

The Dearth of Native Voices in Young Adult Literature:

A Call for More Young Adult Literature by and for Indigenous Peoples

A stereotype is not a simplification of truth, and in the case of American Indian/Alaska Native/Hawaiian Native people, many stereotypical images have been constructed in literature and visual media. No single stereotype adequately illustrates “the variety of images which the Euroamerican mind has been projecting for centuries onto the tan-skinned screen of the North American Indian” (Haladay 114). Lomawaima describes the variety of images projected: “Whether lazy or noble, drunken or stoic, poverty-stricken or living in harmony with nature, we are all lumped together in an artificial category that is anything but natural” (5). Inaccurate representations of Sitting Bull, Pocahontas, and Geronimo all parade before a young adult’s eyes as representations of what an “Indian” looks like and acts like from a mainstream, non-Indian perspective. However, none comes close to representing the reality for Indigenous People today. Over-generalized, arrested forms of representation created by sports mascots, Thanksgiving and Columbus myths, non-Indian literature, and Hollywood movies perpetuate the perception that American Indian/Alaska Native/Hawaiian Native people still look and act the same as they may have hundreds or even thousands of years ago. Imagine an Indian child, watching *Dances with Wolves* or reading James Fennimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* looking in a mirror. His mother tells him he is an Indian, but he sees neither feathers, nor war paint, nor other accoutrements associated with the Indians he sees in these visual and literary media. In his confusion, he

may ask himself “Are you a real Indian?” As University of Kansas professor of Indigenous Education Cornel Pewewardy (Comanche/Kiowa) would tell this young man, “There are no real Indians in America, only indigenous peoples increasingly forming into a hybrid culture trying to hold onto what little culture, language and sacred knowledge are left” (71). This response would also silence those hasty generalizers who say, “You don’t look Indian.”

Stereotypes exacerbate the identity crisis children and teens already face, particularly those stereotypes found in the curriculum schools often provide for students. Books like Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* and Mary Rowlandson’s captivity narrative were mainstays in the high school canon for over a century, disseminating the colonialist assumption that Indigenous Peoples are savages in a civilized Anglo world. Within those pages, readers—Indian and non-Indian—saw the stereotypes that persist to the present day.

Luther Standing Bear in his autobiography *My People the Sioux* asserted that non-Indians who have tried to write stories about Indigenous Peoples have either “foisted on the public some blood-curdling, impossible ‘thriller’; or, if they have been in sympathy with the Indian, have written from knowledge which was not accurate or reliable” (Haladay 114). Furthermore, the incomplete knowledge Anglo writers have written from has homogenized hundreds of indigenous cultures, robbing them of their distinctive identities, creating a one-size-fits-all image of what it

means to be indigenous. The fact of the matter is that “Native America is incredibly diverse, encompassing hundreds of communities with distinct languages, cultures, philosophies, and educational systems that defy easy generalizations” (Lomawaima 5). Only in the last hundred years have American Indian/Alaska Native/ Hawaiian Native authors had opportunities to represent themselves, in all their diversity, honestly in mainstream literature, generating an authentic picture of the issues and characteristics of Indigenous Peoples

(Haladay). “No one is able to understand the Indian race like an Indian,” wrote Luther Standing Bear. In response, dozens of Native American authors, such as Sherman Alexie (Spokane/ Coeur D’Alene), James Welch (Blackfeet), Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo), and N. Scott Momaday (Kiowa) have contributed to the growing body of American Indian literature now available to young adults of all races, providing an authentic narrative from the viewpoints of Indigenous Peoples.

One book in particular that came out in 2007 was Alexie’s “Flight,” not necessarily meant for young adults; however, it addresses many of the issues young indigenous students face as they navigate their world. Michael (or Zits as he is called) struggles to find his identity and a stable home. In the end Michael comes to some revelations about himself and his people.

