Book Talk 3: Misrepresentation Hunting

⏱Time Required	• About 2 weeks' out-of-class preparation • 30–60 minutes for sharing in class
🔑Key Skills	Reading (especially critical reading)
📋Type	Students will individually look for misrepresentation. Those found will be presented in the form of Book Talk in pairs or groups. Finally, everyone can vote for the most convincing misrepresentation.

📖Overview and Goals

Misrepresentation might be an unfamiliar word to you. The *Cambridge English Dictionary* defines it as "something that misrepresents an idea, situation, or opinion, or the fact of something being misrepresented." In this context, the word refers to portrayals that show prejudice, misunderstanding, ignorance, or assumptions, especially in terms of race, gender, culture, or social conventions. These misrepresentations need not be depictions of a book's character expressing prejudicial or discriminatory attitudes; they can also occur when an author expresses unconscious bias, misconception, ignorance, or assumptions. In an example of the former, *Billy Elliot* in *Penguin Readers Level 3* features a father who is against his young son becoming a ballet dancer because of his prejudice that "ballet is for women." (Spoiler alert: the father overcomes his prejudice later in the story). As an example of the latter, a passage in *Japan* in *Oxford Factfiles Level 1* contains this statement: "Most Japanese people have two religions－Shintoism and Buddhism." Many Japanese readers feel uncomfortable reading this and think, "This sentence is misleading. I am not religious; I believe in neither Shintoism nor Buddhism." Even if the writer did not intend to misrepresent Japanese people, the reader is misled because the words are poorly chosen due to bias, lack of knowledge, deliberate misrepresentation, or some other issue.

There are many examples of this in "classic" literary works. Famous examples include the discriminatory portrayal of the Jewish usurer Shylock in William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and the slave-like treatment of Friday in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. When modern women read Jane Austen's novels, in which daughters of the gentrified class are unable to inherit their father's fortune, they tend to think, "What? Impossible!" and feel uncomfortable. This unpleasant feeling or discomfort is the most important point to distinguish misrepresentation.

The purpose of this activity is not to criticize the authors whose examples have been given or suggest that these should be censored. The goal is to foster the habit of critical thinking while reading and discourage readers from blindly believing anything in print. When you reread books with the goal of Misrepresentation Hunting, you will notice many things that slipped by you before. In addition, this activity increases the awareness that "this is not just a problem when reading English; it applies to everyday life as well."

I strongly recommend Misrepresentation Hunting as an advanced model of Book Introduction.

Advance Preparation (Required Materials, Equipment, etc.)

It is necessary to prepare an environment where participants can read many graded readers by using the library or an e-book service. A book or two may not be enough to find appropriate examples for misrepresentation, so students need to be instructed to read a lot and look for them.

Procedure

Lesson 1 (About 90 minutes) + Out-of-class Assignments

1. Explain the meaning of misrepresentation and provide specific examples. Instruct the students to look not only for discriminatory expressions but also for places where the writer (the author of the graded readers or, if there is an original, its author) unconsciously expresses prejudice, misunderstanding, ignorance, or assumptions. The key to spotting misrepresentation is whether the reader feels discomfort or senses unfairness while reading.

2. Have the students read multiple graded readers and look for expressions, settings, etc., that might be a misrepresentation. Since class hours alone do not provide enough time, it is better to make this at least a two-week-long assignment to allow careful search. I recommend preparing a worksheet (see example below) where students can write down the expressions and settings they believe to be misrepresentations and their explanations of what has been misrepresented.

Lesson 2 (about 45–60 minutes)

3. Have the students form pairs or groups and present the misrepresentations they have found. Encourage them to explain what kind of prejudice, misunderstanding, ignorance, or assumption by the characters or the author led to the misrepresentation. This helps establish the practice of critical reading.

4. If done in groups, students can present the most compelling misrepresentation in each group to the whole class.

Cf. Example Worksheet

Misrepresentation-hunting Worksheet
(for a 5-minute presentation)

ID Number   Name

I read _____ from _____series.

①   First, I will summarize the book briefly.
    (No need for a detailed synopsis. It is sufficient to explain when/where/who/what)

②   I have found this book misrepresents ＊＊＊＊.
    （Replace ＊＊＊＊ with, for instance, black communities/gender roles/Japanese culture/sexual orientation/family relationships, etc.）

③   I will quote a passage/conversation/sentences, which show(s) the misrepresentation.
(Quote the section, which prominently shows the misrepresentation shown in ②. When starting to read a quote, begin by saying, "quote," and end with "unquote.")
This quote shows… (Explanation of the quoted part) / The reason why I chose this passage is that…. (State the reason for your choice)

④   I conclude that this book shows …/ that this book tells us …/ that this book depicts …
(Conclude with your evaluation of this book)

(Text: Motoko Fukaya)