Language Arts Lessons

Critical Indigenous Literacies: Selecting and Using Children's Books about Indigenous Peoples

Debbie Reese

This article focuses on unlearning stereotypical representations of Indigenous peoples and replacing harmful narratives with accurate information and understandings. Teachers are critical in categorizing, selecting, and (re)presenting Indigenous communities through children's literature.

In 1863, President Lincoln issued a proclamation stating that the last Thursday of November would be a national day of thanksgiving. In 1990, President George H. W. Bush issued the first presidential proclamation that designated November as National Native American Heritage Month. With these two proclamations occurring in the same month, many teachers use November as the time to read aloud or assign children's books that feature Native peoples. In this article, I ask teachers to rethink literature used to teach children about Indigenous peoples. In situating the experience of Native peoples across time, I begin with a clarification of terms.

I am tribally enrolled at Nambé Pueblo, which means I am counted on the Nambé census. Most Native people prefer to name their specific tribal nation because being specific helps non-Native people learn that we are far more diverse than what the terms "American Indian" or "Native American" evoke. Historically, "Indian" was commonly used, but over time, more people began using "Native" instead. Most recently, "Indigenous" is emerging as an alternative, as seen in the movements to replace Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples Day. I use the terms "Native" and "Indigenous" interchangeably, unless referring to a specific tribal nation.

There are more than 500 federally recognized tribal nations in the United States today, each with distinct systems of governance, languages, locations, material cultures, religions, and, of course, stories! Some people are taken aback at the word "nation" as applied to Native nations because of the tendency to group Native peoples with other minority groups in the United States. However, that framework fails to encompass our single most important attribute: Native nationhood. Without this recognition, our status as sovereign nations whose people were—and are—Indigenous to this continent are erased. We were not the first *Americans,* since Native nations pre-date the United States of *America* by hundreds of years. In fact, European and then US leaders entered into diplomatic negotiations with leaders of Native nations who inhabited the lands from the beginning. The outcomes of those negotiations were treaties, much like the ones the United States forges with foreign nations today. Nonetheless, depictions of Native peoples as primitive or uncivilized are one of the reasons our nationhood is difficult to accept or understand. In fact, Native peoples had/have distinct

Copyright © 2018 by the National Council of Teachers of English. All rights reserved.

cultures passed down from many generations with complex practices and traditions—hardly primitive. Therefore, the larger culture needs to unlearn and rethink how the identities of Indigenous peoples are represented and taught.

Expanding Critical Literacy: Inclusion of Indigenous Peoples

The theoretical term I highlight in this column is *Critical Indigenous Literacies* (Reese, 2013). Critical literacy encourages children to read between the lines and ask questions when engaging with literature: Whose story is this? Who benefits from this story? Whose voices are not being heard? While these may seem like difficult questions, Vasquez (2014) writes that even in early childhood, children are capable of asking these critical questions when approaching texts. Adding "Indigenous" to critical literacy asks readers to think of those questions when they read stories that have Indigenous characters in them.

Critical Indigenous literacy forefronts the historically marginalized treatment of Native stories—and by extension, Native people. In addition, a critical literacies perspective gives voice to how stories are presented and told about people and their history. For example, our creation stories are just as sacred to us as Genesis is to Christians; we do not view them as folktales. When opening many library catalogs, however, *The Story of the Milky Way: A Cherokee Tale* by Joseph Bruchac and Gayle Ross (1995) is likely to appear under "Cherokee Indians—Folklore." *Beaver Steals Fire: A Salish Coyote Story* by the staff of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribe (2005) is most likely categorized as "Salish Indians—Folklore." In fact, both are religious stories explaining some aspect of how the world was created.

In contrast, Peter Spier's (1992) *Noah's Ark* is not labeled "folklore," but "Bible stories—O.T." In fact, all three are creation stories, but the Christian story is treated differently. This difference in how Native and Christian creation stories are treated privileges Christianity, perpetuating institutionalized racism that keeps in place the ideologies of a society that is predominantly Christian. One group of creation stories is categorized and treated as fiction while the other group of creation stories is accepted as truth. Despite efforts by Native people to get their stories accurately categorized, there has been little or no movement, which raises critical questions: Whose voice is not heard in the way that stories are categorized? Whose ideologies are implicitly valued by categorical labels?

