Criteria for Choosing Native American Children’s Books

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Jamestown S’Klallam Tribal Library

- Located on the Tribal campus in Blyn, Washington, established in 1988
- Open to the public Monday-Saturday
- Collection of 6,000 items specializes in American Indian culture, history, and literature with a focus on Northwest Coast Tribes
- Staffed by a professional librarian and two library assistants
- Winner of the Guardians of Culture, Memory, and Lifeways Award for Library Institutional Excellence in 2014 from the Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries, and Museum (ATALM)
Many people can point to a book that inspired them in some way. Many of us believe that books can be powerful. On the other hand, if they can help us, can they also hurt us?

Research studies show that stereotypical images of Native American Indians can depress the self-esteem of Native children.

The studies also show that seeing those same stereotypical images have a positive effect on the self esteem of children who are not Native.

While we all want children and young adults to be inspired by the books they read, we don’t want that to happen at the expense of any child—in this case—Native American Indian children.
Criteria For Choosing Native American Children’s Books

Here is a partial list of criteria to check for when choosing children’s books with Native American Indian themes:

**Author Qualifications**, Tribal affiliation, references and consultant information is provided.

Author identifies *origin of the story* used.

**Tribe is identified**, not portrayed as a generic stereotype.

Indians are *represented as human*.

Text and illustrations are *free of stereotypes* and demeaning language.

**All children can respond to text** and illustrations in a positive manner.

**Text connects past and present** tribal culture.
Author

Qualifications
Author Qualifications

When evaluating a Native American Children’s book the first thing to verify is the author’s qualifications. Read the information on the book jacket about the author. If there isn’t any, find a website and research the author.

If the author is a citizen of a tribe, it most likely will be identified. Some authors aren’t Native American but have close ties with or carefully researched the tribes they write about.

Also look for an introduction or foreword that may be written by a tribal citizen or cultural expert endorsing the book or story.
Author Qualifications

The information below was taken from the book jackets. These are examples of qualified authors.

Born of Mohawk and Cayuga descent, musical icon Robbie Robertson learned the story of Hiawatha and his spiritual guide, the Peacemaker, as part of the Iroquois oral tradition. Now he shares the same gift of storytelling with a new generation.

Sherman Alexie grew up on the Spokane Indian Reservation. He is of Spokane and Coeur d’Alene tribal ancestry.
The author Ron Hirschi worked for the Port Gamble S’Klallam Tribe in Washington as a biologist. This book was made possible in part by a grant to the Port Gamble S’Klallam Tribe from the National Park Service Historic Preservation Grants to Tribes, for the purpose of language preservation (from the book jacket).

Seya’s Song is a book written by a non-Native American, but is well researched, funded and endorsed by the tribe it is written about.
Author Identifies Story
When a Native American story is used, it is important that the origin of the story is attributed to a specific tribe.

Some stories or songs belong to the family it was handed down to from the oral tradition. To write about these stories without permission is stealing from that family or tribe. It would be like copying a piece of art and not giving credit to the artist.
The Fire Race is written by Jonathan London, (non-Native) with Lanny Pinola, a Pomo/Miwok storyteller.

The author’s note states that the story is based on various versions of a Karuk myth.

Julian Lang, a member of the Karuk Tribe wrote the afterword, describing the importance of storytelling to the Karuk Tribe.

There is a bibliography of references used in writing this story included in the book.
The tribe is identified, not a generic stereotype.
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In an appropriate Native American children’s book the tribe the story is about is identified.

If the characters in the story are simply identified as Indian, then that “Indian” will probably have a combination of characteristics that result in stereotypical images and stories that are not accurate.
The tribe is identified, not a generic stereotype.

One pervasive stereotype depicted in the book *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky* is of Plains Indians in buckskins, living in tipis, hunting bison and riding horses. This would be fine if writing about Plains tribes. However, this book is about a Northwest Coast tribe.
The tribe is identified, not a generic stereotype.

In this book the tribe is clearly identified.

Clamshell Boy by Terry Cohlene, illustrated by Charles Reasoner, retells the story of Clamshell Boy, who rescues a captured group of children from the dreaded Basket Woman. This book also includes information on the customs and current lifestyles of the Makah Indians of the Northwest Coast.
The tribe is identified, not a generic stereotype.

This illustration shows a Northwest Coast Native American wearing traditional clothing, and authentic longhouses and canoes in the background. The white dog in the foreground represents an unknown breed of white dogs that were kept by some tribes, who wove the hair into blankets and clothing.

Gray Wolf’s Search
by Bruce Swanson
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These are some popular books that have been used in the classroom, that are inappropriate because of disrespectful treatment of Native Americans.
Native Americans should be represented as human, not less than human.