Sherman Alexie, in his essay “Superman and Me,” also provides a context for native students’ experiences at school:

A smart Indian is a dangerous person . . . we were Indian children who were supposed to be stupid. Most lived up to those expectations in the classroom, but subverted them on the outside. They struggled with basic reading in school, but could remember how to sing a few dozen pow-wow songs. They were monosyllabic in front of the non-Indian teachers, but could tell complicated stories and jokes at the dinner table. They submissively ducked their heads when confronted by a non-Indian adult, but would slug it out with the Indian bully who was ten years older. (5)

Alexie adeptly portrays this experience in his first young adult novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part*

“Native America is incredibly diverse, encompassing hundreds of communities with distinct languages, cultures, philosophies, and educational systems that defy easy generalizations” (Lomawaima 5).

Time Indian, winner of the 2007 National Book Award. Young readers will enjoy this humorous look at a teenager who experiences many of the trials and tribulations that all teenagers face, but from the viewpoint of Junior (AKA Arnold), a boy from the Spokane Reservation. Junior tells his story and the story of many native youth.

James Welch also tells his stories candidly and honestly. “I have not once pulled my punches. And I have so many Indian people come up to me and say that *Winter in the Blood* was just . . . like it is on their reservation. Not only

northern plains reservations but in the southwest or Midwest or whatever. So I think as long as you can write truthfully, people will recognize the truth of what you are writing” (Shanley 26).

Welch goes on to say:

I’ve had whole high school classes write to me how they just became interested so quickly and the whole book just kept them right there. So I feel that the book strikes a chord. So many books of that nature are written from the outside looking in on the Indian culture. This book is from the inside as the Indians look out at the rest of the world. And I think that kind of viewpoint was kind of missing in virtually all of the historical fiction written about Indians. (Shanley 26)

As with all young people, school experiences that promote a positive self-concept for the reader are of developmental benefit to Native American youth. Pewewardy explains that developing a student’s self-concept is critical to his or her development as a mature, well-adjusted adult: “To do well in school or life, each person must know who they are and be proud of their background. They must have a positive self-image” (74). A positive self-image is inseparable from a positive concept of family and culture, as well. P. Jane Hafen (Taos Pueblo) of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, writes that students “must never forget our homes and families, where we are from and who we are. We may seek refuge in pan-Indian associations and urban communities, but we must always remember our own Peoples” (280). Consequently, the challenge to Indigenous People today is to create and

add to a literary canon and a literary community, a cadre of Native American scholars who will develop their own networks and organizations that will protect and respect tribal nations, histories, cultures, and literatures (Hafen 280). Carol Miller, University of Minnesota, says, “Our objective should be to model for our students not an adversarial and minimal survival in an alien environment but an expectation of achievement and influence in a setting that may be adapted to our own self determined ends” (284).

Joseph Bruchac (Abenaki) speaks of this self-determination to publish his own writing, as well as the writing of others. A graduate of Cornell University and Syracuse University, he and his wife Carol founded a literary magazine called *The Greenfield Review* and a publishing company, The Greenfield Review Press, both of which have multicultural literature as a focus. They publish many American Indian writers, including Leslie Marmon Silko, Linda Hogan (Chickasaw), Duane Niatum (S’Klallam), Lance Henson (Cheyenne/Oglalla Sioux), Nia Francisco (Navajo), and Kim Blaeser (Chippewa). On the subject

“Accurate, sensitive and fully-rounded representations of the cultures a child lives in can help validate that child and his or her culture” (Bruchac).

of literature for young adults Bruchac states, “Literature in the classroom introduces students on the one hand to worlds beyond their own, and on the other hand may help them understand their own lives more fully.” In particular, he touts the benefits of historical fiction, which can make history come alive, much

more effectively than “any dry summary of events and dates.”

Conversely, literature may help students to see who they are now not just in the context of history. “Accurate, sensitive and fully-rounded representations of the cultures a child lives in can help validate that child and his or her culture” (Bruchac). The danger, according to Bruchac, in not portraying students’ culture accurately is that they may feel that their world and, by extension, their own lives are of no real importance. However, the problem becomes how can teachers, especially non-Natives, find such literature? The literature is out there if one takes the time to look in appropriate places.

