issues of agency are invisible are summarized in Table 2. In each of these examples, the authors acknowledge that bombs have been dropped, but they refrain from naming the bombers or those who ordered the attacks.

Agent as Nonhuman

In addition to obfuscating issues of agency through the devices of nominalization and passivization, the authors also employ grammatical constructions in which the agents are not ignored, but are nonetheless displaced. In these situations, agents are bombs, not humans. For example, in Faithful Elephants, author Yukio Tsuchiya writes, “Bombs began to drop on Tokyo once more.” In Sadako, Eleanor Coerr writes, “The atom bomb — the Thunderbolt — had turned Hiroshima into a desert.” In other examples, bombs “whistle and plunge down” (Hiroshima), “hurt many people” and “spoil everything” (Mieko and the Fifth Treasure), and “fill the air with radiation” (Sadako). Mieko’s grandpa tells her not to worry about “things that cannot be changed…like all that has been lost or hurt by the bomb.” And Sadako’s friend, Kenji, says that he has leukemia “from the bomb.” After Sadako dies, her friends all dream of a monument dedicated to all children “who were killed by the bomb.” In all of these cases, passivization is used to shift agency toward the bomb as a nonhuman agent. Illustrative examples are summarized in Table 3.
Table 2

**Examples without Agents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Grammatical device</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shin’s Tricycle</td>
<td>An explosion so terrible, a flash so blindingly bright…</td>
<td>Nominalization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiroshima No Pika</td>
<td>… the flash. The explosive…</td>
<td>Nominalization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sadako</td>
<td>There was the flash of a million suns…there is a big explosion. There is a blinding light like a sun…</td>
<td>Nominalization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiroshima</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faithful Elephants</td>
<td>Bombs were dropped on Tokyo every day and night, like falling rain.</td>
<td>Passivization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sadako</td>
<td>…we remember those who died when the atom bomb was dropped on our city.</td>
<td>Passivization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Miracle Tree</td>
<td>An atom bomb had been dropped on Nagasaki.</td>
<td>Passivization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mieko and the Fifth Treasure</td>
<td>She would never forget the day when the Thunderbolt — the atom bomb — was dropped on Nagasaki.</td>
<td>Passivization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiroshima No Pika</td>
<td>… an atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki.</td>
<td>Passivization</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Agent Appears, then Disappears**

In *Hiroshima No Pika*, Maruki (1980) describes the atom bomb attack twice in the story. The first occurrence takes place just a few pages into the text:

> Moments before the flash, United States Air Force bomber *Enola Gay* had flown over the city and released a top-secret explosive. The explosive was an atomic bomb, which had been given the name “Little Boy” by the B-29’s crew. “Little Boy” fell on Hiroshima at 8:15 on the morning of August 6, 1945.

The United States is named, and several details are provided. The author, Toshi Maruki, locates agency with the U.S. bomber plane, the *Enola Gay*, which “released” the bomb and the bomb itself, “Little Boy,” which “fell on Hiroshima.” However, Maruki takes a much different tactic later in the story with his second explicit description of the bombing as he writes: “…an atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki…Among the victims, in addition to the Japanese, were people from many other countries, such as Korea, China, Russia, Indonesia, and the United States.” Here, passivization returns as Maruki describes the bomb dropping with no agent dropping it. This description also signals a shift from Americans as the bombers to Americans as part of the group of bombing victims (i.e., Americans died from the bomb as well). The story ends by first presenting the bomb as agent (“The atomic bomb…caused death and illnesses for many years following the explosion”) and then by naming the fact that there was some unknown agent (“It can’t happen again…if no one drops the bomb”). Given the appearances and disappearances of potential agents, readers are left without specific insight into who might be responsible.
Social Studies Research and Practice
http://www.socstrp.org

One Different Story Being Told

In contrast to the other six texts, only Hiroshima by Laurence Yep explicitly personalizes and complicates the atom bomb attacks by naming the American bombers, describing some of their actions, and suggesting some guilt that accompanies their involvement in the bombing. The text begins: “Early in the morning of August 6, 1945, a big American bomber roars down the runway on a tiny island called Tinian. The pilot is Colonel Tibbets. He has named the plane after his mother, Enola Gay (p. 1). From the outset, we learn the name of the specific pilot and that he is an American. Several pages later, we receive a moment-to-moment description of events leading up to the actual bomb dropping as Yep describes:

Colonel Tibbets must see clearly to steer the bomber. He does not put on goggles. Neither does the bombardier. Everyone is tense and excited. No one is sure if the bomb will go off... Now the bombardier looks through his bombsight and guides the Enola Gay the last few miles to its target. Doors snap open on the belly of the plane. The bombardier sees his landmark. It is a bridge shaped like a T. On the bridge, a Japanese colonel rides his horse. The bombardier presses a button to release the bomb. (p. 16)

Then a few pages later, Yep implies at least one of the pilots is remorseful after the pilots dropped the bomb:

Everyone in the crew has flown on bombers. They have helped drop tons of regular bombs. On each flight, they have seen death and destruction. But no one has ever seen anything as powerful as this one bomb. The copilot writes a note to himself: “What have we done?” (pp. 23-24)

