

CHOOSING GOOD BOOKS: GUIDELINES AND COMMENTARY ON ASSESSING INDIANS IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

NOTE: Several sets of guidelines exist, mine is not definitive. Beverly Slapin, co-editor of The Broken Flute, has written "How to Tell The Difference: A Guide to Evaluating Children's Books for Anti-Indian Bias." The Smithsonian's Anthropology Outreach Critical Bibliography is on the Smithsonian's web page. [<http://www.nmnh.si.edu/anthro/outreach/Indbib/>] The guidelines below share the same general approach as nearly all others.

QUESTIONS TO ASK AS YOU SEARCH:

1. What is the context of the book? Is the book tribal specific or is just generic Indian? Some children's authors not only identify the cultural setting of the book but explain where they got the information. Generally, those that are tribal specific are better but beware a book that says it is based on Navajo culture but has illustrations that show tipis and men with eagle feather headdresses. The Navajo did not have these in pre-reservation times and certainly do not feature them today.
2. Are Indians presented as if they no longer exist? Does the author's narrative say in so many words, "Indians used to _____?" Naturally, some books will not convey an impression one way or another but one of the truly important truths that should inform book selection and presentation is that American Indians are very much alive and contemporary. As one of my students said, "We don't wear beads and feathers and live in tipis but we are alive and well."
3. Is the book condescending about Indian life styles whether contemporary or in the past? Are the Indians presented as superstitious, relentlessly concerned with ecosystems, and do they "believe" that animals have spirits? Are the descriptive words loaded?
4. Does the book distort history? This is a really difficult measure to consider because it is hard for even those of us who teach Indian Studies. Often authors will present Indians as ruthless savages who kill women and children and massacre settlers---without indicating that the Americans were ruthless as well. Of course one should watch out for the "Dances With Wolves" syndrome which has the evil cavalry laying waste to the entire West while hounding the peaceful, cheerful, and humane Lakota. Watch for balance of presentation as you would with any history.
5. Is it "good" Indians help the Whites and "bad" Indians fight them? Of course one can read James Fenimore Cooper and Zane Grey but there needs to be some antidotal evidence presented if these authors are chosen for literary reasons despite their biases. A good book presents the facts of conflict and these facts are rarely so easily evaluated. One thinks of the "Narratives of America" series by Alan Eckert as a reasonable approach.
6. Are there stereotypes? A dead giveaway is if "all" Indians behave in a certain way.

7. Watch for tokenism! If the book has a non-Indian context, do Indians appear as just a browner version of the other characters? Quite a few elementary school books came out in the sixties and seventies that demonstrated diversity by just changing the color of characters from earlier books.
8. Does I stand for Indian? In other words are Indians just presented as objects as in alphabet books...A is for Apple, I is for Indian and so on. Indians are people and should be presented as people.
9. Are norms ethnocentric? Are Indians foils for describing flaws in American society? For instance are ecological, generous Indians contrasted with environment destroying, selfish non-Indians with the obvious moral of the story being that "we" should act more like Indians? Do Indians reflect an emphasis on individualism? For instance, does a girl character yearn to be a boy and do all of the things that boys do? This would not be appropriate if the story has a pre-reservation setting but it is appropriate for an Indian girl to be a feminist today.
10. Are the women and children real people? Are the fathers real people? Is the main character a chief's child?
11. What is the author's background for writing a book about Indians? What about the illustrator? It is a lot easier to find out these things today because most authors have web pages as do many of the illustrators. Also, does the author tell you what sources were used to verify the context of the book?
12. Does the vocabulary of the book sound reasonable or do Indians talk in a stilted manner?
13. What preparation have you made for selecting books? There are some reviews available for children's books. Sometimes the Hornbook has reviews, Choice Magazine might review non-fiction books, web pages can be used, and there are several books that assess Indians in children's literature. A Broken Flute edited by Doris Seale and Beverly Slapin, American Indian Stereotypes in the World of Children by Arlene Hirschfelder, et. al, and Native Americans in Children's Literature by Jon Stott have numerous evaluations of individual books. Note: reviews are not necessarily right. There are references that are available for teachers/adults as well. I recommend the web page maintained by Lisa Mitten because it has many links but the Smithsonian web page is good also. It would not hurt to sample some of the academic studies available on a particular subject (tribal histories, ethnographies of many of the pre-reservation cultures, gender studies, etc.) if you are selecting a book for a teaching unit for instance.
14. Would you be embarrassed to read the book you selected to Indian children and their parents?

Of course these guidelines do not guarantee that you will select the best book but they will help you prepare readers for the books they are going to read. Reading is a participatory activity so readers need to learn to judge too. One of my students indicated that she dealt with books that were less than correct with the understanding that readers have more than one book. One book does not ruin a student's understanding of Indians as long as there are many good ones too.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS:

1. What is the age level of the child? Remember that younger children revel in stereotypes and clear presentations of “good” and “bad.” Just make sure that Indians are often well presented too.
2. If books present difficulties, are you ready to explain them the way you would when describing the presentations of “Poor White Trash” in Huckleberry Finn? Older children are capable of understanding imperfections in literature. Books that present negative descriptions of people offer a good chance for discussion.
3. Eschew hypercriticism! Don’t come to the conclusions that all books with Indians in them must be discarded because they contain errors. Sometimes critics get carried away and use impossible standards. Critics often have their own axes to grind and are not really concerned with whether a book about Indians is appealing to children. Sometimes critics do not pay attention to what the intent of the book is so the book gets panned for not being what the critic thinks it is trying to be.
4. Remember that non-Indians can write good books about Indians. The real issue should be has the author done his/her homework. If we believe in education then we realize that one learns about cultures, history, and context. Knowledge is not conveyed genetically.
5. As a corollary to #4, remember that just because an Indian writes a book, the work is not necessarily good and accurate. I often find it wryly amusing when an Indian author who grew up in New York City and is Cherokee writes a book about Hopi culture and it is assumed to be authentic without any qualms. Judgment should not be suspended just because the author is Indian.
6. Don’t leave your esthetic standards behind. Are the illustrations good? Are the characters rounded? Is the story interesting? Do children like the book?

If one follows these guidelines and considerations, you should be able to pick good Indians in children’s literature books. Descriptive accuracy is important but is not the only consideration. I remember when Where the Wild Things Are appeared. I still do not understand why my children and millions of others love it...I was too old to understand. Sometimes one just has to let the children decide.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gregory O. Gagnon is an associate professor in Indian Studies at the University of North Dakota. His specialty is contemporary tribal government and federal policy and he is a consultant on governance and faculty development for several tribal colleges. He teams with Ellen Gagnon to offer Indians in Children’s Literature as part of the Indian Studies program at UND. He was Vice President for Instructional Affairs at Oglala Lakota College for the better part of seventeen years before joining UND’s faculty. He has conducted professional development workshops on Indian Studies for elementary, secondary, and college level teachers on reservations and for school systems in several states. Dr. Gagnon is an enrolled citizen of the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa.