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## Historical fiction in the study of the American Indian culture

Kay Lynne Bisinger

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### Abstract

In planning school instructional programs, educators need to consider the cultural diversity in the United States. Children need to become attuned to diversity and at the same time discover the universals that all people share. One means of doing this is through literature experiences that nurture children's awareness and appreciation of different cultures. In selecting multicultural literature for the classroom, teachers need to make informed choices. Portrayals of any culture require sensitivity, accuracy, and positive imagery (Bishop, 1987).

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the American Indian Culture

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Kay Lynne Bisinger

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Date Approved

*Jeanne McLean Horner*  
Director of Research Paper

5/23/93

Date Approved

*Jeanne McLean Horner*  
Graduate Faculty Adviser

5/26/93

Date Approved

*Constance J. Ulmer*  
Graduate Faculty Reader

5/26/93

Date Approved

*Peggy Sellers*  
Head, Department of Curriculum  
and Instruction

In planning school instructional programs, educators need to consider the cultural diversity in the United States. Children need to become attuned to diversity and at the same time discover the universals that all people share. One means of doing this is through literature experiences that nurture children's awareness and appreciation of different cultures.

In selecting multicultural literature for the classroom, teachers need to make informed choices. Portrayals of any culture require sensitivity, accuracy, and positive imagery (Bishop, 1987).

#### Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this paper is to consider the rationale for presenting literature experiences with multicultural elements. A specific focus will be placed on the American Indians, a major neglected culture, as portrayed in historical fiction commonly read by children in grade three. An established criteria will be used as an evaluative instrument to survey works for racially negative elements.

#### Rationale for Multicultural Literature in the School Program

Literature can serve as the basis for developing an understanding and appreciation for other cultures (Bishop, 1987; Florez, 1986; Huck, Hepler, & Hickman, 1987; Merriam, 1988; Norton, 1990; Rasinski & Padak, 1990; Reimer, 1992; Stoddard,

1983; Tway, 1989). These experiences can assist in understanding cultural diversity though they cannot substitute for real life experiences with other people. As vicarious experiences, literature works can raise the level of consciousness and extend the understanding of cultures (Huck et al., 1987). Literature experiences can provide the impetus to question stereotypes and misunderstandings and to eliminate them (Stoddard, 1983).

Textbooks provide colorless descriptions of events, but literature works offer different points of view of people and their emotional responses to life experiences (Rasinski & Padak, 1990). Authors of quality works have created characters and action that children can identify with and also enjoy (Merriam, 1988; Norton, 1990; Bishop, 1987). As a result of this more whole perspective of people and their conflicts, children can develop an awareness and internalize a value system that can provide the force for acting in a positive fashion on issues. "Understanding our common humanity is a powerful weapon against the forces that would divide and alienate us from one another" (Bishop, 1987, p. 60).

### Historical Fiction

#### as a Means of Relating to the Past

Experiences with historical fiction is one way to help children understand other cultures and responses to neglected

cultures. Today's way of life is a result of what people did in the past and that the present will influence the way people live in the future. Reading and listening to historical fiction helps children develop a sense of history (Huck et al., 1987).

In considering the elements of quality historical fiction, Huck et al. (1987) states, "Books of historical fiction must first of all tell a story that is interesting in its own right" (p. 603). Fact and fiction must be balanced so that the story is read with enthusiasm by the child.

Other criteria for selecting quality historical fiction for children is summarized from the above source.

1. Historical fiction has to be accurate and authentic. Details of the research should be woven throughout the story, not interjected for effect.

2. Misinformation cannot be accepted in any form although fictional characters and invented turns of plot are accepted in historical works. Nothing should be included that contradicts the actual historical record.

3. Stories must accurately portray the life of the times. Characters should act in accordance with how people felt and thought at that time in history.

4. The authenticity of language in historical fiction reflects thought of the period. Some archaic words may be used if

their meaning is made clear, and they help to capture the essence of the period.

Historical fiction with American Indian characters, especially stories written during the pioneer period of history, needs to be evaluated critically. Because of the white settlers' misconceptions of these people in this time period, reconstructing the life of the time period presents unique problems for both the writer and reader.

Children do not always recognize negative stereotypes in books. Therefore, teachers, librarians, and parents need to assist in selecting and discussing the bias found in books. Writers are free to create an unpleasant character but must respect that character and must convey to the audience why the character does the things he or she does (Marzollo, 1991).

