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## Native American Literature for Children and Young Adults

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### ABSTRACT

THE AUTHOR ADDRESSES the importance and features of Native American oral literature (myths, legends, and folktales—or stories) in Native American life, accounts for the heightened interest of publishers in producing dozens of volumes with Native American stories for children, and considers problems in these works as well as in those books that carefully retell the stories. She then discusses past and current problems in children's nonfiction and fiction books about Native Americans and gives some examples of nonfiction works and novels that provide accurate information.

### INTRODUCTION

During the 1940s through the 1960s, children's book publishers put out a sprinkling of books with Native American "myths," "legends," and "folktales" (many Native Americans prefer "traditions," or "stories," or "sacred narratives" to these terms). The 1970s saw a steady stream of books of Native American oral literature. According to Ginny Moore Kruse and Kathleen T. Horning (1991), this increase in authentic literature of Native Americans and other people of color resulted, in part, from the creation of the Council on Interracial Books for Children, whose staff encouraged publishers to produce books by authors and artists of color. They also attribute the increase to a *Saturday Review* article by Nancy Larrick (1965) titled "The All-White World of Children's Books" that reported the results of a survey she conducted on 5,000 juvenile trade books from 1962 to 1964.

She found that only four-fifths of one per cent of these books included any mention of contemporary African-Americans in either text or illustrations. Larrick's article made a tremendous impact on both publishers and the book-buying public. In this time of great social change, many trade publishers responded to this information and began to meet the new public demand for a more accurate picture of our society by showing a greater sensitivity toward racial diversity in the books they subsequently published for children. (Kruse & Horning, 1991, p. x)

The 1980s and early 1990s, however, have witnessed an outpouring of retellings of Native American stories. Several factors account for this publishing trend. Undoubtedly, the publishers have addressed the renaissance in storytelling all over the United States. "The ancient art of storytelling, muted for decades in living rooms dominated by television, has been coming back. As many as 300 storytelling leagues now meet around the country" (Johnson, 1986, p. B8). Schools are interested in storytelling programs for children and many teachers and librarians link the stories to literacy by introducing folktales and legends in written or book form. Storytelling also introduces children to people from different cultures in an era acutely aware of the multiplicity of cultural traditions. According to Joseph Bruchac (1988):

The stories of the many Native nations of what is now the United States speak to both the Indian and the non-Indian in ways unlike any other tales. Moreover, the many Native American tales already collected and in print constitute one of the richest bodies of myth and legend found anywhere in the world. There are currently to be found in books tens of thousands of Native American tales from the more than 400 oral traditions of North America—tales filled with those memorable and exciting details which attract both storytellers and audiences. (p. 105)

#### ORAL LITERATURE: IMPORTANCE AND CHARACTERISTICS

Publishers are keenly aware of the revival of public interest in Indian traditions, especially in the last decade leading up to 1992, designated by the Senate and House of Representatives "The Year of the American Indian," with its year-long programs, ceremonies, museum exhibitions, and other activities commemorating the 500 year anniversary of the arrival of Christopher Columbus. Publishers have responded with scores of works about Native American people. Among those published over the past twenty years are many Native American poets and novelists, some of whom have enjoyed national awards and enormous attention. Dell Hymes (1985), an anthropologist who has devoted over thirty years to studying Indian languages and traditions, noted in a review of *American Indian Myths and Legends*, selected and edited by Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz, that "old monographs were ransacked for new anthologies" (p. 85).

The importance of oral literature in Native American cultures is undisputed. Indeed, Native American people have never stopped telling their stories. As Sandra A. Rietz (1988) explains:

Oral literatures are more than curious, historic tribal artifacts. Oral stories, though they are very old, have very contemporary functions. Our technology may have changed, but the archetypal memories which may have motivated the beginnings of human literary activity so long ago are still fresh. Oral stories are still evolving as products of human literary creativity. (p. 167)

Native American peoples pass on their histories, cultural traditions, and laws by word of mouth. Oral stories, some serious, some funny, explain how the world was created, how the first people of the tribes originated, and how the sun, moon, stars, lakes, and mountains came to be. Each tribal story explains the origin of every landmark, every plant, and every animal. Some stories tell about greediness, selfishness, or boastfulness and show the correct way that people should treat one another and other beings in the world. They contain practical advice and moral teachings. Some give recipes for ways to heal—how to find the proper roots and medicinal herbs. Some teach tribal laws and the consequences of their violation. Some stories are used to say what cannot be said—stories about dying and how to prepare for dying. Some stories are so sacred and powerful—from “time immemorial”—that they are treated with special respect. Some creation stories, for example, are usually recited in ritual form and a sacred aura and serious demeanor accompanies their telling. Many sacred genesis stories are considered ceremonial and known to specialists like priests or heads of clans or religious societies who learned the narratives from predecessors. Sometimes a tribal creation story is told in different ways. Members of different families in different communities tell their own versions with some even contradicting one another. And some stories today combine older motifs with contemporary themes, reflecting Native American adaptation to hundreds of years of domination by European and Euroamerican societies.

Stories are told during designated periods, usually winter. The restriction on storytelling is still honored by many Native American people to this day. Tehanetorens, a respected Mohawk elder, explains:

The old stories...are very powerful. If you tell a legend in the summer when the crops are in the ground, then the Corn and the Beans, the Squash and the other food plants might listen to that story and forget to grow or produce their fruit. A story is so strong that things in the natural world listen to it, too, and may become confused and not go about their proper ways. (Caduto & Bruchac, 1988a, p. 13)

Long summer days are so crammed with activities that storytelling has to wait until the pace slows down. During the cold winter months, people believe there is more time to relax and receive the teachings in stories.

