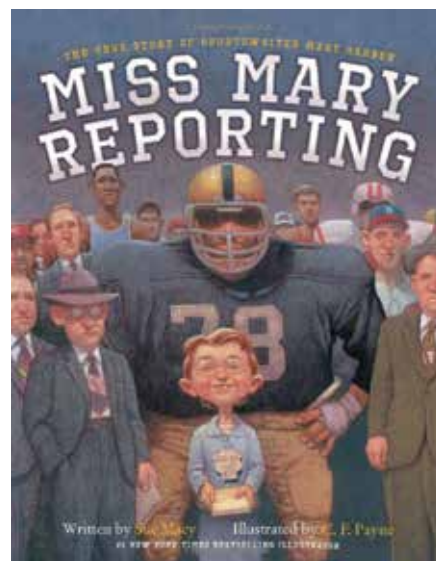


# Sports Reporter Mary Garber: Expanding the Trailblazer Approach to Women's History



Alyssa J. Whitford

“I liked reading about Mary, because I just didn’t know girls could do all those things like boys did.”

—Amelia, age 8

I’ve often asked elementary students what history means to them. Who has contributed, and what have they accomplished? Although the responses vary, they tend to reflect the poor representation of women’s history in elementary classrooms. As women are severely neglected in social studies resources, helping students understand women’s historical experiences can be challenging.<sup>1</sup> This difficulty is illustrated by the way many textbooks portray female trailblazers, women who were first to achieve in a certain field. Trailblazing women may be included in curriculum materials, but their narratives are often limited to a brief description of their success.<sup>2</sup> Although these fascinating women certainly deserve our attention, focusing only on their triumphs can trivialize their overall experiences. While guest teaching in a third-grade classroom as part of my doctoral studies, I was interested in how students think about female pioneers and what it means to be “first” in a historical sense.

Mary Garber is a fascinating example of a trailblazer. In 1946, Garber became a sports reporter, a pioneer in a field that was considered exclusively male. She built a distinguished career, becoming the namesake of the Mary Garber Pioneer Award and the first woman to win the Associated Press Sports Editor’s Red Smith Award. Garber’s journey is chronicled by Sue Macy in her illustrated children’s book, *Miss Mary Reporting*. This student-friendly text includes powerful themes and provides many opportunities to discuss women’s history and discover what being a trailblazer truly means.

I found myself turning to read-alouds with texts such as *Miss Mary Reporting* while planning this lesson. As a former elementary teacher, I have faced the challenge of finding meaningful lessons about women in history as well as the difficulty of finding accurate representations of women in textbooks,<sup>3</sup> so I was excited to explore the potential of interactive read-aloud books to teach women’s history with young students.

## A Brief Biography of Mary Garber

Born in New York in 1916, Garber battled stereotypes even as a child. Although her mother urged her to “behave like a girl,” she tended to “behave like a boy” by becoming interested in sports at an early age, forming neighborhood teams, and attending athletic events with her father, who educated her about different sports.<sup>4</sup> As an adult, Garber was hired as a society columnist for the *Twin City Sentinel* in North Carolina despite having little interest in the subject matter. It was only during World War II, which opened doors across the nation for women in the workforce, that Garber was able to pursue her passion (the *Sentinel*’s male sportswriters having left to fight overseas). Garber faced many challenges as she established herself as a sportswriter, including a rule that barred women from sitting in press boxes. Even after she gained admittance with the help of her editors, she was required to wear a badge that read, “Press Box: Women and Children Not Admitted.”

In addition to facing daily jeers and condescension, Garber was excluded from professional organizations. She was barred from entering locker rooms for post-game interviews, which made it difficult to record quotes from coaches and players. Some athletes refused to talk with her altogether.

Despite these obstacles, Garber persevered. Her dedication and talent won the respect of those around her as she gained the trust of coaches and athletes alike. Garber refused to become complacent as she established her career. Instead, she continued to push boundaries by covering athletic events at black high schools and colleges in the time of segregation, breaking the usual protocol. She strove for equal news coverage and professional opportunities for black athletes.<sup>5</sup> She paved the way for women interested in male-dominated jobs, worked for equity, and inspired many with her determination. In 2008, she was inducted into the National Sportscasters and Sportswriters Association's Hall of Fame.