#### Evaluating Children's Literature With American Indian Elements

Two reputable sources for evaluating children's literature with American Indian characters and experiences are: Shadows of the Indian: Stereotypes in American Culture (1982), by Raymond William Stedman, and Through Indian Eyes; The Native Experience in Books For Children (1992), edited by Beverly Slapin and Doris Seale. For this paper, more concise criteria have been developed



from these sources to use in evaluating children's literature that depicts American Indians:

1. Does the vocabulary belittle the character?  
(Are terms such as "savage" or "squaw" used negatively?)
2. Do the Indians talk in monosyllables or in a way that makes them appear to lack intelligence or language ability?
3. *Is Indian humanness dignified? (Do children play Indian or are animals dressed as Indians?)*
4. Do American Indian characters have names that can be realistically explained?
5. Is the historical background misrepresented? Teachers need to be aware of ongoing stereotypes, such as the idea that the white people suddenly came upon a vacant land on which they created the world's affluent society (Deloria, 1973). Is it suggested that the white peoples' ways are superior?
6. Are Indian characters successful only if they relinquish their customs and traditions and assume the ways of the white society?
7. Are white people the only authority figures who solve both the white and American Indians' problems?

8. Are Indian women shown as subservient laborers without an important role in their society?
9. Can American Indian children read the work and be proud of their cultural heritage? Is there anything in the work that would make American Indian children feel hurt, embarrassed, or ashamed to be who they are?

Not all of these criteria will apply to every book being perused.

#### Application of Criteria to Historical Works

##### with American Indian Elements

The criteria for evaluating historical fiction with American Indian elements have been applied to several works that are commonly presented in third grade social studies programs. For each historical fiction work, a synopsis of the story and a summary of the evaluation is given. Also for each work, its place in the learning environment, either for independent reading or for reading aloud by the teacher, will be noted.

Wagon Wheels, by Barbara Brenner (1978) Independent reading

This short, easy-to-read work, based on a real life experience of a black pioneer family in the 1870s, is one that both African American and American Indian children can feel proud to read. The Civil War is over, and the Muldie family has just settled on free land out West. During the harsh Kansas winter, food and firewood were depleted, and the people of Nicodemus were

hungry and cold. This black family was saved by the generosity of Indians who observed their plight and came to their aid. The fear that the townspeople felt because they had all heard stories about Indians was dispelled by the generosity shown when the Osage rode in and dropped deer meat, fish, beans, squash, and bundles of firewood on the ground outside their homes saving the people of Nicodemus from starvation.

In this work, Indians are depicted as problem solvers in a time of crisis. This documented account of Indians helping the people of the community attributes dignity to this neglected minority. Also, the author notes the specific nation of Osage, honoring these people. Indians prefer to be known by their nation's name.

Caddie Woodlawn, by Carol Brink (1935) Teacher read-aloud

Caddie, a twelve-year-old tomboy, makes friends with the Indians in her area and rides to warn them of danger when her community believes there is going to be a massacre. Based on incidents in the childhood of the author's grandmother, the story is about Caddie's growing up years in the Wisconsin wilderness of the 1860s.

This work presents the various viewpoints and feelings of the people at this time in history. The characters act in

agreement with how many of the pioneer people responded to American Indians.

The reader needs to be cognizant of the stereotypical language while reading it: "those frightful savages," "squaws," "half-breed children," and "savages were savages" to name a few. One of the Indian characters, named John, is shown as peace-loving, but only allowed to speak in broken English, as "They no kill white" (p. 141) and even "John only grunted" (p. 138).

Pocahontas and the Strangers, by Clyde Bulla (1971) Independent reading

Clyde Bulla's careful research makes this volume an accurate and moving account of Pocahontas. Pocahontas did not fear the white strangers and did what she could to bring peace between her nation and the newcomers. This account of Pocahontas' life chronicles how she saved Captain John Smith from death at the hands of the warriors, was held by the English newcomers for ransom that could not be paid, took food from the Indian storehouses to the ill and hungry settlers, and married John Rolfe and lived in Jamestown and later in England.

It is refreshing to find actual Indian names used, as Old Bekbek, Hapsis, Powhatan, Comochock, and Nantaquas. This work has simple, straightforward language and sentence structure. The Indians speak in full sentences without guttural monosyllables.

Pocahontas, portrayed as a sensitive, intelligent, and brave person, plays an important role in both her own culture and the Jamestown settlement. The Indian culture is depicted realistically.