The stories from more than 400 oral traditions of North America have been recited from memory again and again and passed from older to younger people from generation to generation over hundreds of years to the present day. Like other people who did not rely on writing, Native Americans had keen memories. All the information they knew and needed was held in the collective memories of the individual communities where it was always available through storytelling. After the arrival of Europeans in North America, these stories were first recorded by explorers and settlers and later, during the 1800s, by anthropologists, linguists, and folkloricists. Slapin and Seale (1988) point out that many early collectors "cared deeply about the people whose tales they recorded; they shared their lives, learned their languages and they were zealous about getting it down and getting it down straight. George Grinnel, for instance, spent some 40 years visiting the Cheyenne people every summer, and his material is about as authentic as a person from another culture can get" (p. 186).

#### ISSUES OF AUTHENTICITY AND DELIVERY IN TRADITIONAL LITERATURE

Unfortunately, not all stories were written exactly as Native American people spoke them. Written versions of stories were sometimes incomplete or inaccurately recorded. Thousands of these stories, accurate or not, have been stored in university ethnology publications, museum and folklore journals, and United States Bureau of American Ethnology volumes. The bureau, established in 1879 as part of the Smithsonian Institution, sent scholars to interview tribal speakers. These days scholars take along tape recorders and video cameras to capture new stories heard at intertribal fairs, powwows, and conferences held in Denver or New York City.

Writers and publishers have reproduced dozens of volumes with these stories aimed at children. These stories, however, according to Malcolm Margolin (1981), a writer and publisher himself, have been "stripped of the richness of human voice and the presence of living audience, cut off from cultural knowledge and tradition, translated into a distant language and set into type,...[and] so diminished that many of them seem formless, empty, and incomprehensible to us" (p. 8). William Schneider (1986), director of the Oral History Program at the University of Alaska, points out that other changes occur when oral stories are converted to written form:

No longer is the elder speaking to the privileged few; everyone who can read becomes a potential member of the audience regardless of how much they know or do not know about the culture. In the oral setting the audience is controlled, limited, and prescribed by the storyteller and the cultural group. When the story is written, the storyteller has no control over who will read the stories, nor does he know what clarification

they will need....In the written form, the role of interpreter is taken out of the speaker's hands. Sometimes it is taken up by a writer who puts the book together; often it is left out.... (p. 17)

Ideally, Native American stories should be spoken aloud and not read. Traditional storytelling required that people come together and listen. American Indian storytelling was and still is an occasion for a communal experience when Native American people come together to share their dynamic past. After an evening meal, an established storyteller gathered people of all ages around him or her to play the drum, sing songs, and tell stories about their Native American heritage and traditions. As Michael J. Caduto and Joseph Bruchac (1988a) note: "Because Native American cultures had an intuitive understanding of this powerful role of myth and the cross-generational value of stories, people of all ages gathered around when a story was told...we know of no place where storytelling was 'just for children'" (p. 12). The performance was as important to the storytelling as the story itself. States Malcolm Margolin (1981):

the entire audience—except for the very young children—had heard each story and myth many times. Since everyone knew the plot, the storyteller was free to concentrate instead on voice, cadence, and performance. Especially performance! Imagine, for example, a rainy winter night. People have crowded into the assembly house or large dwelling. A fire is lit—it crackles and smokes from the moisture in the wood—and the storyteller launches forth, voice rising and falling; now talking, now singing; adopting the tone of one character, then another; shouting, whispering, grunting, wheedling, laughing—and all in a language molded to the story by centuries of previous performances; all in an energized setting in which family and friends are crowded together. (p. 7)

Further, the interaction between the storyteller and the youngsters and others in the audience becomes a dramatic performance, "each presentation is marked by the personalities of those present, and every telling is slightly different, shaped by the things that have happened before, the relationships between those present, and the intent of the teller...the experience cannot be completely repeated in either written or recorded form" (Schneider, 1986, p. 17).

In some cultures, stories are a possession. The owner of a story shares it with the audience. William Schneider (1986) notes: "Often [a story] is a gift to be listened to, but cannot be repeated except by the owner....The teller chooses to give his story to an audience he selects; the audience feels privileged to participate in the session and agrees to honor the story by upholding whatever ownership is recognized within the culture" (p. 17). Caduto and Bruchac (1988a) also point out that: "In some Native American cultures, certain stories and certain songs were seen as the property of special groups or individuals. Only those people or groups could tell such stories and

there might be restrictions as to who could tell them and when. To this day many Native American people guard their stories from outsiders" (p. 12). And in putting together their book *Keepers of the Earth: Native American Stories and Environmental Activities for Children*, Caduto and Bruchac retold stories that were already in print and they "tried to avoid using stories which might be regarded as "too sacred" to use, even with care, in a book" (p. 12).

Other authors also proceed with great care when retelling Native American stories. In her book, *North American Indian Stories: More Earthmaker's Tales*, Gretchen Will Mayo (1990) provides brief notes about storytelling for her readers. She points out:

loving a good story, Indians wove parts of some European folktales into their own. Some legends, of course, were sacred and could never be given away or changed, even to this day. In early days, the time and setting for storytelling was very important. Rules had to be followed, although the rules varied from tribe to tribe. Like many other tribes, the Blackfoot insisted on telling their legends after dark and in the wintertime. (n.p.)

Following the stories, Mayo lists her sources which permits any reader to verify authenticity. The absence of sources makes it impossible to see how closely an author has adhered to or departed from the original by embroidering his or her own details, thus tampering with and inauthenticating the story. Slapin and Seale (1988), who review books with Native American traditional stories, wonder "when writers don't happen to mention where they got their stories, whether they are afraid we might go back and check up on them" (p. 337).