Oyate is a Native organization working to see that Indigenous People’s lives and histories are portrayed honestly (<http://www.oyate.org/aboutus.html>). This website contains very helpful information on how to find such books as *Through Indian Eyes*. It is also helpful in pointing out books to avoid such as *My Heart is on the Ground*, *Sign of the Beaver*, *The Indian in the Cupboard*, which unfortunately “sell millions of copies and are in virtually every school library” (Bruchac). Therefore, one major issue is the availability of YAL for Indigenous People. If the teacher cannot find good books in the school library, where can such quality books be found?

Bruchac says, “The problem lies principally not in a lack of material, but in convincing the publishers to open their doors to more Indian authors.” There are numerous Indian authors who have publishable manuscripts but cannot get their foot in the door because publishers are looking for what they are familiar with—which is the stereotyped, romantic non-Indian view of Indians. Therefore, the answer to the question of availability is that teachers must be diligent in seeking out books that are culturally relevant. As well as *Oyate*, Bruchac’s own website is a valuable resource (<http://josephbruchac.com/>).

The question then becomes, why should teachers spend the time seeking out such books? Teachers need to take the time because, “The lack of culturally relevant literature can be devastating to children” (Bruchac). The unspoken, or sometimes spoken, implication is Native students’ culture is not worthy of respect. Native students need to be able to see themselves in their reading. Bruchac, himself, has published over 75 books with Native American themes and characters, the majority of which would serve the purpose of providing Native American youth with a positive vision of themselves. Singling out individual works of his is hard, but two examples of very good books that could be used with young adults are *Hidden Roots* (2004) and *Wabi: A Hero’s Tale* (2006), both of which portray important images of native student’s experiences. The former is the story of a young man whose family tries to hide their Indian roots, similar to Bruchac’s experience. The latter is the story of Wabi’s journey of self discovery. Although it employs elements of fantasy it has a realistic depiction of identity and love.

Bruchac stresses that certain aspects of Native American cultures (there is no monolithic “Indian

Culture” but, rather, there are many cultures) can be addressed through the medium of storytelling, but it is more a question of content and approach than it is of genre and form. Once teachers select this culturally relevant literature they must strive to re-emphasize the importance of enjoyment in reading. “The current trend of emphasizing testing above all other things is killing American education as a whole, discouraging and penalizing minority students in particular” (Bruchac). Beyond the classroom, in order for books to be available, Bruchac says more open-mindedness in the world of publishing is needed, along with the involvement of more American Indian writers and artists.

Jackie Boyd (San Juan Pueblo/San Felipe Pueblo/Navajo), an education instructor at Haskell Indian Nations University in Lawrence, Kansas, offers important insights into how writers and teachers can be attentive to the needs of Native students. Boyd believes that students first need to understand and comprehend what they read. Then they can develop an appreciation of the world around them and learn about other cultures. Like Bruchac, Boyd states that books must contain contemporary contexts as well as historical facts. Native students can then make connections with young characters that may live in cities or on reservations but are also Native American, sharing similar thoughts, and struggles. Sometimes students may not be able to go back to their tribe or community, because it is difficult to participate in all ceremonies and celebrations. However, students can read about it and it can have a positive affect on their lives.

Unfortunately, Boyd laments, culturally appropriate literature for Native American children is currently very limited. Many of the writers who write about Native Americans are non-Native. “They do their best to write about Native people, but it is different.” Boyd explains that Indian writers writing about Native culture will have a much stronger insight because they know what it is like to grow up with a particular tribal affiliation.

Boyd offers a specific example from her past at a day school at San Juan Pueblo where the students read about Dick, Jane, and Muffin. Students could not connect with these people because they had nothing in common. If these children had books like Cynthia Leitich Smith’s (Muscogee) *Jingle Dancer*, the story of a small-town native girl and her relationships with

women of her intertribal community, it would make a big difference. Boyd’s own childhood experience is a good example of this. Her grandmother shared *Chee and His Pony* with her, which became her favorite children’s book to read. Boyd’s maiden name is Chee, and one of the characters was a Navajo boy, two powerful connections to personal experience. Boyd contends that if children at any age or from any culture do not have culturally relevant literature then it will have profound effects.