Bread-and-Butter Indian, by Ann Colver (1964) Independent reading

This historical work is about a young girl, Barbara Baum, who has always longed for a "best friend." Too young to understand her parents' fear of Indians, Barbara befriends a hungry Indian man, offering him the bread and butter that she had prepared for a tea party with her imaginary friends. Although they cannot communicate through language, the two establish a bond of mutual trust. At dusk one evening, Barbara is kidnapped by a strange Indian. She is rescued by her Indian friend.

Through the eyes of a little girl the reader sees that the Indians were real people and not much different than her own family. She is not treated unkindly when taken to the Indian camp, and she observes that the Indian mothers are kind and caring. Importantly, the customs of the Indians were not relinquished in this story and they were shown with dignity.

The Courage of Sarah Noble, by Alice Dalgliesh (1954) Independent reading

Sarah Noble, eight years old, journeys with her father in 1707 into the Connecticut wilderness. After completing a cabin,

Father makes the long trip back to Massachusetts to assemble the rest of the family and their belongings to bring to the new home. The true test of Sarah's courage is when her father tells her that he must leave her with a stranger, Tall John, a friendly Indian, his wife, and children while he returns to Massachusetts for the rest of the family.

Indian children can be proud of the presentation of their race in this actual account of early America. The contrast between Sarah's own upbringing and the Indian lifestyle is shown, but each way of life is presented with dignity. Tall John and his wife were loving and caring parents. Tall John's introduction as a character who did not 'say two words when one would do' was intended as a sign of strength, not an inability to communicate. This book shows a positive portrayal of the characters from both cultures and has a strong, historically accurate plot.

The Matchlock Gun, by Walter D. Edmonds (1941) Teacher read-aloud

Told from the colonists' point of view, this story focuses on the terror as well as the courage of Dutch settlers living in the Hudson Valley in 1756 who experienced fierce Indian raids. When the father of the family was summoned to watch for marauding Indians, he took from the wall the great matchlock gun and handed it to his son, Edward, to use as protection for himself, his mother, and sister. The anxiety and fear that the parents feel

with the impending Indian raid is made more horrible because no reason is given for the attack.

This book has received a great deal of criticism for the portrayal of Indians as bloodthirsty savages and for having a child kill the three marauders. An example of the demeaning portrayal of American Indians is as follows:

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).

Although this book won the Newbery Award, generally it is considered as unaccepted literature for children.

Stone Fox, by John Reynolds Gardiner (1980) Independent reading

Little Willy, ten years old, is determined to keep their farm going in order to give his ailing grandfather a reason to live. So the farm will not be taken from them, he needs five hundred dollars to pay off ten years' back taxes. Little Willy stakes everything on one wild hope that he and his dog, Searchlight, can win the big prize money in a dog sled race. He is pitted against the best dog sled racers in the country including the legendary American Indian, Stone Fox, who plans to

use the money he wins from racing to buy back his people's land. At one point in the story, when Little Willy enters a dark barn where Stone Fox is staying and approaches the Samoyeds belonging to the giant man, he was surprised by a hand hitting him in the face. If someone is caught near a strange dog sled team and the owner does not know their intentions, this could understandably be the result. It is offset by Stone Fox gently petting one of the Samoyeds after Little Willy has left.

Stone Fox is portrayed as a strong person who is formidable until the end of the race when his compassion is poignantly evidenced. The reader is left with admiring, warm feelings toward this very human character.

Stone Fox is a Native hero who can be admired for what he did for his own people. His honesty, courage, and self-determination will make American Indian children feel proud of their heritage. This story shows a way in which Native peoples actively resisted the white invaders. Stone Fox's name can be realistically explained as he had a face of granite and rarely spoke which are portrayed in this story as signs of strength. The Sign of the Beaver, by Elizabeth George Speare (1983) Teacher read-aloud

The similarity of this story and the circumstances Sarah experienced in The Courage of Sarah Noble are at once evident.



Matt, too, is left alone in the wilderness while his father returns to Massachusetts for the rest of his family. After Matt encounters a series of calamities, an elderly Indian, Saknis, and his grandson, Attean, save him from the effects of an attacking swarm of bees. Through their developing friendship, both boys learn from each other and revise their attitude toward each other's culture.

