

# Contemporary American Indian Cultures in Children's Picture Books

Lisen C. Roberts, Eliza Dean, and Marna Holland



**Among the numerous tribes is tremendous diversity, and yet the majority of Americans know little of this diversity.**

**Lisen C. Roberts**, PhD, is an associate professor in the school counseling program at Western Carolina University in Cullowhee, North Carolina. Her research interests include diversity and children's literature.

**Eliza Dean**, PhD, is an assistant professor and the program director for the birth-kindergarten program at Western Carolina University. Before teaching college students, she taught young children for six years in New Orleans and in east Tennessee.

**Marna Holland**, EdS, is a visiting instructor in the birth-kindergarten education program at Western Carolina University. Her research interests include diversity issues and children's literature.

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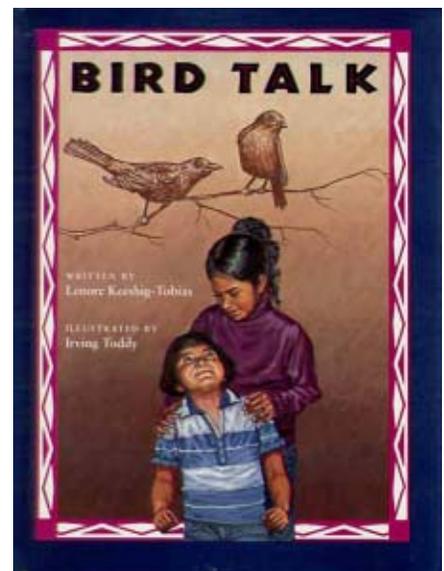
**A** kindergarten class visits a children's museum on a nearby American Indian reservation. As they enter the foyer, their guide, a member of the reservation's Native tribe, greets the group. "When are we going to see some real Indians?" asks one of the children. "You are meeting one. I am American Indian," says the guide. The children are skeptical. Their host, with his professional, contemporary appearance, looks quite similar to their teachers, families, and neighbors. "You don't look like one," ventures five-year-old Katie. "Where's your horse and headdress?"

Perhaps no other ethnic group in the United States has endured greater and more varied distortions of cultural identity than Native Americans. Stereotypes of American Indians are based on superficial and/or distorted views and inaccurate information. We, as early childhood educators, are obligated to prevent stereotypes from becoming established in young minds. We must seek out honest portrayals of Indian heritage and life.

## Recognizing great Native diversity

The latest census data show that 1.5 percent of the U.S. population report American Indian and Alaska Native ethnicity. While this is a low percentage of our total population, the figure represents 4.1 million individual Native Americans. There are more than 500 federally recognized tribes divided into 39 major tribal groups (Ogunwole 2002; U.S. Census Bureau 2005). Many American Indians are highly educated and serve the public at large and their own people as professors, lawyers, doctors, engineers, ranchers, educators, and politicians (Miheuah 2002).

Among the numerous tribes is tremendous diversity, and yet the majority of Americans know little of this diversity. Both anecdotal and empirical evidence exist that non-Indian children overwhelmingly believe that American Indians either no longer exist today or that they live in a strictly (and stereotypical) traditional manner far



removed from the children's own lives (Reese 1998; League of Women Voters 1999; Heller, Cunningham, & Heller 2003). Even in adults, the childhood images of Indian "braves" stick with us: beating tom-toms, living in "teepees," scalping and torturing innocent settlers, wearing war paint and feathers, and yelling war cries. "Indian givers" go back on their promises. For Thanksgiving, teachers have children make feather headdresses. Sports teams use American Indian images as mascots. And children still "play cowboys and Indians" today using mass-produced toys that perpetuate stereotypes. "Children pretending to be Indians grunt 'ugh,' . . . a nonsensical, verbal symbol of the quintessence of Indianness" (Mihehuah 2002, 11). Non-Indians "tend to consider only those individuals with long hair, beads, and a horse parked around the corner as Indians" (p. 24). Furthermore, "It's hard to take seriously, to empathize with, a group of people portrayed as speaking ungrammatical language, as dressing in Halloween costumes, as acting 'wild,' as being undependable in their promises or gifts" (Dorris 1998, 19).