Dell Hymes (1985), who "has spent thirty years studying Indian...traditions," cares deeply about attributing the stories in an appropriate way. He states that the origin of stories is often inaccurate or is not given at all. He answers the question "Why care about the names of Indians long dead, unless one is descended from them?" by suggesting that:

The fundamental challenge to all of us is to realize that the stories told years ago, like those told today, come from individuals. Personal creative use of tradition did not begin in our lifetime. It is as old as the narrative art itself. True, the older collectors helped to obscure that fact. They usually gave the names of their sources, and thanked them, but would publish stories told by a single person as if they stood for a whole community....The individual sources, then, are in a sense creators as well as preservers. When what they said is accurately recorded, and the devices and designs they employed are understood, one can hear both a tribal art and a personal voice. (p. 85)

Many examples can be found in children's books that honor the original creator and preserver of the published story. In Anne Cameron's (1985) *How the Loon Lost Her Voice*, the author tells her readers: "When I was growing up on Vancouver Island, I met a woman who was a storyteller. She shared many stories with me,

and later, gave me permission to share them with others. This woman's name was KLOPINUM. In English, her name means 'Keeper of the River of Copper'" (n.p.). In *Baby Rattlesnake*, a legend told by Te Ata (1989) (a 92-year old internationally acclaimed Chickasaw storyteller from contemporary Oklahoma) and adapted by Lynn Moroney, readers are told that:

Oklahoma storyteller Lynn Moroney, herself part Indian, had admired Te Ata for years and finally asked her permission to retell the story of *Baby Rattlesnake*. At first the answer was no, but when Te Ata came to a story-telling festival organized by Lynn and heard the younger woman tell her own stories, Te Ata was so impressed that she gave Lynn her blessing to tell this story and pass it on to others through the medium of a book. (p. 32)

Tipi Press in Chamberlain, South Dakota, has published a book by Moses Nelson Big Crow (1987) called *A Legend from Crazy Horse Clan*. The title clearly establishes for readers that the story belongs to his family and clan. In *Old Father Story Teller*, Santa Clara Pueblo artist Pablita Velarde shares the stories of her people handed down to her by her grandfather and great-grandfather. In a collection of legends told by Arizona Indian children and collected by Byrd Baylor (1976), *And It Is Still That Way*, each child's name and tribal affiliation is given. Baylor tells in her introduction that she and the Native American children "talked about storytelling in the Indian way. We talked about how it feels to hear stories that aren't made up new and written down in somebody else's book but are as old as your tribe and are told and sung and chanted by people of your own family, your own clan" (p. viii). In a curriculum about New England's Native American peoples by Barbara Robinson (1988), the Wampanoag creation story concludes with the note: "Attributed to Chief Red Shell, Historian of the Nauset Wampanoag Tribe and Chief Wild Horse, Wampanoag Champion of the Mashpee. Origin probably Delaware (Nanepashemet, personal communication; Simmons, 1986, p. 215). Reprinted from Reynard, Chatham Historical Society, 1986" (p. 111). In the Wabanaki curriculum by the American Friends Service Committee (1989), legends such as "Adventures of Master Rabbit" are footnoted with: "The source of this legend is *The Algonquin Legends of New England* by Charles G. Leland, Houghton Mifflin and Co., 1884. This particular "Master Rabbit" legend is Passamaquoddy and was told to Leland by Tomah Josephs. The wording has been changed somewhat to make the story easier for students to read" (p. C-21). In *The Naked Bear: Folktales of the Iroquois*, John Bierhorst (1987) spends several pages discussing his sources. In *The People Shall Continue*, Simon Ortiz (1977) tells his own epic story of Native American people from creation to the present day in traditional oral narrative style.

Not all writers and publishers have been so careful with the stories told by Native Americans. In *Back in the Beforetime: Tales of the California Indians*, retold by Jane Louise Curry (1987), there is no attribution. Award winning author William Toye (1979) never mentions his source(s) in *The Fire Stealer*. And the recent series (1990) of *Native American Legends* supplies no sources for the stories Terri Cohlene retells in each of the six books. Many more books neglect to mention the original storyteller or sources.

Publishers and adapters alike, then, need to supply their exact sources to underscore the fact that stories belong to Native American individuals, families, clans, or tribes and to attribute the proper authorship to the original storytellers. This will enable readers who are so inclined to verify documentation.

### NONFICTION BOOKS

Two studies, one written by Mary Gloyne Byler in 1973 (*American Indian Authors for Young Readers: A Selected Bibliography* published by the New York-based Association on American Indian Affairs) and the other written by Robert B. Moore and Arlene Hirschfelder in 1977 ("Feathers, Tomahawks, and Tipis: A Study of Stereotyped 'Indian' Imagery in Children's Picture Books" in *Unlearning "Indian" Stereotypes* published by the New York-based Council on Interracial Books for Children) revealed numerous problems in children's nonfiction books about Indians. Since many of the books discussed in these studies remain on library shelves or have been reprinted, they continue to misinform young readers.

Too many history books, particularly those about Indians west of the Mississippi River or those about nineteenth-century wars with Indians, dwell on Indian brutality. These books rarely state that Indians attempted to protect their lands, their homes, and their families from invasion by Euroamericans. The books seldom tell that Indians almost universally greeted missionaries, Spanish, English, and others with friendliness and practical help. They rarely tell that conflicts eventually erupted over land, broken promises, and broken treaties. They seldom explain that methods Indians used to obtain food, clothing, shelter—all land dependent—clashed with economies of Euroamerican settlers who destroyed miles of Indian food sites, homesites, sacred sites, and animal preserves. Mary Gloyne Byler (1973) points out in her study:

Undoubtedly it is accurate that settlers were threatened by, and afraid of, Indians, but Indians were equally, if not more, threatened by the settlers and they had much more to lose. The history books and story books seldom make it clear that Native Americans in fighting back, were defending their homes and families and were not just being malicious. (p. 8)