The American Indian characters speak in "grade-B movie pidgin" (Slapin & Seale, 1992). However, this is somewhat offset by the fact that both boys were having difficulty speaking each other's language: Attean "was speaking the English tongue with greater ease," and Matt was trying out Indian words that "were impossible to get his tongue around."

Indian women are not shown to have an important role. Matt's assigned task of weeding is "squaw work." Attean's sister says of herself: "Attean think squaw girl no good for much" (p. 97). There is also a reference to the women after the bear kill: "Cut up meat . . . then carry . . . squaw work" (p. 74).

The wild feast following the bear killing shows little resemblance to the ceremonious dancing and leisurely feasting that would have actually occurred on such an occasion. Indian words are used inappropriately and contrary to the Indian compact

between animals and humans. Attean is shown to have little compassion for the fox caught in the trap (Slapin & Seale, 1992).

Although this book has some inherent flaws, the theme of friendship between a white boy and an Indian boy assures wide readership and critical acclaim.

Going West, by Jean Van Leeuwen (1992) Independent reading or teacher read-aloud

Seven-year-old Hannah and her family travel west in a covered wagon to start a new life on the prairie. The events of the trip west and the challenges that they encountered in their first year on the Plains are told through the voice of Hannah. When Indians came to the newly built cabin, the children were frightened. Hannah's response was "I crept behind the rocking chair, my knees trembling with fright. They looked so fierce" (unpaged). Such a view of American Indians is a continuation of the stereotypical Indian being savage and brutal. Fortunately, the illustrator chose to paint a kinder picture of the visitors; they look quite approachable except for the posturing of the one Indian with his arm crossed that tends to conjure up the image, "How." No conversation is exchanged as the text reads, "But Mama smiled. She gave one of the Indians a donut" (unpaged). There is a patronizing tone of hungry Indians being pacified with white people generously offering food. The Indians were not treated as

adults. Also, the motivation for the Indians' visit to the pioneer family is never explored.

Little House on the Prairie, by Laura Ingalls Wilder (1935)

Independent reading or read-aloud

This story of pioneer life follows the Ingalls family into the unsettled Kansas territory. Laura Ingalls Wilder tells what it was like to be a child in the 1870s, relating the hardships of prairie life along with the fun and excitement shared by the members of a loving family.

The "Little House" books have received some criticism for their portrayals of Indians. Some Indian-hating is found in Little House on the Prairie (Harris, 1992). For example, on pages 137 and 139, the text reads: "The naked wild men stood by the fireplace . . . Laura smelled a horrible bad smell . . . . Their faces were bold and fierce . . . ." Another negative connotation is found on page 144 as Pa says, "We don't want to wake up some night with a band of the screeching dev . . . ." This book gives a negative and false interpretation of the plight of American Indians as strangers invade their land. These images can impose shame and embarrassment on a child of this race; children need not be exposed to these emotions.

Teachers should become informed about actual land claims by American Indian groups and point out the injustice of one group of

people moving in and forcing another group out of their land. One white settler stated in Little House on the Prairie, "Treaties or no treaties, the land belongs to folks that'll farm it. That's common sense and justice" (p. 211). This is a blatant disregard for international law.

Laura Herbst in her article "That's One Good Indian: Unacceptable Images in Children's Novels" discusses this novel and objects strongly to the wanton disregard for Indian rights. She states:

The settlers said of him, "That's one good Indian." Generally, however, Indians and wolves are classed together, and red men are described as naked, wild men with eyes like snake's eyes and with speech, when they weren't silent, as short harsh sounds in the throat (p. 193).

It is the teacher's place to expose the students to these stereotypes and differing viewpoints and to help them to become discerning readers.

#### Summary

The criteria presented for selecting historical fiction that includes the American Indian culture provides an evaluative frame of reference for those concerned with selecting unbiased literature. This selection process needs to be conducted with

much care, for the status of American Indians in literature and social studies textbooks has not substantially changed in the last fifty years. Stereotypes exist in widely acclaimed books for children. The task of weeding out and identifying stereotypes is not an easy one.

From the search for literature written for children by American Indians, no volumes were found. Therefore, educators need to study carefully the culture of this neglected culture and to examine critically works that address their conflict, because cultural bias is more likely to appear in books by authors with less firsthand knowledge.

Because children tend to believe the material they read or that is read to them, teachers play an important role in planning a curriculum that explores other cultures with insight and understanding. The need for knowledge of our cultural diversity can be met in part by experiences with reliable and interesting books.

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