**Too many of the available children's books on American Indians present inaccurate depictions.**

### **Inaccurate depictions in books**

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Children with no (known) personal experience with a particular cultural group form their opinions from what they hear from adults, what they read, and what they see on television and in movies. Children's books play an important role in shaping children's perceptions of various cultures. Books are not merely entertainment; they also transmit cultural norms and understanding.

Inaccurate books add to the development of bias and prejudice that is accepted as fact. Too many of the available children's books on American Indians present inaccurate depictions (LaBonty 1995; Moore & Hirschfelder 1999). Many books published in the 1950s and 1960s are disturbing in their portrayals of American Indians, yet some of these books are still on the shelves and readily available to children today. Offensive images in older picture books include non-Indian children "playing Indian" and animals dressed up as "Indians." This presentation of generic Native American ways reduces rich cultural heritage and ethnicity to a few misleading props, such as feathers or animal skin clothing. In older alphabet books, we see "I is for Indian" or "E is for Eskimo." Likewise, counting books count "10 little Indians." These depictions objectify American Indians. We don't see other groups similarly treated. Indeed, most Americans would quickly identify the offensiveness of "P is for Puerto Rican" or counting "10 little Jews" (Reese 1996; Moore & Hirschfelder 1999).

More recently published books on American Indian life may also contain errors because some authors neglect the latest research and information. Thus myths and stereotypes persist. Many children's books with American Indian themes lack authenticity and accuracy. Rather than culturally specific artwork, for example, too often there is a mix of different tribes—for example, a "teepee" of the Plains Indians alongside a totem pole of the Northwest Indians. Books with such generic presentations are inaccurate, disrespectful, and deny the rich diversity among specific Native tribes (Reese 1999; Stewart 2002; Lindsay 2003).

While there are many excellent books on Native myths and traditions, in children's fiction there seems to be an overreliance on historical perspectives focusing on American Indian characters and cultures. It is less common to see contemporary stories (LaBonty 1995; Reese 1998, 1999; Mihehuah 2002; Mouttet 2002/2003; Stewart 2002; Lindsay 2003). Respectful and accurate books on modern day American Indian living can help children appreciate the diversity of Native cultures and learn how American Indians balance mainstream life with their heritage (Mouttet 2002/2003).

**We need books that discuss specific tribes and not just stereotypic American Indians.**

Educators can help young children get accurate views of American Indians by choosing appropriate books. We need modern day stories with Native children engaged in everyday activities such as bike riding and eating at restaurants with parents who are lawyers and engineers (Reese 1996, 1998, 1999). We need books that discuss specific tribes and not just stereotypic American Indians. Ideally, we should share books about the tribes that have historical and/or contemporary roles in our own local communities (Reese 1996).

Books chosen for classroom reading must be of exceptional quality. This excellence includes accuracy. “Children are pretty much a captive audience and they tend to accept the words of their teachers and the apparent facts in books as truth. Of the thousands of books that are published each year, only a handful are chosen for classroom use. We must select carefully for our students; we must demand excellence” (LaBonty 1995, 2). Even with free choice, with children choosing from among books available in the classroom or school library, the books are ones we have chosen for them. Teachers have tremendous power; we must choose wisely (LaBonty 1995).

### Guidelines for choosing books

How can non-Indian teachers evaluate books with American Indian characters and settings? From the recommendations of various authors (LaBonty 1995; Slapin & Seale 1998; Moore & Hirschfelder 1999; Reese 1999; Heller, Cunningham, & Heller 2003; Lindsay 2003), we’ve compiled two simple lists of guidelines—one, “don’t’s,” and the other, “do’s.”