In some books Native Americans are less than human, or objects to be counted. Dressing an animal up as a Native American is inappropriate and disrespectful to their culture.
Native Americans should be represented as human, not less than human.

This page is at the very end of the book Ten Little Rabbits.

The authors have the rabbits dressed in “authentic” clothing from each tribe represented.

Dressing in clothing decorated with tribal designs does not make them Native Americans.
Native Americans should be represented as human, not less than human.

The Indian in the Cupboard series is a favorite of many teachers and librarians, but for Native Americans these books contain some of the worst stereotypes.

The miniature toy Indian in this book is described as an Iroquois warrior, but in the illustrations is dressed like a Plains Indian "chief", complete with eagle feather headdress.
Native Americans should be represented as human, not less than human.

The Indian in the Cupboard is very popular, but it makes people into the playthings of children. This is especially troubling because of the identities of the characters. In it, you have a white child manipulating the life and death of an Indian man. ("Debbie Reese," 2013).
Native Americans should be represented as human, not less than human.

In most tribes women were respected members of the tribe and treated as equals. They made the clothing, baskets for carrying and storing food, foraged for foods and medicines and dried them for later use. The Elder women helped with childcare, weaving, and some were healers.

In *Sign of the Beaver* after killing a bear Attean says “Belong Squaw now, I go tell” “Cut up meat, then carry, Squaw work”. (Speare,p.97)

This dialogue is demeaning and disrespectful to Native Americans. Squaw is a derogatory term that would not have been used by Attean, a Native American, who would have been raised to be respectful of women.
Text should be free of stereotypical terms and dialogue should be normal.
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A warning sign that a book is inappropriate is the use of stereotypical terms and dialogue. If the dialogue is written as broken English, or in an oratorical style of the “Noble Savage” it would be inappropriate.

Text from *Sign of the Beaver* where Attean speaks in sub-human grunts and partial sentences:

“Good”  It was half word half grunt.

“White boy very sick. Now well.”

“brown savage who strode ahead, leading the way...”

Matt calls Attean a savage and yet his life depends on Attean’s knowledge of how to survive.
Text should be free of stereotypical terms and dialogue should be normal.

Some of the most common demeaning and stereotypical terms are redskin, redman, squaw, savage, half-breed and injun. Referring to all Indians as being braves or chiefs is also inappropriate.
This example of oratorical style (noble savage) dialogue is from the book *Brother Eagle Sister Sky* by Susan Jeffers.

“My father said to me, I know the sap that courses through the trees as I know the blood that flows in my veins. We are part of the earth and it is part of us. The perfumed flowers are our sisters.”
Little House on the Prairie is a book that is still very popular in school and public libraries.

In Little House on the Prairie “the only good Indian is a dead Indian” occurs 3 times in the text.

How would a Native American child feel after this text is read aloud in class?

How will he or she be treated by other children if this book was used in the classroom?
Little Laura Ingalls, her sisters and their beloved Ma and Pa were illegal squatters on Osage land. She left that detail out of her 1935 children’s book, *Little House on the Prairie*, as well as any mention of ongoing outrages—including killings, burnings, beatings, horse thefts and grave robberies—committed by white settlers, such as Charles Ingalls, against Osages living in villages not more than a mile or two away from the Ingalls’ little house.

Read this post about what was really happening to the Osage Tribe as settlers like the Wilders moved onto Osage reservation land at
Illustrations should accurately portray a specific tribe or nation
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The text and illustrations of these books accurately portray each tribe.
Illustrations should accurately portray a specific tribe or nation.

This book *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky* is beautifully illustrated, however, throughout the text are stereotypical images not relevant to the story.

“Select only books which pay attention to accurate, appropriate design and color, and in which clothes, dress, houses are drawn with careful attention to detail.” ("Oyate,2000")
Brother Eagle, Sister Sky is a story about Chief Sealth of the Duwamish and Suquamish Tribes in Washington State.

Northwest Coastal tribes wore clothing made from Cedar bark, furs and animal hides.

Many tribes in Western Washington lived near the seashores and rivers. Most travelled by canoe. However, they made canoes of cedar, not birch bark as depicted in this illustration.

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The book *Brother Eagle Sister Sky* by Susan Jeffers is loosely based on a Chief Sealth speech. Native Americans on the NW coast did not live in tipis. They lived in longhouses made from Cedar.
The book allows children to respond to text and illustrations in a positive manner.
Are the characters in the book dressed like Indians as if "Indian" was a role that one could play like being a doctor or a cowboy or baseball player?

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Native Americans should be shown in present as well as past tense.
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Select Only Books in which the continuity of cultures is represented. Look for values, religions, and morals, as an outgrowth of the past, connected to the present, and taking the people into the future.

Is the past unconnected to the present? Be thorough – use of the past tense is a pervasive issue in books about Native peoples. Remember that any general reference to a tribe which is not explicitly related to historical events, should be written in the present tense.