Another problem is the "myths, legends, and folktales" books that are marketed as Native. They are ubiquitous and mostly written by people who are not, themselves, Native. These authors may not have the knowledge needed to accurately depict aspects of Native traditions, some of which are part of our religious dances. In *Dragonfly's Tale,* for example, Kristina Rodanas (1995) shows Pueblo people having a food fight—a misrepresentation of a "throw." During the harvest dance, food items (like ears of corn) are tossed to others as a way to share foods. Rodanas depicted this important community value and spiritual activity as the sort of mischief American kids sometimes engage in. Misrepresentations like these lead to similar critical questions: Who is telling these stories? How are these stories being represented? Who does this story belong to?

Teachers can make choices that do justice to Native stories by choosing books written by Native writers. Both *The Story of the Milky Way* (Bruchac & Ross, 1995) and *Beaver Steals Fire* (Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes, 2005) are #OwnVoices stories—a hashtag created by Corinne Duyvis to describe a book that is written by someone who is of the particular culture being depicted. The idea is that the quality of a story is improved when the person creating that story is an insider who knows what to share and how to share it with outsiders. As a child, I was taught what can—and cannot—be shared with outsiders. A history of exploitation has made Native writers mindful of what they disclose.

To capture this concept, I have been adding a "curtain" to Bishop's (1990) "mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors" metaphor when I talk or write about Native stories. This is a way to acknowledge and honor the stories behind the curtain—those that are purposefully kept within Native communities. Native communities resisted historical oppression and continue to preserve our culture by cultivating

our ways in private spaces—behind the curtain. While Native people share some of our ways publicly in the present day, there is a great deal that we continue to protect from outsiders. Furthermore, it conveys the importance of how #OwnVoices knows what belongs within the community and what knowledge can be shared outside of our communities.

We Can Do Better: Rethinking Native Stories in Classrooms

Let's turn, now, to Native American Heritage Month and its intersection with Thanksgiving. Many teachers read aloud children's books about the "First Thanksgiving." Some classrooms take part in reenactments, with kids dressing up like Pilgrims and Indians or, perhaps, Wampanoags. Most of these books and activities default to stereotypes where Native people are shown in feathered headdresses and fringed clothing—items worn by Plains Indians rather than anything the Wampanoag people would have worn. When teachers use Thanksgiving as the vehicle for their instruction about Native peoples, they are inadvertently locating Native lives in the past.

There are better ways to bring Native stories and books about Native peoples into classrooms. I focus on Cynthia Leitich Smith's (2000) picturebook *Jingle Dancer* to illustrate how classroom book collections depicting Native people could be improved. The key ideas are to choose books that are tribally specific (that name a specific tribal nation and accurately present that nation), written by Native writers, set in the present day, and relevant all year round, keeping Native peoples visible throughout the school year.

Choose books that are tribally specific. Select books about Native peoples who are/were residents of your specific state. I recommend using websites like the National Congress of American Indians and the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian for information on tribal nations. Smith's picturebook is about Jenna, a little girl who is doing the jingle dance for the very first time at an upcoming powwow. In the author's note, Smith shares that Jenna is a citizen of the Muscogee Nation, pertinent to children in Georgia, where the Muscogee people originated, or in Oklahoma, where they are today. Therefore, focusing on the local context empowers tribal nationhood within the states of origin rather than focusing on politically constructed holidays like Thanksgiving.

Use present tense verbs to talk about Native Nations. A teacher in Georgia might say, "Today, the Muscogee Creek Nation is in Oklahoma. Before Europeans arrived on what became known as the North American continent, the Muscogee Creeks were in Georgia." To go even further, use the provocative but accurate word "invaded" instead of "arrived." While reading *Jingle Dancer,* which is set in the present day, show the Muscogee Nation website as a complementary source. Jenna's house is in an everyday neighborhood and she is wearing clothes similar to kids in the classroom. She is a person of the present day.

Choose books by Native writers. As noted earlier, Smith is Muscogee Creek. Introducing her as the author is another opportunity to use a present-tense verb. Because Smith and her character are Muscogee Creek, *Jingle Dancer* is an #OwnVoices story. As such, Smith is writing from her personal knowledge of Muscogee families and communities as they come together to help a child prepare and participate in a ceremonial dance for the first time. Jenna needs specific clothing, learns the steps and music, and understands the meaning of the dance from her tribal community. At one point in the story, Jenna is feeling overwhelmed by all that she has to do. In a matter-of-fact way, Jenna's great-aunt tells her about the story of Bat, which is a Creek creation story. As a result, we learn that Creek families share creation stories with each other to instill strength and as a way to carry on when feeling low or overwhelmed.