### Why Use an Interactive Read-Aloud?

Interactive read-alouds, which I define for this article as any read-aloud activity that includes purposeful communication between students and teachers throughout the text<sup>6</sup> are valuable educational tools.<sup>7</sup> These read-alouds support both content knowledge and literacy, since teachers can introduce new concepts while modeling reading skills. Literary non-fiction texts, such as *Miss Mary Reporting*, are rich with such opportunities,<sup>8</sup> as they introduce historical figures in ways that feel important to students. Interacting through these texts also encourages students to engage with the content while allowing teachers to address misperceptions and help students connect the material with their own lives.<sup>9</sup>

While interactive read-alouds can be implemented in different ways, they typically involve purposeful questions and scaffolding.<sup>10</sup> It may be helpful for teachers to choose texts that illustrate new or powerful ideas and to pre-read the text in order to choose points at which to pause and foster discussion about essential concepts. Pre-planning allows teachers to highlight vital concepts, provide context, and help students integrate new knowledge.

Utilizing read-alouds of any kind may be especially vital in social studies, where women are shown in stereotypical roles or neglected completely in curriculum materials.<sup>11</sup> This misrepresentation is troubling since it sends the erroneous and harmful message that women have not played important roles in society.<sup>12</sup> Using interactive read-alouds to introduce these largely unknown narratives also provides opportunities to think critically about history. By examining experiences of women that contrast with what they see in other classroom materials, students are able to challenge their pre-existing ideas and consider new perspectives. (**Sidebar**, p. 26) These critical thinking skills are important to students' development as engaged citizens.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, the opportunity to explore and challenge their understanding of women's roles in history supports a feminist perspective on citizenship.<sup>14</sup> Read-alouds are also low cost, thanks to school and public libraries, and programs such as inter-library loan systems that supply engaging texts about notable women, often at no cost to library patrons.

Interactive read-alouds can also assist in designing lessons

that align with both social studies and literacy standards. The lesson described below helps children develop skills in "speaking and listening to and reading informational text," as stated in the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects.<sup>15</sup> The lesson also includes standards from the C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards. Students examine how individuals face and overcome challenges (D4.6.3-5), confront the different perspectives of the time (D2.His.4.3-5), and use text to answer essential questions (D3.4.3-5).<sup>16</sup>

### Using *Miss Mary Reporting* to Teach Women's History: The Read-Aloud

To examine Mary Garber's life in a meaningful way with elementary students an interactive read-aloud is an effective starting point. The students were intrigued by the text of *Miss Mary Reporting* and showed enthusiasm from the pre-reading stage through the culminating activity. Alongside eye-catching illustrations are direct quotes from Garber and those who knew her, in addition to interesting and often humorous anecdotes. While I wanted the students to enjoy the story, my intent behind this lesson was more specific: My goal was for the students to explore how trailblazing women have influenced the experiences of others and how Garber's fight for equality promoted change for women and other marginalized groups.

We began with the first of two essential questions: What does it mean to be first? Specifically, I asked the students what happens when someone is the first to do something. Initially the students focused on what happens to the person themselves, suggesting that they win a prize or feel proud and happy. I then expanded the question by asking what it means when someone is the first to accomplish something in history. Their answers were similar, centered on how exciting it would be to be "first." One student, Darren, remarked that they would like to be first because then they would be famous. This incited a chorus of cheers and agreement.

To transition to the next essential question, I remarked that when we learn about women's history, we often talk about women who were "first", and that we would explore what that means together. I wrote the second question across a piece of chart paper: "Did Mary Garber affect the world around her? Why or why not?"