The two studies showed that too many books are filled with words that trigger negative and derogatory images of American Indians. "Squaw," "brave," and "papoose" do not evoke the same images as do the words "woman," "man," "baby." The practice of using pejorative terms still continues today, although to a lesser degree. In a 1985 book, *Indian Festivals*, Keith Brandt should have used "man" when he wrote: "If a brave killed more game than his family could eat..." (p. 15). In a 1990 book, *Costumes*, Clare Beaton shows children how to dress as a "squaw." The studies showed that writers used a dual system of labeling Indian and Euroamerican behavior. Writers call battles won by Euroamericans "victories" and battles won by Indians are called "massacres." Writers convey the idea that Euroamericans who protected their homelands were patriots. Indians who did likewise were murderers. Writers call people who follow their jobs or who go to work or go on vacation "travelers," "commuters," "vacationers." Indians whose job it was to hunt buffalo or Indians who moved between their winter and summer homes or who went on religious pilgrimages were "wanderers" or "roamers." Roaming and wandering describe people—or animals—moving without purpose or direction. Writers call the lands that Euroamericans settled "wilderness." Indians called these lands their "homelands" or "sacred geography." Writers call Euroamericans who settled on Indian homelands "settlers." Indians called them "trespassers" or "invaders." Writers call Indian clothing "costumes." Indians call them "tribal dress," "clothes," "regalia."

Too many books contain distortions of Indian cultural practices or historical facts. A book distorts historical truth when the writer tells children that "Columbus discovered America." Many books still do. A book distorts the reality of contemporary Indian America when a writer titles it "How the Indians Lived." Many books written decades ago, and still on library shelves, tell youngsters Indians vanished: "Now, in all of Georgia and Alabama, there is nothing left of the nation that had lived there for a thousand years before the white man came. The Cherokees are gone..." (Bealer, 1972, p. 84). The presence of the Southeastern Cherokee Confederacy in Leesburg, Georgia, and the Georgia Tribe of Eastern Cherokees in Cairo contradicts this inaccurate statement. And Sonia Bleeker's sixteen-book series about American Indian tribes, published during the 1950s by William Morrow, contains dated or inaccurate information that continues to misinform young readers about Native American realities in the 1990s. Fortunately, newer series are available, although these are not without their problems as well.

There are far too many books for children with ethnocentric statements about Native American people. Too many books state that

Indians had no schools or alphabets or books before Euroamericans. And then the writers hasten to explain that Indians had elders or teachers—their parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles—who told them stories that gave them information. These statements suggest to children that Euroamerican education practices—schools, alphabets, and books—are superior to Indian education practices. The writers undermine Indian educational practices and suggest Indian methods are less worthwhile. Writers promote cultural awareness when they explain, without qualifications, that Indian elders who teach and tell stories to Indian youngsters (and they still do) are as important to Indian people as teachers in school buildings. Writers promote cultural understanding when they explain that oral stories of Native American peoples are like curricula that teach what Indian people know about themselves and their universe and their histories. These stories are as valuable and valid to Indian people as alphabets, books, and schools are to Euroamerican people.

Far too many books omit cultural and historical information about Native Americans. In a foreword to *American Indian Stereotypes in the World of Children* edited by Arlene B. Hirschfelder (1982), Michael Dorris wrote: “To deprive our children (who grow up to become no less deprived adults) access to the wealth and sophistication of traditional Native American societies is indefensible” (p. vii). Yet writers have routinely omitted this information. Few discussed the harmonious ways Native Americans coexist with nature, their ingenious use of plants and animals to produce food, clothing, and shelter, and their respect for the natural world. Few discuss close knit loving Native American family life, respect for elders, the care with which children are raised, and the dynamic values of sharing and hospitality. Few writers tell about the traditional and changing roles of American Indian women who have adapted to Euroamerican culture while at the same time perpetuating Native American values. Few writers discuss spiritual and philosophical beliefs or the great variety of religious experiences among Native Americans. Few writers discuss the contributions Indian people have made to their own cultures. Some, but not many, discuss Native American knowledge of agronomy, architecture, astronomy, geology, irrigation, mathematics, and medicine.

Fortunately, over the last decade, Indian and non-Indian writers, published by Native American, mainstream, and small presses, have begun to fill this void with books that accurately depict American Indian cultural traditions. Several photo essay books published in 1990-93 illuminate ancient traditions that continue to thrive, show close-knit loving Native American families, and treat spiritual traditions with respect. (Holiday House published two books by Diane

Hoyt-Goldsmith and Lawrence Migdale, photographer: *Totem Pole* in 1990, *Pueblo Storyteller* in 1991, *Arctic Hunter* in 1992, and *Cherokee Summer* in 1993. Cobblehill published Marcia Keegan's *Pueblo Boy: Growing Up in Two Worlds* in 1991.) A number of books provide accurate treatments of Native American housing traditions. Among them are three by Charlotte Yue and David Yue: *The Tipi: A Center of Native American Life* (1984), *The Pueblo* (1986), and *The Igloo* (1988). Nashone (1989) has written *Where Indians Live: American Indian Houses*. Other books, like the earlier mentioned *Keepers of the Earth* and *Keepers of the Animals: Native American Stories and Wildlife Activities*, both written by Michael Caduto and Joseph Bruchac, address Native American environmental concerns. Gary McLain (1990), author of *The Indian Way: Learning to Communicate with Mother Earth*, describes for young readers, ages eight and up, the way Native Americans have lived in harmony with "Mother Earth, Father Sky, and all living things" (n.p.). The second part of the book provides activities that children can do to achieve a closer bond with the earth. Native practitioners and educators, however, may question some of the suggested activities aimed at children which draw on sacred practices of Native Americans. A 1990 Franklin Watts book, *North American Indian Survival Skills* by Karen Liptak, also describes how North American Indians relied on Mother Earth to survive: "Yet, no matter where they lived, the Indians treated Mother Earth with great respect" (p. 9). With the help of Willy Whitefeather of Cherokee descent, the writer describes the ingenuity of Indians who were (and are) able to survive in a variety of regions. In another book about Native American ingenuity, Henry Tall Bull and Tom Weist (n.d.) tell a story about men who skillfully fight forest fires in *Northern Cheyenne Fire Fighters*.

