

Hidden Figures: Women Telling A Dead Man's Story

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The narrator of *A Children's Bible* written by Lydia Millet is Jack's older sister, Eve. Traditionally the main character is seen as the narrator in a first-person story like this one. However, in this story, the primary character can be seen as Jack when a few factors are taken into consideration. The children's relationship develops throughout the story, though Eve seems to feel parental urges towards her brother due to their parent's portrayed lack of involvement in their lives.

Throughout the story, Jack connects the group's experiences with his copy of a children's Bible. While he connects the events to The Bible, he works to translate the deeper meaning of the story. Through his sister's narrations, readers will know the story of Jack and his Bible. While author Lydia Millet had good intentions, telling the story through Eve instead of Jack succumbs to thousands of years of oppression women have historically faced, with women being relegated to the background of history. Women have not been given the opportunity to write their own stories as they have been too busy telling the story of men.

Hidden Figures

The term "hidden figure" rose to popularity with the film *Hidden Figures*, a film released to the big screen in January of 2017, which takes place in 1961 during the space race. While the film was released in 2017, it is based on a book that was published in September of 2016. The film tells the story of three African-American women who worked as computers for NASA during this time. Each woman played a crucial role in the successful mission to get an American

in space, but their stories remained hidden until the book, and later, the movie took the country by storm.

As the film gained popularity, so did the term. Since the definition of a hidden figure is not available in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, individuals have had to define it for themselves; Thomas Doherty outlines the definition of the undefined term in his movie review of the film, “Hidden Figures is a clever title. It suggests how the film’s protagonists—known as computers, due to their mathematical abilities to calculate numbers accurately and rapidly by hand, in support of the U.S. aeronautics and space program—have been largely hidden from history.” The last part of this statement is the most important piece of his definition: “... have been largely hidden from history.” This would suggest that someone who is a hidden figure must be someone seen as irrelevant to the story.

Remaining a hidden figure can be difficult for someone such as Eve in *A Children’s Bible*, as she tells the story of Jack and his Bible similar to how a historian would: she says what she knows. While Eve is extremely present in the telling of Jack’s story because it is entirely from her perspective, she is not telling her own tale: she is telling Jack’s. In order to understand how a character can be the one who tells the story of the main character and simultaneously not be the main character requires one to take a look beyond *A Children’s Bible*, and instead look to the award-winning musical written by Lin-Manuel Miranda, *Hamilton*.

Hamilton premiered on Broadway in August of 2015, before the release of the film *Hidden Figures*. Although *Hamilton* premiered before *Hidden Figures* did, *Hidden Figures* arguably reached the majority of American homes before *Hamilton* as *Hidden Figures* premiered on a screen, not a singular stage. *Hamilton* was released to *Disney +* the summer of 2020.

The story in the Musical *Hamilton* is about Alexander Hamilton, one of the founding fathers of the United States. Though the story is about Hamilton, Hamilton is not the storyteller; the story is being told about him. The audience doesn't recognize this phenomenon until the musical closes. Jennifer Forestal and Menaka Philips write in their article titled 'Hamilton and the Unsung Labors of Wives', "...the play's ambiguous ending has launched discussion about the role of Elizabeth Schuyler Hamilton in both the play and in her husband's legacy. "Who tells your story?" asks the play's final refrain. The answer, in this case, is clear: Eliza.

Eliza Hamilton slips through the entire musical as simply the wife of the historical figure but history, and the ending of the musical, tell us a different story. The ending of the musical takes place after Hamilton's death. The last song explains to the audience who worked so hard to tell the story of Hamilton, and it exposes *Hamilton's* hidden figure: Eliza Hamilton. Eliza recounts the story of her efforts to preserve Alexander's legacy, as he never had the chance to determine what his legacy could be.