Next, we began to read *Miss Mary Reporting*. To encourage discussion, I gathered the students together on the carpet, ensuring that each child was near a partner with no one excluded from the group. I incorporated both pair-shares and whole class discussions throughout the story to encourage all students' participation. Prior to the lesson, I had marked six pages that I felt encouraged meaningful discussion, although this number could be adjusted depending on the group. I especially encouraged an examination of the sexism and racism of the time, Garber's own experiences and actions, and her larger influence on society. (**Sidebar**, p. 27). I also encouraged

students to ask questions as needed and made spontaneous stops to supply context about segregation and women's rights. Another point to make here is how Garber's experiences differed from others as her race and access to college education likely provided opportunities other women may not have been afforded. Throughout the text, students reacted strongly to the examples of unfair treatment and affirmed that Garber was brave, true to herself, and determined. One student proclaimed, "Mary has a lot of heart!" As Garber conquered obstacles the students became increasingly animated, bursting into cheers and even applause. Finally, we connected Garber's advocacy with modern society by discussing how people fight for equal rights today and how the students themselves might work to change something they felt was unfair.

### Post-Reading Activities

We concluded the read-aloud by addressing the essential question on our chart paper: Did Mary Garber affect the world around her? Why or why not? Below the question I drew a chart that resembled a bullseye with 3 rings. Still following a whole-group discussion format, I asked the students to identify words they felt related to Garber herself, which I wrote in the center ring. In addition to the descriptors they had brainstormed during the story, the students declared her to be strong, persistent, kind, daring, and dedicated.

I then asked the students to extend their thinking by working in pairs to complete two sticky notes. On one they represented with words or pictures how Garber influenced those immediately around her. Those who demonstrated their knowledge through pictures explained their answers orally to allow for differentiation. These were placed on the middle ring, surrounding Garber's characteristics. Many sticky notes on this ring detailed the individual athletes Garber interviewed or times when she performed additional duties when asked. For example, once during a basketball game Garber was asked to mend a player's torn shorts. Although this incident is related with humor, it was a valuable opportunity to discuss the differential treatment Mary received because of her gender.

Last, the students used their second sticky note to show how Garber influenced the world on a broader scale. I wanted to differentiate this from how she affected those around her to show the lasting impact a trailblazer can make. Many students used their last sticky note to show how Garber opened doors for women in sports or other traditionally male jobs. Sophia wrote that Garber, "inspired girls to know they could do any job," and another, Landon, explained his picture by stating, "If a girl wanted to be in a job people didn't want her to have Mary showed her to be brave and show how good she could do at it." Several students also focused on the attention Garber brought to athletic events at black high schools during segregation, demonstrating that she "showed people to care about all the kids no matter what their skin color is."

The student's engagement was palpable while they shared

answers and listened eagerly to other students' ideas. This allowed them to connect and integrate new concepts. Once the chart was complete, I pointed out how the center circle, listing Garber's characteristics, connected to her actions in the middle circle, which allowed to her make the far-reaching impact described in the outer circle. I asked them to consider how being the first female sportswriter helped her act for change. This time, their ideas about "first" had shifted. Instead of focusing on Garber's awards or how it might have felt to succeed, students were more aware of both what it takes to be first and how being first can affect the world. This shift was evident as they returned to the essential questions in their culminating activity.

### In Their Own Words: The Culminating Activity

Students responded to these questions individually in their writing journals. Specifically, they stated whether or not they believed Garber had influenced the world by being first and defended their answer. They then broadened their answer by explaining what it means to be first in a historical sense. When compared to the pre-lesson discussion answers, the journal responses showed a new understanding of how trailblazers affect society and the civic lesson of advocacy. Students were far more likely to consider the concept of discrimination and appreciate how Garber advocated for equality. Students' were also able to connect Garber's actions with their influence on modern society, especially regarding women in the workforce, making statements such as, "People like Mary helped girls today try for any job they want." Although each answer was unique in length and depth, a few themes emerged.

### Theme: Inspiring Others

The theme of inspiring others through pioneering was prevalent throughout most students' writing. Several students argued that Garber was inspirational to women who wanted to follow their dreams and to the athletes she wrote about.

"When you are first you make other people know that they can do it too if they try."—Levi, age 9

"If a girl wanted to do something girls didn't usually do, they could think about Mary and how she kept trying."

—Rochelle, age 8

### Theme: Challenging Discrimination

Challenging discrimination was another theme. The students were both upset by the oppressive standards of the time and impressed by the way Garber challenged them. Throughout the book students expressed surprise at the sexism and racism of the time, and their indignation was clear in their responses.