Some publishers who are aware of the interest in Native American spiritual traditions have begun to issue books about this topic for younger readers. One of the best examples is *The Mishomis Book: The Voice of the Ojibway* by Edward Benton-Banai (1979), executive director of the Red School House in St. Paul, Minnesota, a full-blooded Wisconsin Ojibway of the Fish Clan and a spiritual teacher of the Lac Court Oreilles Band of the Ojibway Tribe. He offers readers an accurate account of the culture, history, and philosophy of the Ojibway Nation in a book Slapin and Seale (1988) call "a spiritual odyssey as well as an historical one..." (p. 168). The author states that he "has been careful not to profane any of the Ojibway teachings. He has attempted to leave the sacred teachings intact where their complete form has been proclaimed by ritual" (p. ii). He tells the Ojibway Creation Story, takes the readers through a Midewiwin Ceremony, the clan system, the sweat lodge ceremony, as well as other

cultural material. Benton-Banai concludes with the history of Ojibway encounters with settlers, traders, missionaries, and federal armies which he tells with clarity and honesty.

Other books lack this clarity and honesty, however. In 1990, Childrens Press issued *Black Elk: A Man with a Vision* (Greene), a biography about the renowned Oglala Lakota medicine man and the first attempt to describe for young people the life of this important Native American healer. Although the author sticks to the material in *Black Elk Speaks* as told through John G. Neihardt, originally published in 1932, this retelling “of Black Elk’s vision is so oversimplified that it sounds ridiculous and muddled” (p. 6), according to Naomi Caldwell-Wood and Lisa A. Mitten (1991), both with the American Indian Library Association.

In the book *Indian Festivals*, by Keith Brandt (1985), the author misinterprets and oversimplifies the Plains Sun Dance by suggesting: “The dance symbolized the struggle of the human soul to free itself from the bonds of the body” (p. 22). Actually, the Sun Dance, one of the best known religious ceremonies in Native North America, was conducted by over twenty tribes of the Plains region for different reasons. Indeed, the name of the dance itself, its origin, purpose, and ritual differed from group to group. In general, the dance was and is held to pray for the renewal of the people and the earth, to give thanks, to fulfill a vow, to pray for fertility and plenty, to protect the people from danger or illness, and for other religious purposes. Brandt also tells readers that the great festivals of the tribes of the Northwest Coast are no longer held (p. 30). While it is true that the Canadian government made it a criminal offense to hold a potlatch, people held potlatches in secret. When the government lifted its ban in 1951, serious—but not irreversible—damage had been done to potlatching rites. Once lengthy affairs, today evening-long potlatches continue the ritual and tradition.

In his book *Buffalo Hunt*, Russell Freedman (1988) misrepresents Native American ritual practices in the chapter “Buffalo Magic.” He calls a buffalo skull mounted on a rock a “magical device” (p. 18) to attract buffalo herds and calls buffalo hearts strewn across the plains “magical power” (p. 38) to renew the herd. Calling sacred power objects “magical devices” demeans them, strips them of spirituality, and relegates them to the realm of make believe.

Evelyn Wolfson’s (1988) *Abenaki to Zuni: A Dictionary of Native American Tribes* contains so many inaccuracies about Native American spiritual traditions that these make it an unreliable reference source for that subject. A few examples show why. Wolfson states that the Cayugas and Senecas (members of the Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy) observed an eight-day Midwinter Ceremony while the

Onondagas (also members of the Six Nations Confederacy) observed this same ceremony for four days. She does not tell that the Mohawks and Oneidas (members of the Six Nations Confederacy) also observe this sacred ceremony which in fact lasts nine days for all the tribes. There is also no information about spiritual traditions of the Tuscaroras, members of the Six Nations Confederacy as well. For the Cayuga, Mohawk, Oneida, and Seneca, she never explains the purpose of the Midwinter Ceremony but dwells instead on the arrival of the False Face Society with its "grotesque, wooden masks" (p. 41). For the Onondaga, she writes that: "Each new year they hold a four-day celebration called the Midwinter Ceremony, when they thank the spirits for a bountiful harvest" (p. 133). There is much more to the ceremony than the author's explanation suggests. The masks to which the author refers in the Cayuga and Seneca entries are sacred medicine masks that represent the power of the original medicine beings. "Grotesque" ridicules them and misrepresents their sacred functions during religious ceremonies. Wolfson also misinterprets the "Blackfoot" religious celebration ("the Sun Dance, which is a series of feasts, dances, fasts, and exhibitions of self-torture") (p. 32) and the Teton (Sioux) who hold a Sun Dance each summer during which they "fast, feast, dance, and practice self-torture" (p. 160). Blackfeet and Sioux male dancers pledged (but did not actually perform) and did not exhibit, flesh offerings, made sacrifices (but did not practice self-torture) of their bodies. These sacred functions took place on behalf of the earth, people, and for other purposes.

With the current interest in Native American topics, some publishers have turned out nonfiction titles in series. For young readers, Franklin Watts publishers has a series of books about six tribes which surveys each tribe's cultural traits, past and present, and which is enriched with plenty of colorful photographs. Childrens Press has published at least nineteen "New True" books about tribes, introducing youngsters to the histories and cultures of each people, along with photographs of historic and present-day Indians. Educators should use these books with caution, however, as the writers oversimplify or misinterpret cultural information. For example, in *The Sioux* (1984), the author states the Santee, Middle (called Yankton in the book), and Teton divisions of the Sioux Tribe "did not speak the same language" (p. 12) when indeed all divisions spoke dialects of the Siouan language. Holiday House announced, in early 1993, its "The First American Books" series beginning with *The Sioux* and *The Navajo*, both by Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve, Rosebud Sioux author. Lerner Publications Company in Minneapolis launched its "We are Still Here: American Indians Today" series. Gordon Requinti, Leech Lake Ojibway, and photographer Dale

Kakkak, Menominee, tell the story of rice harvesting in Minnesota in *The Sacred Harvest: Ojibway Wild Rice Gathering* and Russell M. Peters, Wampanoag, and photographer John Madama, relate the story of a traditional clam bake of the Massachusetts Wampanoags.