There are certain aspects of culture that are appropriate for authors to write about and some that are not, according to Boyd, because they are topics that are not supposed to be spoken of outside the culture. A book written about a Native student going to a basketball tournament would be culturally appropriate, since basketball is very popular among Native men and youth. If a character were to narrate the sacred events of traditional rituals and dances, however, that would not be appropriate (Boyd). Therefore, not only do authors need to be sensitive to content that is appropriate to include in young adult books, but they also need to pay attention to aspects of specific cultures which are out of bounds.

Boyd says, “The most pressing need in reading and writing education is for children to be exposed to a variety of reading material, not just novels, but poetry written by Native people and short stories, because many of us grew up listening to stories.” Oral histories are crucial to Native students. Subsequently, with more exposure to authentic content, states and districts need to write standardized tests to include this content (Boyd). This means not just changing the name from an English name to a Native American name, but the stories need to be authentic. There need to be more stories about Indian people who are fulfilled and successful in life, so students can imagine more opportunities than just stagnating on the reservation, living off commodities (Boyd).

Reading is important but it requires that schools have the appropriate literature. Boyd has worked with adults who teach in Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) schools, and was struck by the lack of professional development and instructional resources they have available to them. The teachers in these BIA schools were excited to gain the instructional strategies and curricular knowledge from Boyd’s classes to take back to their students, but available materials are still not at the level they need to be. Boyd says, “What needs to

happen in the world of publishing and writing is for books to touch on all cultures, not just one culture, bringing their stories to life for kids to read.” More sensitivity is needed to get an accurate portrayal through stories of culture, and more research should be done.

On source of high quality literature with Native American characters is Cynthia Leitich Smith, author of the above-mentioned *Jingle Dancer*, as well as *Indian Shoes* and *Rain is Not my Indian Name*. Cynthia’s novels and picture books offer accurate portrayals of culture. Her work also includes a short story in *Moccasin Thunder: American Indian Stories for Today* and a companion story to a work by Joseph Bruchac in *Girl Meets Boy, Boy Meets Girl* (2008). Smith says:

It is crucial for young people to have a choice of books—some with characters that reflect them—in the greater body of literature. This is not only the case with regard to race, ethnicity, or tribal affiliation, but also of religion, sexual orientation, region, and so forth. It is true of Native youth because they are bombarded with false, stereotypical, and minimizing images.

It is important for all students to read about people like themselves and different from themselves. It

facilitates character identification and encourages understanding (Smith).

As a young person, Smith longed for Native American heroes, so in her imagination she overlaid Indian identities on characters where none was specified. Young adults will survive using their own coping mechanisms, but at the same time, characters that are similar to teen readers send the messages that they belong in the world of books and that

the experiences and perspectives of people like them are valued (Smith). However, if something as profound as heritage, culture, or lineage are not recognized, young adults will begin to notice that absence, which may result in their pulling away from literature.

At this point in the early 21st century, there are few books Smith can recommend. One challenge is that there are so few authors working in this area; so, there is little diversity of tribal affiliation or setting (urban, rural, suburban, reservation) reflected in the body of literature. Smith, as an author, visits public and school libraries. They may have a Native American section, but the books are often dated. “Budgets are an issue and books by Native authors rare”; however, Smith says that the market is steadily building. Outreach—by Native authors and their supporters—helps to bring readers in this area to the fore.

Smith continues:

Small and regional publishers, for example, have been increasingly open to historically underrepresented groups such as women and minorities. Also, I’m starting to see more Native voices on the big-house lists. But, we are lagging behind other ethnic-related literary communities. Our numbers are statistically insignificant. There are a handful of well-researched and well-written books about Indians by non-Indian authors, and that’s great. But these, too, are in the minority. We all still have a long way to go.