"Mary showed people that women can do jobs perfectly and shouldn't be told that they can't. That's not fair."—Mina, age 8

“Mary wrote about the black and white schools no matter what so everyone would know that all the players are important.”

—Avery, age 8

### Theme: Changing Unfair Views

Although similar to challenging discrimination, this theme was more specific to character traits. Overall, students especially focused on Garber’s bravery, which they seemed to understand was not a word associated with women in the 1940s. The students felt that by persevering through inequality and prejudice Garber was able to challenge stereotypical views of women.

“She showed that girls are brave.” —Ari, age 8

“First people can change the way people see the world and make it better.” —Darren, age 7

### Adapting and Expanding the Lesson

This lesson could be adapted in several ways. *Miss Mary Reporting* is written to appeal to many age groups but could be shortened and enhanced with additional visuals for younger grades. After teaching the lesson again in a second-grade classroom, I also recommend more explicit discussion throughout the text as the younger students sometimes focused on the humor in the story rather than the themes. It may be useful to provide additional historical context through this discussion to help young students understand the realities of segregation and the gender-based expectations of the time. Upper-elementary educators may also enhance the read-aloud by examining multiple resources including images, articles written about and by Mary Garber, or oral history interviews.<sup>17</sup> Teachers might also

use technology such as online word clouds. This lesson could also be adapted to explore the experiences of other minoritized groups. Using a similar format, teachers could utilize interactive read-alouds to introduce the narratives of many populations to further broaden students’ historical and social knowledge.

Deeper understanding and retention could likely be achieved by utilizing the lesson format across several read-alouds about various pioneers to create a unit. In addition to the biographies listed in the Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People, several websites offer information regarding quality children’s books about women’s experiences, especially under the heading of “Women’s History Month.” (Sidebar, below). Such a unit might expand students’ thinking by helping them explore connections across experiences, especially across a diverse group of female historical figures. These connections could include challenges faced, means of overcoming challenges, and broader social impact.<sup>18</sup> By displaying and adding to the charts with each new read-aloud,

teachers help students explore the experiences and impact of the many incredible women “firsts” in history.

### Conclusion

*Miss Mary Reporting* ends with a powerful quote that, despite her many accolades, Garber once cited as the greatest compliment she ever received. It comes from a young boy who was overheard speaking to a friend, saying, “That’s Miss Mary Garber. And she doesn’t care who you are or where you’re from. If you do something, she’s going to write about you.” Mary Garber is a name that students are not likely to know before the read-aloud, but within pages they will care deeply about

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## Sources for Biographies about Women Trailblazers

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**National Women’s History Museum**, [www.womenshistory.org/students-and-educators/biographies](http://www.womenshistory.org/students-and-educators/biographies)

**Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People**, [www.socialstudies.org/publications/notables](http://www.socialstudies.org/publications/notables)

**Reading Rockets**, [www.readingrockets.org/booklists/womens-history-month](http://www.readingrockets.org/booklists/womens-history-month)

her experiences. As a trailblazer, Garber provides students an opportunity to better understand the meaningful impact women have made throughout history, helping them to truly explore what it means to be “first.” ●

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## Sample Discussion Questions to Help Students...

Think about the sexism and racism of the 1940s:

- What do you think Mary’s mother meant by asking Mary to “behave like a girl?”
- Why might Mary be hired as a society columnist instead of a sports reporter even though she really loved sports?
- Mary wrote about athletes in black high schools and colleges. Why was this unusual?

Connect to Garber’s experiences:

- How do you think Mary felt when she wasn’t allowed to sit in the press box or talk to the players right after the game in the locker room?
- If you were Mary, how would you react to that rejection?
- Mary didn’t quit the profession of journalism, even when people thought she should. What does this say about her?

Describe Mary’s lasting influence and expand on the topic:

- Mary changed the way the newspaper covered sports by highlighting the accomplishments of black athletes. Why does this matter?
- There are far more female sports reporters now than there were back then. What do you think this has to do with Mary?
- How did Mary make a difference in the way our world is today?
- How do people today try to change unfair laws or practices? How could you work to change something you thought was unfair?