Jack's story is told in a mirrored perspective to Hamilton's. Instead of Eve telling Jack's story from Jack's perspective, or any of the other children, she tells it from her own. By doing this, she exposes herself as a prominent figure in Jack's life, while also accepting that her story ends with Jack and ignoring her own contributions, whether stated or unstated.

Jack's Death and Translations

The death of Jack, while unstated, broke the hearts of many readers. Before one can fully understand how Jack could portray the main character, it is important to take a look at a few pieces of evidence at the end of the story that reveals the story's main character.

Seemingly right after Jack completed his translation of the Bible, he appears to succumb to his illness. “He was happiest when I was there talking to him, but he was getting so tired in those days. So very tired” (Millet 224). Jack states in the book that Jesus equals science, and that the Holy Ghost represents making stuff. Eve is the one who tells Jack that if the Holy Ghost is “making stuff,” then the Holy Ghost must be art.

Furthermore, Jack used his translations of The Bible to predict or recognize what catastrophe the children would encounter next on their adventure. Upon the warning of the hurricane, Jack takes to the woods to collect one of each animal, similar to Noah and his Ark. The children referred to the treehouse as the Ark as the storm pushed through the area, doing just as Jack had predicted: flooding. Parallels of the Holy Bible and *A Children's Bible* continue throughout the story in a seeming slipstream manner, a kind of magical realism, slipping between realism and *something else*.

The ending of the book is precisely timed. After Jack's apparent death, the story ends. The story ends, because there is nothing left to tell. If Jack is dead, he isn't given a chance to spread the word. Nor is there anything left for Eve to write about. With Jack being the main character, him succumbing to his illness means the story does as well.

Books that end with the death of a character are difficult to come by, for the exact reason Jack points out in *A Children's Bible*, “You know. The story. After the chaos time? It wasn't in my book, But all books should have a real ending.” (Millet 223). The statement, “All books should have a real ending” lies only one page away from the end of the novel; ironically giving it an ending that feels shortchanged. By Millet ending the story after Jack passes, she establishes that there is no more life in the story.

Another story that ends in a similar way is a fictional novel that is read by the main characters in the story *the Fault in Our Stars*. In *The Fault in Our Stars*, the book *It's An Imperial Affliction* by Peter Van Houton ends mid-sentence. The ending of this fictional tale bothers the main characters significantly. The narrator of *The Fault in Our Stars* says she believes this ending is due to the main character's death. They simply died mid-sentence like we all likely will. Mid Sentence, midthought, and in the case of Jack and the fictional stories narrator, midlife. The story cannot continue because there is nothing left to tell. While Eve might have been able to contribute her own aspects and thoughts to Jack's story, she fails to do so.

Why does the story gets told?

After Hamilton's death in July of 1804, the world was seemingly struck with grief. Despite a clear hatred for the founder due to political conflicts, many also loved him. His wife took action with her pain. Eliza interviewed as many people as she could to discover and find a way to tell her late husband's story. Forestal and Philips argue, "Our political and intellectual heritage, in other words, is largely the product of women's unsung labors." This quote alludes to the unfortunate truth: it is often women's jobs to tell the story of dead men. If it wasn't for grieving women throughout history, their stories would have gone untold. After Alexander's death, Eliza not only interviewed everyone in Alexander's life, she documented it. It is because of her hard work that Miranda was able to write the musical that has taken today's Americans by storm.

Jack's story is no different. While Hamilton's biggest accomplishment in life was fighting for America's freedom and setting up the financial system still in place in the U.S.

today, Jack's was his translations of his copy of a literal children's Bible. As Eve says in the closing pages of the novel, "I think you solved it, Jack. In your notebook. Jesus was science. Knowing stuff. Right? And the Holy Ghost was all the things that people make. You remember? Your diagram said making stuff." (Millet 224) Jack responds to Eve with, "Yes. It did."

"So maybe art is the Holy Ghost. Maybe the ghost in the machine.