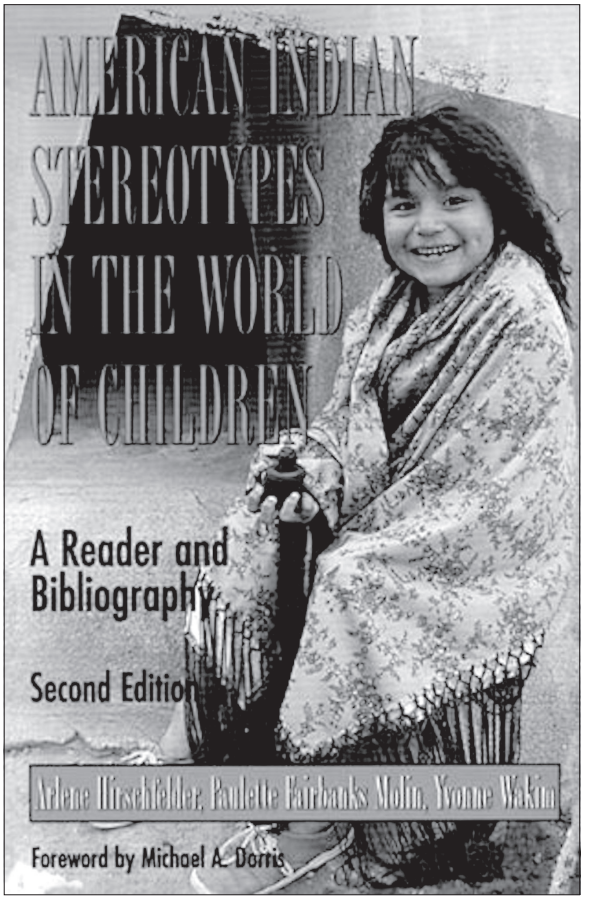
Use books by Native writers all year round. *Jingle Dancer* can be used any time of the year. I've focused on it for most of this article, but it is only one of many books available. (A list of recommended books in a range of genres, all written by Native authors and tribally specific, follows the references.) A middle grade teacher doing a unit on lyrics in pop music might consider using Eric Gansworth's (2013) *If I Ever Get Out of Here*. It is tribally specific, set in the present day, and an

#OwnVoices story. Every chapter title in the book is the name of a song by the Beatles or Paul McCartney. (If you're a fan of either one, you'll love the discography Gansworth has on his website!) Gansworth's book is about the relationship that develops between Lewis, a Native boy living on the Tuscarora Reservation, and George, a White boy living on a nearby Air Force base.

Each year the market is flooded with problematic books that publishers market to classroom teachers, but there are also gems worth reading. At my website, American Indians in Children's Literature (https://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com), I read as many as I can and create "best of" lists. Visit! See what you'll find for your classroom.

For Further Reading

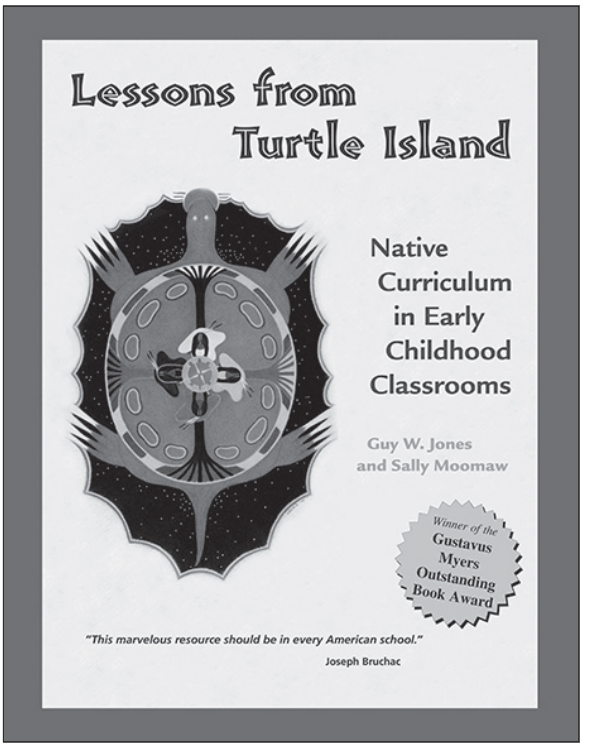
Hirschfelder, A., Molin, P. F., & Wakim, Y. (1999). *American Indian stereotypes in the world of children.* Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press. ISBN 978-0-8108-3613-6



This is a very useful text that has eight chapters with several short essays in each one. It also contains an extensive bibliography of books and articles teachers can study to gain a depth of knowledge of the ways Native peoples have been depicted over time.