Smith suggests one remedy for the dearth of Native American YAL is to extend beyond that one week in November when all schools do the Native American unit. “We can celebrate Native authors and integrate them throughout the curriculum.” For example, *Rain is not my Indian Name* can be used to talk about technology and students’ self-expression. Once we do this in an integrated fashion, literature becomes a priority, and it is not as much of a struggle to include Native voices. If this culturally relevant literature is not included, students may feel that their own stories are not worth telling. “For those who are non-Indian, they can see that we are human beings; we have a range of emotions. That we live in the 21st century, sometimes in houses with television sets,” Smith explains.

Cynthia also laments the current obsession with testing in education and how this fails to take into account the cultural variations across our society. “I understand that there is a need for evaluation, but there should be an awareness of differing regional and cultural perspectives and a variety of modes of learning,” she contends. Again, reflecting the diversity of Indigenous Peoples and their communities is essential to the development of both literature and educational materials. Cynthia describes a test driven

On source of high quality literature with Native American characters is Cynthia Leitich Smith, author of the above-mentioned *Jingle Dancer*, as well as *Indian Shoes* and *Rain is Not my Indian Name*.

approach to teaching literature, saying, "Reading is not just a subject to pass on a test but a life skill that is absolutely essential to the individual and society."

The need for more literature in our schools written by, for and about Native Americans is undeniable. There are some issues to consider as we move forward, however. In a survey of first year writing students at Haskell Indian Nations University, we found some additional issues that merit future scrutiny. First, some Native students did not necessarily want to have their culture emphasized in school for fear they would be singled out. This fear may point to an issue of institutional inequities that need to be addressed. Perhaps the very infrastructure of our educational institutions is not conducive to the educational needs of an increasingly diverse student body. Second, students pointed out that just because literature was from an Indigenous perspective did not mean it was culturally relevant to them. Perhaps there is a need to draw on the resources of diverse Native communities to create literature using the language, customs, and culture that is appropriate to share with Indians and non-Indians alike. Educators and anyone who has a stake in the education of young adults need to begin to develop curriculum that includes culturally relevant literature by for and about Indigenous People in order to build a society that is not only tolerant but inclusive as well. Authors and publishers must also play a role in this process, since there is still a need for them to write and publish works by for and about Native young adults. Many excellent authors have been mentioned such as Cynthia Leitich Smith, Sherman Alexie, and Joseph Bruchac, but more American Indian, Alaska Native, and Hawaiian Native authors need to step up and be recognized for the work they are producing and the work they will produce in the future. These works are needed as an alternative to the misinformed and stereotypical young adult books that are being written and published every year.

In summary, books for Indigenous youth must not only portray Indigenous People with historical accuracy, but also portray members of various cultures as contemporary role models. It is also essential that a diversity of cultures be represented in the literature, paying attention to the many tribes and communities that abound. For these reasons, it is vital that more Native authors write books for and about Native

youth, as well as for non-Native youth. We as educators must show publishers that there is a market for such books in the schools. We must also share such culturally relevant literature with non-Indian youth, so that they may appreciate the diversity of culture. In turn, the culture of all students must be recognized as essential to a broader understanding among students and teachers alike. Finally, this has far-reaching implications that reach even into the area of high-stakes testing. Educators need to advocate for equity on reading tests, where all cultures may be represented. This may mean shaping testing materials for particular communities, but if we express the need for these materials then they will be developed.

Kenan Metzger has worked at Haskell Indian Nations University as a curriculum developer focusing on culturally relevant literature. Currently, he works at Ball State University where he continues to focus on culturally relevant curriculum. In particular he is working on a project to teach young adult literature with Native American themes to secondary students.

Wendy Kelleher completed her Ph.D. in English education at Arizona State University following a career in high school English language arts and theater in North Dakota. Her primary research areas are culturally responsive curriculum and instruction, and teacher training. She currently lives in Fountain Hills, Arizona.