#### DON'T's

Present texts and images that could embarrass a Native American child or foster stereotypic thinking in a non-Indian child. This means no

- generic “Indians” with costumes and symbols such as feathers and tomahawks
- alphabetizing or counting people as if objects
- stereotypic, one-dimensional portrayals
- mixing of cultures
- offensive, degrading vocabulary such as savage or squaw

#### DO's

Present American Indians authentically and respectfully. Seek

- images and stories that are authentic to time, place, and culture
- depictions of American Indians in everyday tasks of living
- depictions of individuals as part of a community
- presentations of unique individuals as fully human, with varied physical features and roles
- accurate facts about specific tribes

Also from various sources (Caldwell-Wood & Mitten 1991; Reese 1996, 1998; Slapin & Seale 1998; Weston 2001; Mouttet 2002/2003; Heller, Cunningham, & Heller 2003; Lindsay 2003; Pettigrew 2004; York 2004), we have compiled two lists of Recommended Books (see pages 4–6). One is for pre-K through grade 1 and the other for grades 2–3. These books offer authentic and respectful depictions of American Indian peoples and cultures in contemporary society.

## Recommended Books, Pre-K to Grade 1

***A Rainbow at Night: The World in Words and Pictures by Navajo Children*, by Bruce Hucko. 1996. San Francisco: Chronicle.**

This book is a collection of artwork by Navajo children. With each painting or drawing is an explanation and a photograph of the artist. In all of the explanations, we learn something new about Navajo culture.

***Bird Talk*, by Lenore Keeshig-Tobias. Illus. by Irving Toddy. 1994. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace.**

Polly and her family leave the reserve for the city while her mother attends college. Polly's classmates say she's not Indian because she doesn't have feathers or red skin. In their modern home, Polly's mother comforts her and reminds her of her heritage and her large extended family. They talk about Christopher Columbus and their Ojibway language.

***Emma and the Trees/Emma minwaah mtigooh*, by Lenore Keeshig-Tobias. Illus. by Keeshig-Tobias. Trans. into Ojibway by Rose Nadjiwon. 1996. Toronto, Ontario, CAN: Sister Vision.**

Emma's mother helps her see that the trees are talking to her, soothing her. Emma learns that trees everywhere know her—in Nana's yard and even on a bus, train, or airplane.

***Firedancers*, by Jan Bourdeau Waboose. Illus. by C.J. Taylor. 2000. New York: Stoddart Kids.**

In this Anishinawbe (Ojibway) picture book, Noko (Grandmother) shouts, "Slow down, Fast One," to her young grandchild. The two set out from home late at night and travel by motorboat to Smooth Rock Island, where their ancestors once danced. There, by firelight, the grandmother becomes young again and the child gains the wisdom of understanding heritage.

***I Can't Have a Bannock, but the Beaver Has a Dam*, by Bernelda Wheeler. Illus. by Herman Bekkering. 1993. Winnipeg, Manitoba, CAN: Peguis.**

A young boy wants his mother to bake bannock (bread). The mother explains that she can't because an industrious beaver has downed a tree, causing it to fall on a power line and cut off the electricity. The story is said to take place "in the north," but the specific tribe is not named. Charcoal illustrations depict the Native American family wearing modern clothes and residing in a contemporary home with modern appliances.

***Jingle Dancer*, by Cynthia Leitich Smith. Illus. by Cornelius Van Wright and Ying-Hwa Hu. 2000. New York: Morrow Junior.**

Jenna, a young member of the Muscogee (Creek) nation, wants to dance the traditional jingle dance at the upcoming

powwow. Her family members contribute jingles so Jenna's dress can "sing."

***Less Than Half, More Than Whole*, by Kathleen Lacapa. Illus. by Michael Lacapa. 1994. Flagstaff, AZ: Rising Moon.**

Tony, a young boy of Native American and Anglo-American descent, explores what it means to come from a multicultural background. His grandfather Ta'Tda' uses colorful ears of corn to explain the beauty of a diverse heritage. Lacapa incorporates Native American designs, including Hopi, Apache, and Mohawk, into the illustrations.

***Morning on the Lake*, by J.B. Waboose. Illus. by Karen Reczuch. 1997. Toronto, Ontario, CAN: Kids Can Press.**

Noshen, a young Ojibway boy, and Mishomis, his grandfather, spend a day together in the northern wilderness, enjoying wildlife and each other's company.

***Red Is Beautiful (Chiih Nizhoni)*, by Roberta John. Illus. by Jason David. Trans. into Navajo by Peter A. Thomas. 2003. Flagstaff, AZ: Salina Bookshelf.**

Nashasha has rough skin and dreads her classmates' teasing. With her grandmother's guidance, she learns about *chiih*, a healing cream of red earth mixed with mutton fat. Nashasha grows up to educate others about traditional medicine and using natural resources.