For older readers, Chelsea House has published four dozen books about Indian tribes, each filled with color and black-and-white illustrations and written by anthropologists, historians, or other specialists who have had field experiences with the tribes that they write about. Facts on File has published an eight-volume "The First American Series" organized on a geographical basis (Indians of the Plains, California Indians, and so on). Each volume encompasses all the tribes of a particular area of North America. These books, illustrated with dozens of color and black-and-white photographs, cover the cultures, relations with Euroamericans, and current status of the tribes.

In addition to series about tribes, there are a number of series with biographies of notable American Indians. Twenty years ago, Dillon Press published numerous Indian biographies introducing youngsters to artists such as Pablita Velarde and Michael Naranjo, both Santa Clara Pueblo; Daisey Nampeyo, Hopi; George Morrison, Chippewa; Maria Martinez, San Ildefonso Pueblo; and Oscar Howe, Sioux; politicians such as William Beltz, Inuit and president of the first Senate of the State of Alaska; military figures such as Chief Joseph, Nez Perce; Crazy Horse, Oglala Lakota; Geronimo, Apache, and Osceola, Seminole; an athlete, Jim Thorpe, Sac and Fox; a dancer, Maria Tallchief, Osage; and a historian, William Warren, Chippewa. Troll Associates offers a series of biographies which include Black Hawk, Chief Joseph, Pocahontas, Sacajawea, Osceola, Pontiac, Sequoia, Sitting Bull, Tecumseh, and Squanto, all published in 1979. Slapin and Seale (1988) feel these ten biographies offer up "formula non-fiction....All of these books are filled with fictionalized conversations....These books feed directly into the myths of superiority and infallibility of white American institutions—myths that are force-fed to children in school" (pp. 366-68). Raintree Publishers has released eight of a planned twenty-four book series (*American Indian Stories*) about the life and achievements of important American Indians. Herman Viola of the Smithsonian Institution and Robert Kvasnicka of the National Archives are involved in writing and editing these volumes. Raintree has released books about Geronimo, Apache; Hole-in-the-Day, Chippewa; Carlos Montezuma, Yavapai; Plenty Coups, Crow; John Ross, Cherokee; Sitting Bull, Sioux; Jim Thorpe, Sac and Fox; and Sarah Winnemucca, Paiute. Silver Burdett Press has its "Alvin Josephy Biography Series

of American Indians" which includes books about Geronimo, Hiawatha, King Philip, Sequoia, Sitting Bull, and Tecumseh.

Years ago, most writers omitted discussions of European expansion and the treatment Indians received from the federal and state governments. Most writers omitted discussions of the role European diseases played in killing more Indian people than did the conflicts between Indians and Euroamericans. Few writers discussed Native American struggles to maintain their sovereignty, cultural practices, and spirituality in a modern world. And most writers omitted discussions of contemporary issues facing Indian nations including struggles over treaty rights, land, water rights, minerals, timber, fishing, religious freedom, and adjustments to life on reservations and in cities and rural areas where more than half of the Native American population now lives.

Again, fortunately, some Indian and non-Indian writers have tackled these issues over the past decade. Brent Ashabranner (1982) dealt with the confrontation between the Northern Cheyenne and energy companies in *Morning Star, Black Sun: The Northern Cheyenne Indians and America's Energy Crisis*. He wrote about the struggle of young Native American people to remain Indian while at the same time learning to make it in the dominant culture in *To Live in Two Worlds: American Indian Youth Today* (Ashabranner, 1984). The New Mexico People & Energy Collective (1981) wrote about Emma, a Navajo woman who struggled with coal and power plants on her reservation near the Four Corners in *Red Ribbons for Emma*. Jeanne Heuvig (1979) described the efforts of the Suquamish of the Puget Sound area to hold on to traditions while using modern technology in *Suquamish Today*. In his book *Black Hills: Sacred Hills* (1987), Tom Charging Eagle told about the importance of this sacred site to Dakota people and its appropriation by the U.S. government, an act described by the U.S. Court of Claims in 1975 as "a more rank and ripe case of dishonorable dealings will never in all probability be found in our history." Educators can find more books like those cited earlier that honestly and realistically portray contemporary issues facing Native American people.

### FICTION BOOKS

Over the past twenty-five years, scholars have found many problems in children's fiction about American Indians. In her 1972 University of Chicago Master of Arts dissertation, Martha Joan Moss investigated the portrayal of American Indians in fiction written for young readers, seventh to twelfth grades, from 1960 to 1971. After analyzing sixty-three works of fiction, she concluded in her abstract (p. i) that "although some recent works portray the American Indian

honestly and sympathetically, many inaccurate or dishonest works are still available." She also cited the research findings of Elaine Garwin who analyzed the treatment of Indians in juvenile fiction published between 1908 and 1958 and found the presentation of Indians far from representative or accurate. In 1973, Mary Gloyne Byler, who examined more than 600 books, many of them novels for children, reported stereotyping, depersonalization, ridicule, parody, inauthenticity, cultural vandalism, and bias in children's books with Indian characters. Hap Gilliland (1980), professor of education at Eastern Montana College, found that many of the fiction books written before 1965 contained misinformation, misinterpretation, and misconception. "Many of the books were written by nonIndian authors who had no personal knowledge of the Indian and were more concerned with writing a good adventure story than giving a true picture of Indian life" (p. 12). Although he noticed a great change between 1965 and 1980 ("Editors are refusing to publish books which obviously downgrade any of our minority groups or their cultures" [p. 16]), he still found that "although the majority of books published in the last dozen years attempt to tell the truth, many authors are still ignorant of the facts, and some of these are still getting their writing published" (p. 16). He concluded, "many of the more recent books [published after 1965], give a very biased picture of Indian life. They downgrade the Indian either by the statement of false concepts, stereotypes, omission of facts, or by the innuendos of vocabulary and semantics" (p. 18).

