

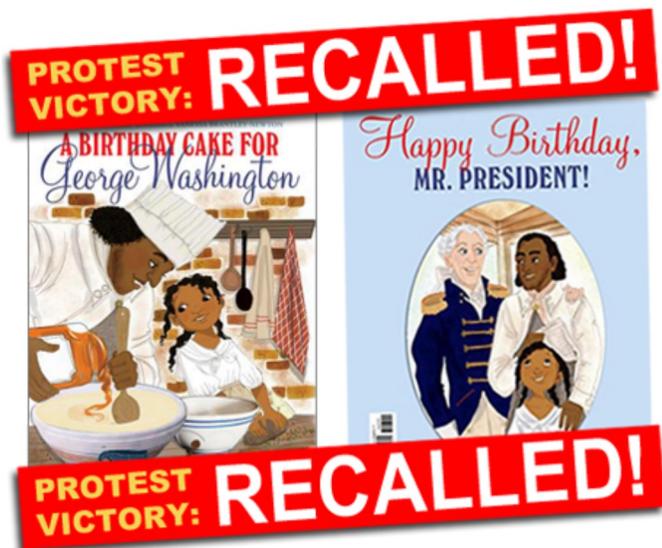
Under Pressure, Scholastic Recalls Racist Children's Book

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The Zinn Education Project
Teaching a people's history

By Deborah Menkart



A firestorm erupted when Scholastic released a children's book early this month, *A Birthday Cake for George Washington*, by Ramin Ganeshram and illustrated by Vanessa Brantley-Newton, featuring smiling slaves baking a cake for George Washington. The back cover portrayed George Washington and his enslaved chef, Hercules, arm-in-arm, like best buddies. The image convinced many that this was an *Onion* parody and not an actual children's book published in 2016. The images of seemingly happy enslaved African-Americans working in the kitchen were underscored with Hercules's closing words when he serves the cake: "An honor and a privilege, sir... Happy birthday, Mr. President." The story never offers children a hint as to why it was not a "privilege" nor a smiling affair to be enslaved. Nor do readers learn that the conditions were so dire that Hercules escaped on Washington's birthday the following year, despite having to leave his children behind.

The *School Library Journal* called the book "highly problematic" and *Kirkus Reviews* labeled it "an incomplete, even dishonest treatment of slavery." But neither of these critical reviews generated a public response from Scholastic.

It was not until a grassroots campaign by librarians, social justice organizations, #BlackLivesMatter activists, journalists, and others that Scholastic took the extraordinary step of recalling the book.

It happened in just four days. On Wednesday of last week, the Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit Teaching for Change shared on Facebook a critical review of the book by librarian Edith Campbell along with the image of the book's back cover.

The story went viral. Leslie MacFadyen of the National #Ferguson Response Network created the hashtag [#slaverywithasmile](#) and within 24 hours articles appeared in the [Atlanta Black Star](#), [The Root](#), and [Fusion](#). Thousands signed a [protest petition](#). Debbie Reese of [American Indians in Children's Literature](#)—who had played a major role drawing public attention to the [Mexican American studies ban in Tucson, Ariz.](#)—was the information hub, keeping the book's critics up-to-date with developments.

Scholastic launched damage control with statements first by the [editor](#), then the [author](#), and finally from the [corporate office](#). Not one of these slowed the mounting protests. Young adult book author [Daniel Jose Older](#) tweeted,

Each day, the campaign continued to build.

By Sunday, Scholastic must have realized that its reputation was at stake and announced it would stop distribution of the book. They released a statement saying:

(January 17, 2016) Scholastic is announcing today that we are stopping the distribution of the book entitled ***A Birthday Cake for George Washington***, by Ramin Ganeshram and illustrated by Vanessa Brantley-Newton, and will accept all returns. While we have great respect for the integrity and scholarship of the author, illustrator, and editor, we believe that, without more historical background on the evils of slavery than this book for younger children can provide, the book may give a false impression of the reality of the lives of slaves and therefore should be withdrawn. [\[Full statement here.\]](#)

This is not the first time that a campaign has forced Scholastic to do the right thing to protect its public image. In 2011, [Rethinking Schools](#) and the [Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood](#) exposed Scholastic's profitable and unethical partnership with the American Coal Foundation. Scholastic had used its trusted name to [promote a "clean coal" curriculum to 4th graders](#) all over the United States. A [concerted campaign](#), culminating in a *New York Times* editorial led Scholastic to end the partnership with big coal and pull its curriculum from its website. In 1999, Scholastic's publication of *My Heart Is on the Ground* by Ann Rinaldi was met with resistance for its whitewashed depiction of government boarding schools whose

mission was to kill the Indian and save the man. Published as part of its Dear America series, Scholastic allowed the book to go out of print.

The protests over *A Birthday Cake for George Washington* are part of a longer and larger campaign for children to learn the truth about history and the world today. As [Edith Campbell noted](#):

While this victory is empowering, the fight itself is disheartening because the battle against the portrayal of "happy slaves," of people who were less than human and who were being well cared for is a hundred years old. The need for accuracy, not for *sweetening*, with regards to the enslavement of Blacks in America is critical to this country. This era in American history has shaped our national identity and until we get it right, we will continue to be encumbered with racism.

The National Geographic released an equally problematic children's book in 2013 called [Master George's People: George Washington, His Slaves, and His Revolutionary Transformation. A Fine Dessert](#), released this time last year, was also widely [critiqued for its depiction of "happy slaves."](#) (But no recall, yet.) It's especially unfortunate when a children's book with an African American protagonist is so biased. There remains a shocking [lack of diversity in children's books](#). In [2015, of the 3,000 books published for children ages 8 and above, only 32](#) were identified by Campbell and author Zetta Elliott to be written by African American authors.

As the victory to force Scholastic to withdraw its book illustrates, activists and scholars are using [social media effectively to counter master narratives](#). While there is much work to be done, this victory is an important milestone and a reminder of the power of collective action and truth telling.

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