Works Cited

- Alexie, Sherman. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2007.
- . *Flight*. New York: Black Cat, 2007.
- . "Superman and Me." In *Approaching Literature in the 21st Century*, Ed. Peter Schakel and Jack Ridl. New York: Bedford/St. Martins, 2004: 4-6.
- Boyd, Jackie. Personal communication. 21 Dec. 2004. Haskell Indian Nations University.
- Bruchac, Joseph. Personal communication. 10 Jan. 2005. josephbruchac.com.
- . *Hidden Roots*. New York: Scholastic, 2004.
- . *Wabi: A Hero's Tale*. Dial, 2006.

"I understand that there is a need for evaluation, but there should be an awareness of differing regional and cultural perspectives and a variety of modes of learning," she contends.

- DeJong, David H. *Promises of the Past: A history of Indian Education*. Golden Colorado: North American Press, 1993.
- Haladay, Jane. "Solemn Laughter: Humor as Subversion and Resistance in the Literature of Simon Ortiz and Carter Revard." In *Native American Literature: Boundaries and Sovereignties*. Special issue of *Paradoxa* 15. Vashon Island, WA: Paradoxa, 2001: 114-131.
- Hafen, P. Jane. "More than Intellectual Exploration." In *Native American Literature: Boundaries and Sovereignties*. Special issue of *Paradoxa* 15. Vashon Island, WA: Paradoxa. 2001: 280-281.
- Jester, Timothy E. "Healing the 'Unhealthy Native': Encounters with Standards-Based Education in Rural Alaska." *Journal of American Indian Education* (2002): 1-21.
- Leitch Smith, Cynthia. Personal communication. 21 Nov. 2006. NCTE, Nashville, TN.
- Leitch Smith, Cynthia. *Jingle Dancer*. New York: Morrow Junior Books, 2000.
- Leitch Smith, Cynthia. *Indian Shoes*. New York: HarperCollins, 2002.
- Leitch Smith, Cynthia. *Rain Is Not My Indian Name*. New York: HarperCollins, 2001.
- Loewen, James W. *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Book Got Wrong*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995.
- Lomawaima, K. Tisianina. "The Unnatural History of American Indian Education." In *Next Steps: Research and Practice to Advance Indian Education*, Ed. Karen G. Swisher and John. W. Tippeconnic III Charlston, West Virginia: ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, 1999: 3-31.
- Miller, Carol. "Academe as Indian Country." *Native American Literature: Boundaries and Sovereignties*. Special issue of *Paradoxa* 15. Vashon Island, WA: Paradoxa, 2001: 283-286.
- Pewewardy, Cornel. "Fluff and Feathers: Treatment of American Indians in the Literature and the Classroom." *Equity and Excellence in Education* (1998): 69-76.
- Shanley, Kathryn.W. Paradoxa Interview with James Welch. In *Native American Literature: Boundaries and Sovereignties*. Special Issue of *Paradoxa* 15. Vashon Island, WA: Paradoxa, 2001: 17-37.
- Wood, William. *New England's Prospect: 1634*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1977.

James Moffett Award

NCTE's Conference on English Education, in conjunction with the National Writing Project, offers this grant to support teacher research projects inspired by the scholarship of James Moffett. All K-12 classroom educators who teach at least three hours or three classes per day are eligible to apply for the grant. Moffett Award winners receive a certificate, a monetary award (up to \$1,000) to be used toward implementation of the proposed project, and a copy of James Moffett's last book, *The Universal Schoolhouse*. Proposals will be judged on such criteria as the strength of the connection to James Moffett's scholarship and the perceived value and feasibility of the research. **The deadline for nominations for the 2008 Moffett Award is May 1, 2008.** Winners will be notified in July 2008 and announced at the 2008 NCTE Annual Convention in San Antonio, Texas. Submit nominations to James Moffett Award, Kristen Suchor, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096. For more information, go to <http://www.ncte.org/groups/cee/awards/moffett/108836.htm>.