For example, the sentence “Many California tribes used acorn in their meals” should actually have been written in the PRESENT tense, as this is still a widely consumed food among many California Natives. (“Oyate,n.d.”)
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In the book *The Cherokees* by Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve much of the information is historical however, two pages are included at the end of this book with current information about that tribe.
Native Americans Today

Children need books with images of Native Americans that are historically accurate and perhaps more importantly current images of Native Americans that reflect who they are today.
The books mentioned here are just a few of books available for children that have stereotypical Native American Images. For more information please visit Debbie Reese’s weblog at: http://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com/.

This weblog is a wonderful resource for learning about Native Americans and how they are portrayed in children’s books. She writes in-depth reviews about past and current children’s books dealing with Native American subjects.

Oyate.org is another highly recommended resource. This site provides the criteria for how to tell the difference between a good and bad Native American children’s book. http://oyate.org/index.php/resources/41-resources/how-to-tell-the-difference.
Native Americans and Holidays
Native Americans and Holidays

“Many books about Halloween have illustrations of kids dressed up as Indians, and due to society's embrace of things-Indian and playing Indian, most people don't give it a second thought. Let’s pause for a moment though and think about this seemingly innocent act of dressing up as an Indian for Halloween.

What else do kids dress up as at Halloween? I don’t mean animals or superheroes, but people-costumes. They can be policemen, firefighters, cowboys, doctors, nurses, pilots, astronauts, baseball players, cheerleaders... All these are occupations or positions one can, in fact, be at some point, with the proper training. Now---what about an Indian? You can’t train to be an Indian. You can’t become one. It is something you are born into.” (Reese, 2006)

Clifford’s Halloween, Bridwell, Norman, Four Seasons Press, 1967

Native Americans and Holidays: Columbus Day

Columbus Day is **NOT** a day of celebration for Native Americans. It is seen by many as the beginning of the invasion of their world. There were many indigenous people living on the land that is now the United States when Columbus “discovered” it.

South Dakota, Hawaii, and Alabama have changed the holiday’s name to Indigenous People’s Day, and nine cities across the United States, including Olympia, Washington and Portland, Oregon have done the same.

*Coyote Columbus* by Thomas King is a story about Columbus from a Native American perspective.
Native Americans and Holidays: Thanksgiving

Thanksgiving is often the only time during the school year that children learn about Native American Indians. Sadly, most of what they are taught is from a colonial perspective, or simply not factual.
Recommended books about Thanksgiving
From a Native American perspective

Bruchac, Margaret M. (Abenaki), and Catherine Grace O'Neill, *1621: A New Look at Thanksgiving*. Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 2001, grades 4-up


Recommended books about Thanksgiving (continued)

From a Native American perspective

Regguinti, Gordon (Ojibwe), *The Sacred Harvest: Ojibway Wild Rice Gathering.*

Minneapolis: Lerner Publications, 1992, grades 4-6


Swamp, Jake (Mohawk), *Giving Thanks: A Native American Good Morning Message.*

New York: Lee & Low, 1995, all grades

Wittstock, Laura Waterman (Seneca), *Ininatig's Gift of Sugar: Traditional Native Sugarmaking.* Minneapolis: Lerner Publications, 1993, grades 4-6
Recommended books about Thanksgiving

Primary Sources from a Colonialist Perspective


Recommended books about Thanksgiving

Primary Sources from a Colonialist Perspective


Review of criteria for choosing Native American children’s books.

**Author Qualifications**, Tribal affiliation, references and consultant information is provided on the book jacket or somewhere in the book.

Author identifies **origin of the story** or legend used. The author should inform the reader what tribe the story is from, and whether he or she has permission to use it or if it was approved by the tribe or a tribal member.

**Tribe is identified** and not portrayed as a generic stereotype. A specific tribe or tribes should be named in the story. If it starts with, “an Indian boy went out to...” the story will probably have other factual errors also.

Indians are **represented as human** beings. Native Americans are not things to be counted or manipulated. Animals and people should not be dressed as if they were Native Americans.
Review of criteria for choosing Native American children’s books (continued).

Text and illustrations are free of stereotypes and demeaning language like: redskin, redman, squaw, savage, and injun. Calling all Native Americans brave or chief is also inappropriate.

Children can respond to text and illustrations in a positive manner. If Native American children will be offended, hurt, or teased after viewing text or illustrations, the book would be inappropriate.

Text connects past and present tribal culture. Books should have a present-day connection to the tribe or nation. Most books about Native Americans are written in the past tense, but children need to know that Native Americans are still a part of our society and actively participate in maintaining their culture.
References


Cohlene, T., & Reasoner, C. (1990) *Clamshell boy*. Vero Beach, FL: Rourke