Jones, G. W., & Moomaw, S. (2002). *Lessons from Turtle Island: Native curriculum in early childhood classrooms.* Saint Paul, MN: Redleaf Press. ISBN 978-1-929610-25-9

Written especially for teachers—by two teachers—each chapter takes a close look at issues in how Native content is taught. It features lesson plans built on children's literature that can provide children with accurate and authentic knowledge.



Children's Literature Cited

Bruchac, J., & Ross, G. (1995). *The story of the Milky Way: A Cherokee tale* (V. A. Stroud, Illus.). New York, NY: Dial Books.

Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes. (2005). *Beaver steals fire: A Salish coyote story* (S. Sandoval, Illus.). Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.

Gansworth, E. (2013). *If I ever get out of here.* New York, NY: Arthur A. Levine Books.

Rodanas, K. (1995). *Dragonfly's tale*. New York, NY: Clarion Books.

Smith, C, L. (2000). *Jingle dancer* (C. Van Wright & Y. Hu, Illus.). New York, NY: Morrow Junior Books.

Spier, P. (1992). *Noah's ark.* New York, NY: Doubleday.

References

Bishop, R. S. (1990). Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. *Perspectives, 6*(3), ix–xi.

Reese, D. (2013). Critical Indigenous literacies. In J. Larson & J. Marsh (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of early childhood literacy* (pp. 251–263). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Vasquez, V. (2014). *Negotiating critical literacies with young children.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Recommended Books

Baker, D. (2016). *Kamik joins the pack* (Q. Leng, Illus.). Iqaluit, Nunavut: Inhabit Media.

Dimaline, C. (2017). *The marrow thieves.* Toronto, Ontario: Cormorant Publishers.

Gansworth, E. (2013). *If I ever get out of here.* New York, NY: Arthur A. Levine Books.

Herrington, J. (2016). *Mission to space.* Ada, OK: White Dog Press.

Marshall, J., III. (2015). *In the footsteps of Crazy Horse* (J. M. Yellowhawk, Illus.). New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams.

Minnema, C. K. (2014). *Hungry Johnny* (W. Ballinger, Illus.). Saint Paul, Minnesota: Historical Society Press.

Ortiz, S. J. (2017). *The people shall continue* (S. Graves, Illus.). New York, NY: Lee and Low Books.

Robertson, D. A. (2016). *When we were alone* (J. Flett, Illus.). Winnipeg, Manitoba: HighWater Press.

Robertson, J. (2017). *The water walker*. Toronto, Ontario: Second Story Press.

Robertson, S. (2014). *Rock and roll highway: The Robbie Robertson story* (A. Gustavson, Illus.). New York, NY: Henry Holt.

Smith, M. G. (2017). *You hold me up* (D. Daniel, Illus.). Victoria, British Colombia: Orca Book Publishers.

Tribally enrolled at Nambé Pueblo, **Debbie Reese** is a former schoolteacher and assistant professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her academic and professional articles as well as her blog (American Indians in Children's Literature) are taught in English, education, and library science courses in the United States and Canada. She can be reached at dreese.nambe@gmail.com or on Twitter at @debreese.

Search for Next Editor of *English Education*

The Conference on English Education is seeking the next editor for its journal *English Education*. The term of the present editor, Tara Star Johnson, will end in July 2020. Applicants for the editorship should be tenured (or have completed the tenure process with a reasonable certainty that tenure will be granted) and should have published in *English Education* or a national journal of similar quality.

Applicants should send a letter of application to be received **no later than August 31, 2018.** Letters should be accompanied by the applicant's vita, one published writing sample (article or chapter), a one page statement of the applicant's vision for the future of the journal, and letter(s) specifying financial support from appropriate administrators at the applicant's institution. Applicants are urged to consult with administrators on the question of time, resources, and other institutional support that may be required for the editorship of this journal.

Applications should be submitted via email in PDF form to kaustin@ncte.org; please include "EE Editor Application" in the subject line. Direct queries to Kurt Austin, NCTE Publications Director, at the email address listed, or call 217-328-3870, ext. 3619.

Finalists will be interviewed by the search committee at the NCTE Annual Convention in Houston in November 2018. The applicant appointed by the CEE Executive Committee will effect a transition, preparing for their first issue to be published in October 2020. The appointment is for five years, nonrenewable.