In his study, Raymond William Stedman (1982), professor of English and Communication at Bucks County Community College, listed ten works by non-Indians arguing that "many pre-1970s juvenile novels opened paths to understanding" (p. 182), but he pointed out that these novels faced "continued competition for library space or bookclub listings from the wild and woolly school of children's novels, as exemplified by the one sided award winner of 1941, Walter D. Edmonds's *The Matchlock Gun*" (p. 182). About this novel, Slapin and Seale (1988) stated:

In 1941, Walter D. Edmonds received the Newbery Medal, awarded for "one of the most distinguished contributions to American literature for children," for *The Matchlock Gun*. The book has been reprinted 25 times since then, and is currently available....The story is ominous, filled with foreboding, and fear of the Indians, who, we know, are going to come. The illustrations are luminous, and they show Indians, one behind the other, hunched over, menace on two feet; dancing around the leaping flames of burning cabins, always in darkness, always terrifying....No *reason* is given for the Native attack on this decent and appealing little family....(pp. 16-17)



In 1986, Dartmouth College student Deborah Doyle-Schechtman studied forty-eight Indian characterizations in books written for children between 1975 and 1985 and found that many of the books contained stereotypes and focused on the "native past." She discovered frequent themes such as "the vision quest; a boy and his horse; white captivity; and war" (p. iii).

Many of the criticisms about fiction books with American Indian themes voiced in these studies persist today. Five novels published since 1989 deal with non-Indians captured or killed by Indians. A young girl during the nineteenth century hates Indians for killing her parents and stealing her brothers in *Jenny of the Tetons* (Gregory, 1989); a community in colonial Massachusetts is raided by Indians and everyone but a young girl is killed or taken hostage in *Only Brave Tomorrows* (Luhmann, 1989); a pioneer girl is captured by Indians in *Maggie Among the Senecas* (Moore, 1987); a ten-year-old girl is kidnapped in 1845 and raised among Sioux Indians in *A Circle Unbroken* (Hotze, 1988); and a Pennsylvania farm girl is abducted and adopted by Allegheny Indians in *I Am Regina* (Keehn, 1991).

Captivity themes are not new. As long ago as 1682, a Massachusetts printing press published America's first significant and best-selling true narrative of Mary Rowlandson's capture and release after eleven weeks by Narragansett Indians. Stedman (1982) points out that: "The scenes of horror or privation that Mary Rowlandson bequeathed to her successors rebound today from printed page or theater screen or picture tube: a shrieking attack on an anxious compound, terrified settlers dragged from their isolated cabins..." (pp. 75-76).

For years, non-Indian writers of juvenile fiction have reworked the popular subject of "white child in Indian captivity." Anna Lee Stensland (1979) noted the popularity of this theme in junior high books and went on to comment: "the white child is usually treated quite well, and in fact is often adopted by Indian parents to replace an Indian son or daughter who has died. In these books the white child grows to love the foster Indian parents and wants to stay with them" (p. 10).

No matter that the Indians eventually redeem themselves in some of these works, the equation of Indians and violent behavior repeated in countless novels and history books for youngsters (written in 1941 or 1991) adds up to the idea that American Indians are menacing, hostile, unfriendly, malicious, in short, downright nasty. In contemporary society, those children socialized to believe kidnapping and killing are wrong become conditioned to consider Indians as "savages," given their predilection to kidnap and kill in so many juvenile novels. Novels with captivity themes rarely convey the fact that "frontier hostilities were not inevitable where fair-mindedness

existed" (Stedman, 1982, p. 182). Further, since captivity-and-kidnapping books, as well as a disproportionate number of other novels about Indians, are set in the past, non-Indian children today struggle with the idea that Indians are contemporary human beings. Constant encounters with stereotypes and other dishonest, inauthentic, and disparaging views of Indians in novels (bolstered by images from television, movies, ads, games, toys, greeting cards, clothing, sports mascots, and so on) distort the social and visual perceptions of non-Indian children and prevent them from developing realistic attitudes about Indian people. Indian children who need to build good self concepts, feelings of worth, and a sense of their place in U.S. history, need to read culturally and historically accurate books about their own people. Constant contacts with specious images of Indians in juvenile novels (and many other media) result in Indian children losing self-esteem and pride in their identity.

Besides the classic captivity stories, other recently published novels for children project a similar Indians are violent theme and win acclaim for their efforts. British author, Lynne Reid Banks has written a trilogy of books—*The Indian in the Cupboard* (1980), *The Return of the Indian* (1986), and *The Secret of the Indian* (1989a). *The Indian in the Cupboard* (1989b), now available in audiocassettes and film, has sold over 50,000 copies in hardcover and more than 1 million in paperback. Slapin and Seale (1988) feel the book abuses child audiences, and Caldwell-Wood and Mitten (1991) feel these books, although classic examples of highly acclaimed books, should be avoided. Despite their being much-loved books, they point out that from the Indian point of view, the trilogy contains horrendous stereotypes:

The miniature toy Indian [Indians portrayed as objects or things] is described as an Iroquois warrior, but is dressed as a movie version of a generic plains Indian "chief," complete with eagle feather headdress. The warrior is described in the most stereotypical terms and speaks in subhuman grunts and partial sentences. He is manipulated by a more powerful white child, fostering the image of the simple and naive Indian whose contact with the white man can only benefit him and his people. (p. 2)

In *The Return of the Indian*, the following passage equates Indians with violence and dogs:

He saw an Indian making straight for him. His face, in the torchlight, was twisted with fury. For a second Omri saw, under the shaven scalp decorated with a single scalp..., the mindless destructive face of a skinhead just before he lashed out....The Algonquin licked his lips, snarling like the dog....Their faces...were wild, distorted, terrifying masks of hatred and rage... (pp. 159, 158)

Forty years earlier, Walter D. Edmonds offered the same equation in *The Matchlock Gun*: "There were five of them, dark shapes on

the road, coming from the brick house. They hardly looked like men, the way they moved. They were trotting, stooped over, first one and then another coming up, like dogs sifting up to the scent of food" (p. 39).

