

Good Intentions Are Not Enough

Creating a Book Climate of Diversity

Of the books being published in the children's and young adult field, many are published to fuel the demand for profitable titles that sell well in the big bookstores. Multicultural books, other than perhaps those about the African American culture, seem not to generate a quick audience base in most bookstores. The popularity of culturally diverse books is often slow to develop because it is fueled by reviews and word of mouth, rather than marketing and hype.

Their popularity is driven by library media specialists and teachers—those who know the importance of every child seeing a face like his or her own in the materials the child reads, and the importance of including a diversity of cultures in the materials young people have available to them.

The process of reading reviews, selection, purchase, use, and then sharing the knowledge about a particular title, is much slower than the bookstore venue. Teachers and library media specialists hear about useful books through seminars and periodical articles, and then seek to develop their own classroom and library activities using those materials. By then some, if not all, of those materials will be out-of-stock or out-of-print. A demand for a book will have been created with no available book to satisfy the demand.

Encouraging publishers to pay more attention to the publishing of Native American books (and all ethnically diverse books) is a matter of profit. Cynthia Leitich Smith, an author of several Native American books, says it best on her Web site, "If you support diversity



By Sharron L. McElmeel

in children's books, if in fact you believe in the publication of quality children's books at all, it is absolutely essential that you vote with your dollars in support of quality mainstream and quality multicultural books" <www.cynthialeitichsmith/newreading.htm#segregation>. She goes on to explain that not only should one purchase multicultural books for libraries and classrooms, but individuals should also give such books as gifts, ask for them in bookstores, encourage professional peers to incorporate the books in their classrooms and libraries, request the titles at the library, and in general "walk the talk."

The author Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve states, "Few contemporary Native American stories are published because they don't sell. Legends and historic settings do sell, because that is how the general public wants to view us and publishers continue the fantasy" (McElmeel 1999, 402).

Historical Perspectives

Many Native American books that are published are those that feature folk literature or a retelling of tales from the past: a biography of a great Indian chief or a history

of a particular tribe. Books for young readers about Native Americans in a contemporary setting are few and far between.

Historical topics studied in school demand that we include books about Native Americans from a historical perspective. However, in identifying books to use, we must be aware that over the years many nonnative writers have employed some of the worst stereotypes in their writing. It is up to us to make sure the truth is presented through a balanced collection that will include up-to-date and accurate titles about Native Americans. We must include titles that are authentic and respectful works from a Native American perspective.

Those of us who have taught traditional units about Native Americans will recognize some of the weaknesses of the materials we use while reading the activities in a book by Beverly Slapin. The title, *Basic Skills: Caucasian Americans Workbook* (Oyate, 1994), is sure to make the adult reader stop, think, and reassess what we do in the classroom.

Selecting Titles

Selecting books for our diverse culture must go beyond our good intentions. We must ensure that the books treat the cultures they represent with accuracy and respect, and sensitivity toward all aspects of the culture. Everyone is not expected to be an expert in every culture. So how do we know what is accurate and sensitive, and what is not? The first step is to use reviews in professional reviewing sources—ones that assign books to reviewers with some expertise in the subject matter. Look to the experts in the field.

The publication, *Bulletin of the Council on Interracial Books for Children*, created a list of guidelines titled “Ten Quick Ways to Analyze Children’s Books for Racism and Sexism” in the early 1990s. Several Web sites make this list available with slight adaptations:

- <www.rootsforchange.net/index.cfm?group_ID=1219>
- <www.birchlane.davis.ca.us/library/10quick.htm>.
- <www.osi.hu/iep/Workshops/anti_bias/ten_ways.htm>

The following source is specifically developed to focus on Native American titles.

- Slapin, Beverly, Doris Seale (Santee/Cree), and Rosemary Gonzales (Ojibwe). *Oyate, 1996. How to Tell the Difference: A Guide for Evaluating Children’s Books for Anti-Indian Bias.*
- The guide above is a reprint of thirty pages from *Through Indian Eyes: The Native Experience in Books for Children.* Oyate, 1998.

Both publications can be ordered from Oyate, 2702 Mathews St., Berkeley, California, 94702, (510) 848-6700 or by e-mail at Oyate@oyate.org.

Look for other resources that will assist you in moving from having good intentions to being knowledgeable about how to recognize bias, stereotypes, insensitivity toward cultural traditions, and inaccurate facts.

Resources for Building Awareness

Berman, Joan. *Native American Children’s Literature in the Classroom: An Annotated Bibliography.* Humboldt State University Library, Arcata, California, 2004. <library.humboldt.edu/~berman/naclit.htm> [March 1, 2004].

An extensive list of resources, both print and Web-based, for the educator who wishes to

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learn more about identifying appropriate materials for sharing with young learners.

Berman, Joan. *HSU Subject Guides: Native American Studies.* Humboldt State University Library, Arcata, California, 2004. <library.humboldt.edu/~berman/na.htm> [March 1, 2004].

A gateway page leading users to online resources on Native American topics.

McElmeel, Sharron. *100 Most Popular Children’s Authors: Biographical Sketches and Bibliographies.* Libraries Unlimited, 1999.

A reference book featuring profiles of authors/illustrators representing a variety of cultures and perspectives.

Oyate, 1999. <www.oyate.org> [March 1, 2004].

Oyate provides reliable information about, and access to, publications for children and teachers about Native peoples. Of current interest is the lengthy critical review of the “Indian” entries in Scholastic’s *Dear America* series, including *My Heart Is on the Ground* and other titles. The Web site’s link <www.oyate.org/books-to-avoid/index.html> lists “Books to Avoid.” Not only will readers be provided specific information about specific titles, but the explanations may also be used as points to consider when evaluating other titles.

Smith, Cynthia Leitich. 2003. *Children’s Author Cynthia Leitich Smith Official Web Site.*

<www.cynthialeitichsmith.com> [March 1, 2004].

This site is developed and maintained by Smith and is a virtual treasure-filled resource with multiple essays about Native American books and resources, bibliographies, and links to even more resources.

Strom, Karen M. *Index of Native American Resources on the Internet: WWW Virtual Library—American Indians.* 2003. <www.hanksville.org/Naresources> [March 1, 2004].

This is a gateway page containing dozens of links in 33 categories about Indigenous people.

Vandergrift, Kay E., compiler. *Powerful Native-American Images Revealed in Picture Books.* SCILS, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 2004. <www.scils.rutgers.edu/~kvander/ChildrenLit/native.html> [March 1, 2004].

While most of the books cited are very appropriate, some authorities might question the inclusion of some titles such as Miska Miles’ *Annie and the Old One*. Don’t use this list without any analysis of your own.

Sharron L. McElmeel is the author of *Children’s Authors and Illustrators Too Good to Miss (Libraries Unlimited, 2004)* and other titles about authors/illustrators and their books. She teaches an online children’s literature course for the University of Wisconsin-Stout and maintains a Web site at <www.mcelmeel.com> with links to many literature-rich resources.

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