Table 3

Examples of Nonhuman Agent—Bomb as Agent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faithful Elephants</td>
<td>But what if bombs fell on Sendai? Bombs began to drop on Tokyo once more.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sadako</td>
<td>The atom bomb—the Thunderbolt—had turned Hiroshima into a desert. Why, the atom bomb hasn’t even scratched her.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mieko and the Fifth treasure</td>
<td>“The bomb spoiled everything, Grandma.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“The bomb hurt many people, Mieko”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Miracle Tree</td>
<td>Then one day a bomb dropped that destroyed the factory and most of her workmates.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiroshima No Pika</td>
<td>“Little Boy” fell on Hiroshima.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiroshima</td>
<td>If the bombs start fires, the hoods are supposed to protect them from burning sparks. No one is sure if the bomb will go off. The bomb whistles as it plunges down, down through the air. It must not drop again.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion

An assumption operating across all the texts, except, perhaps, *Hiroshima* (Yep, 1995), is that war, bombings, even nuclear atrocities, and the resulting destruction and loss of lives are inevitable. These are consequences of war. Put another way, the burden of responsibility falls on (or agency is located with) war rather than a particular country or group of people. Locating responsibility with war, especially in the abstract, obscures attention on historical agency and diminishes, perhaps even prevents, deeper discussions about the complexities embedded in all wars, for example, asking questions pertaining to (a) what or who causes the war, (b) what qualifies as a *just* or *unjust* war, (c) how do nations or those persons wielding sociopolitical power, manufacture consent for wartime efforts, (d) who actually benefits from engaging in wars, etc. may be more difficult to detect. Examining issues of agency with a focus on nominalization and passivization can help both teachers and students ask these kinds of critical questions. *Hiroshima* (Yep, 1995) moves us more explicitly towards these questions. Yep clearly locates agency and responsibility with the American pilots. It can be argued that his focus on the individual pilots obscures attention from larger political and systemic concerns, such as those who gave pilots their orders, why the bombs were dropped at that particular time, or why the bombs were developed. However, Yep does not completely stray from these complexities. Later in the book, he discusses the dangers of the increasing number of countries developing nuclear arms. Along with the United States and republics of the former Soviet Union, he impugns the burgeoning nuclear capabilities of India, Iraq, Israel, North Korea, and Pakistan. As a result, carefully naming the bombers, describing some of their actions, and explicitly naming the nuclear-wielding countries distinguishes Yep’s book, *Hiroshima*, from the other texts.

It is important to note that students may not know that American pilots dropped the bombs under orders from the U.S. government and that they may have other gaps in their knowledge of World War II. Using the lenses of nominalization and passivization can actually allow these gaps to surface. In other words, when students explore a text for agents responsible for actions, they ask critical questions about who undertook specific actions and why. And as students look for agents in any given text, teachers can gain insight into students’ prior knowledge. To conclude, we offer a set of guiding questions from which teachers and students can draw upon to consider issues of agency in social studies texts.

Guiding Questions to Examine Agency

We began this article with the premise that considering issues of agency is fundamental to historical inquiry and understanding. With a focus on two grammatical devices authors employ, nominalization and passivization, we demonstrated how agency can be invisible, displaced, or explicitly acknowledged. The following five questions offer guidance to teachers and students to engage in an inquiry process about agency:

1. What actions are described in the story or historical account?
2. How are these actions described?
3. Who or what is performing the actions?
4. How and when do authors employ the devices nominalization (i.e., using verbs as nouns) and passivization (i.e., using verbs passively)?
5. Why might the authors have made these choices? (e.g., why did most authors and/or publishers in the texts discussed in this article choose to not name the United States or American
Even though children’s literature, especially historical fiction, can engage children in the study of history in powerful ways (Barton, 1997; Levstik & Barton, 2001), having students read stories or narratives to learn about the past does not necessarily help them develop critical reading skills or view history critically. We believe these five critical questions about agency can engender discussions about what it means for students to take active roles in making meaning of historical events and relationships. Moreover, an emphasis on agency can help students “see themselves as historical actors. Just as the actions of people in the past produced history, so too do students’ actions today and tomorrow make history” (Levstik & Barton 2001, p. 128). Put another way, when students examine issues of agency in texts, they are learning to consider and enact their own agency as readers and, ideally, as participants in a democracy.

References


Children’s Books Cited


About the Authors

James S. Damico is Assistant Professor in Literacy, Culture & Language Education at Indiana University, Bloomington, IN. He earned his Ph.D. at Michigan State University in Curriculum, Teaching, and Educational Policy. He teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in critical reading, children’s literature, writing, and research methods. Some of his recent research focuses on how readers analyze, interpret, and evaluate Internet texts.

Mark Baildon is Assistant Professor in Humanities and Social Studies Education at the National Institute of Education in Singapore. He has a Ph.D. in Curriculum, Teaching, and Educational Policy from Michigan State University. His teaching and research interests include inquiry-based social studies education and the uses of technology to support inquiry and multiliteracies. Mark has also taught social studies in secondary schools in the United States, Israel, Singapore, Saudi Arabia, and Taiwan.
Karen Lowenstein is Co-Director of the Boettcher Teachers Program in Denver, Colorado. She earned her Ph.D. at Michigan State University in Curriculum, Teaching, and Educational Policy. Her teaching and research interests focus on novice teacher learning, residency-based teacher education, and issues of linguistic and cultural diversity in K-12 classrooms.

Primary contact information
Mailing Address: Indiana University, Literacy, Culture & Language Education, W. W. Wright School of Education, 201 N. Rose Ave., Bloomington, IN 47405
Email: damico@indiana.edu.