Caldwell-Wood and Mitten address the stark differences of opinion between Native American reviewers who consider demeaning vocabulary, stereotyping in text and illustrations, and distorted history as important as literary techniques and non-Indian reviewers who look at novels about Indians from a literary perspective:

There are plenty of "good" books—i.e. well-written, exciting, from respected authors, much-loved by their readers, with well-developed characters—that are terrible when examined with the criteria of whether the Native American(s) depicted in them are accurately or even humanly portrayed. For the most part, this criticism is directed at fictional works, where the greatest stereotypes and wildest imaginings about Indians still hold sway. (p. 1)

In recent children's fiction, some writers have trivialized, misused, or defiled Native American spiritual traditions. For example, Welwyn Wilton Katz (1987), author of *False Face*, wrote a story about teenagers who unearth an old Iroquois false face mask that harbors an evil power. False face masks are a sacred and integral part of traditional Iroquois religion practiced today on Iroquois reservations in the United States and Canada. Describing the mask as "an absolute evil amounts to religious intolerance and goes far in fostering the conception of native, non-Christian religions as savage pagan rituals" (Caldwell-Wood & Mitten, 1991, p. 6).

Vision quests are currently in vogue and in demand by a New Age generation. Today, as in the past, vision quests, which vary from one tribal culture to another, involve the ritual seeking of communication with the spirit world by a solitary individual who prepares under the guidance of one or more medicine people. The quest, which is not an adventure for the person seeking a vision, may entail great suffering and difficulty. It may take place at adolescence, in adulthood, or in maturity. In many cultures, the quest is associated only with males, but, in others, females also undergo the rite. The quest, which may last from one to four days, includes praying, fasting, and making offerings to the spirits. Children's writers, too, interested in Native American spiritual traditions, have mixed this important Native American ritual into their historical and contemporary novels without regard, however, for accuracy. In *Dawn Rider*, Jan Hudson (1990) created a sixteen-year-old girl who helped her friend with his vision quest during the early eighteenth century—an unlikely scenario since only practiced medicine people prepared young people about to embark on their vision quests. In *Spirit Quest*, by Susan Sharpe (1991), a white fifth-grader and a

Quileute Indian boy decide they want to go on a modern version of the vision quest. In a Golden Kite Honor Book, *Vision Quest*, Pamela F. Service (1989) tosses in sketchy contrived information about vision quests in her contemporary novel about two teens chasing pot hunters around the Nevada desert.

Fortunately, not all children's fiction about Indians contains stereotypes and distortions. Some Indian and non-Indian authors have written fine works that combine authenticity and action. Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve's novels (1972a, 1972b, unfortunately out of print) about contemporary South Dakota reservation life draw on her own Rosebud Sioux background and convey accurate cultural information and excitement. James Houston's novels about the struggles of Inuit people to survive in one of the most challenging environments on earth combine accurate cultural information, frank realism, plus plenty of action. His books show people struggling with blizzards, starvation for lack of game, and foraging bears. Janet Campbell Hale (1974) draws on her Coeur d'Alene heritage in *The Owl's Song* to portray a young Indian boy's struggle to survive in a world determined to erase his identity. Well-known Modoc author, Michael Dorris, wrote his first book for children, *Morning Girl*, a portrait of a family living on a Bahamian Island on the eve of Columbus's discovery of the Americas.

The earlier discussion offers examples of novels that speak to youngsters with authentic voices and that describe Native American life and history without stereotypes, condescension, or gratuitous violence. There are others as well. Educators should celebrate these efforts rather than commend those novels that misinterpret Native American histories and cultures. By the same token, educators who applaud nonfiction works filled with accurate information and Native American stories told with great care, counter the cultural distortions that haunt the world of Native American people today. The heightened interest in Native American culture must be tempered with concern for acquiring accurate books that show respect for Native American traditions and histories.

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Covers for great children and young adult books featuring American Indians as we are---not romantic or savage---just as we really were, and really are: human beings. See my reviews of these books at <http://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.net>. Follow. Great Books Board Book Children's Books Books 2016 Books To Read Book Lists Reading Lists Kids Reading Reading Stories. Native American Heritage Month Native Girls Native American Children American Indians Indian Names High School Literature Children's Literature YA Novels Books For Teens. Cynthia Leitich Smith's young adult novel about a present-day Native girl. Debbie Reese. Book 4 in Erdrich's BIRCHBARK HOUSE series of historical fiction for children. Debbie Reese. American Indians in Children's Literature. Native American Youth in Transition National Indian Child Welfare Association. 3. The literature also suggests approaches that work with Native American youth. These include a return to traditions, treatment for alcohol and drug use, and addressing economic needs. Research Questions. The research questions asked in this study were as follows: 1. What does existing literature tell us about Native American youth aged 16-24? At an age when most young adults are benefiting from full time work and close interpersonal relationships, these youth will not have connected to the labor force; most will lack social support systems. About sixty percent will be men; of these, over half will be in prison, while the remaining young men will be mired in protracted spells of long-term unemployment. Native American literature, the traditional oral and written literatures of the indigenous peoples of the Americas. These include ancient hieroglyphic and pictographic writings of Middle America as well as an extensive set of folktales, myths, and oral histories that were transmitted for centuries. { "19796": { "url": "/art/Native-American-literature", "shareUrl": "https://www.britannica.com/art/Native-American-literature", "title": "Native American literature", "documentGroup": "TOPIC PAGINATED LARGE", "gaExtraDimensions": {"3": "false"} } }. Contents. Native American literature. Article. Media.