"Art is the ghost." is Jack's final line in the novel. Although Jack's death is not directly stated, it can be inferred due to the nature of the last chapter of the book. Similar to Alexander Hamilton the person, it is impossible for Jack to tell his story if he is dead. Although Eve was Jack's sister, not his wife, she holds a similar role to Eliza in the tale of Alexander Hamilton. Eliza worked as hard as she did to tell Alexander's story due to grief so strong she needed a way to feel closer to him.

The reader knows the story is in the past tense, though we do not know how long after Jack's death Eve wrote her version of Jack's story down. The amount of time after his death that it took for Eve to write his story may affect the reasoning behind her telling the tale. Whether she tells the tale because of another storm, an incoming storm, significant changes in the environment, or another reason beyond a desire to engrave her brother's legacy and theory into history is unknown to the reader.

The female historians

Being a woman isn't necessarily a crime in America, though it is a disadvantage. Traditionally, women have held roles that are in support to the men in their lives, such as a father or spouse. Tyson argues, "...a patriarchy is any society in which men hold all or most of the power." (Tyson 149). In the time Eliza Hamilton worked to tell Hamilton's story, women were

not allowed to make decisions for themselves, though she did. She chose to discover and tell Alexander's story; no man told her to do so.

Eve lived in a different time than the Hamiltons did. The exact time *A Children's Bible* is set is not known; however, we do know that it is in the future. The current climate crisis is bad, but it is only going to get worse. The environment's health will continue to decline as the world continues to abuse it for the benefit of mankind. The time when this story is told is crucial to the reasoning behind why Eve chose to write this story from her perspective, a female, instead of Jack's, a male.

Eliza was forced to tell Alexander's story due to the circumstances of the time. She was telling Alexander's story before women even had the right to vote. If she told the story from her perspective, it was unlikely to gain true traction. Therefore, she hid in the shadows of her late husband's comrades, coworkers, and friends. She found their stories, but she had them tell them, as they were all male.

Interestingly, the only storyline told in the musical Hamilton that references a female and Hamilton alone is when Hamilton cheats on Eliza with another woman. While many of the other stories are told not from Hamilton's perspective, but everyone else who was in the room where it happened, this segment is not. This segment is told by Hamilton himself. Although we can assume Eliza documented this part of Hamilton's story based on what he told her as they worked to repair their marriage, it sticks out as another jab to a woman's credibility in the 1800s. Hamilton fails to realize the devotion his wife feels toward him, thereby further pushing her to the background.

A Children's Bible, much like The Bible itself, is the opposite though. It is arguable that Eve felt the story could only be told from her perspective because she was someone who was

there at the time, but also because she lives in an age where a woman could tell a story like Jack's and not get ignored.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a historian is a writer of history. By this simple phrase, both Eliza and Eve can be viewed as historians, though they did not review a past that took place in someone else's life hundreds of years ago, they reviewed a past that took place not only within their own lifetimes but a history that took place in their own lives.

There is a figure of speech, "...and just like that it was history." This statement can be modified and used in multiple different instances for many different things. However, it implies the definition of history in the short-term rather than the long-term as it is typically viewed. The Oxford English Dictionary defines history as being, "A written narrative constituting a continuous chronological record of important or public events (esp. in a particular place) or of a particular trend, institution, or person's life." The definition of history enables the female historians to tell the history of the men, despite them having passed on. Although Eliza opted to remain a hidden figure within her husband's history book, her name would be on the cover.

Conclusion

Through the use of Eve's voice, Lydia Millet recounts the efforts of Eve's brother Jack to try and translate The Bible to be more readable for children. However, as a result, Eve's own voice is drowned out. Eve tells the story not only of a world whose environment is attacking the living but the story of her deceased brother translating it all. Eve allows the reader to reach their own conclusions about the correlations between the events in the story and the stories in the Bible, but with the absence of her own voice, the effect is that of a hidden figure, silently documenting the goings-on around her and nothing more.

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