***SkySisters*, by Jan Bourdeau Waboose. Illus. by Brian Deines. 2000. Toronto, Ontario, CAN: Kids Can Press.**

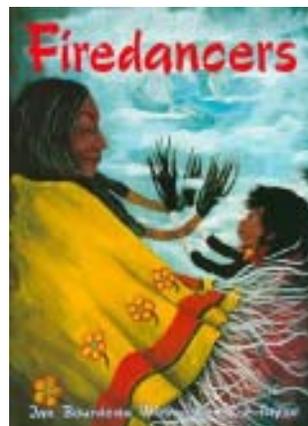
Two sisters climb Coyote Hill under Grandmother Moon and enjoy the wildlife, the cold air, and the snow. They await the arrival of the Sky Spirits (Northern Lights).

***Two Pairs of Shoes*, by Esther Sanderson. Illus. by David Beyer. 1990. Winnipeg, Manitoba, CAN: Pemmican.**

A young Ojibway girl from the Metis tribe receives a pair of black patent-leather shoes from her mother. She runs to show her grandmother, who then presents the girl with home-made, beautifully beaded moccasins. The girl now learns when and how to wear each pair of shoes.

***Where Did You Get Your Moccasins?* by Bernelda Wheeler. Illus. by Herman Bekkering. 1995. Winnipeg, Manitoba, CAN: Peguis.**

A young boy tells his friends the story of how his moccasins were made. First, his dad went hunting for the deer, and then his grandmother Kookum washed, scraped, pulled, and smoked the hide to make the leather. Finally, she assembled the moccasins and put beautiful beadwork on them.



## Recommended Books, Grades 2–3

***Apache Rodeo*, by Diane Hoyt-Goldsmith. Photos by Lawrence Migdale. 1995. New York: Holiday House.**

Ten-year-old Felecita lives and goes to school on the Fort Apache reservation and spends her free time training for the annual rodeo. She learns not only skills specific to the rodeo but also discipline and perseverance. Her father, who also competes in the rodeo, is a role model for his children.

***Brave as a Mountain Lion*, by Ann Herbert Scott. Illus. by Glo Carlson. 1996. New York: Clarion.**

Spider, a young Shoshone boy, dreads the school spelling bee. Encouraged by his supportive family, Spider looks to the brave mountain lion, the clever coyote, and the silent spider for inspiration as he competes onstage for the spelling prize.

***Buffalo Days*, by Diane Hoyt-Goldsmith. Photos by Lawrence Migdale. 1997. New York: Holiday House.**

Clarence Three Irons Jr., a 10-year-old member of the Crow tribe in Montana, lives in buffalo country. Readers learn about his family's 40-acre ranch, his school, and the annual Crow Fair and rodeo. We also learn about the history of the buffalo. There are beautiful photographs in this nonfiction book.

***Celebrating the Powwow*, written and photographed by Bobbie Kalman. 1997. New York: Crabtree.**

This nonfiction book introduces the elements of a powwow, from the musical instruments and dancing to the dancers' colorful regalia. The photographs show Native Americans in both contemporary and traditional dress as they prepare for and participate in the powwow.

***Cherokee Summer = Cwy ay*, by Diane Hoyt-Goldsmith. Photos by Lawrence Migdale. 1993. New York: Holiday House.**

In this nonfiction book, 10-year-old Bridget of the Cherokee Nation in Oklahoma teaches us many things about her tribe and heritage: the Trail of Tears, the weekly stomp dance, the revival of the Cherokee language and traditions, the capital of the Cherokee Nation (Tahlequah), summer fun, and much more.

***Children of Clay: A Family of Pueblo Potters*, by Rina Swentzell. Photos by Bill Steen. 1992. Minneapolis: Lerner.**

Gia Rose, a Santa Clara Pueblo great-grandmother, gathers family members to dig for clay. Before digging, Gia Rose stands quietly and talks to the clay spirit, explaining that they will be respectful and will work carefully with the clay they take. The family returns to their village to begin

the many steps required to create the beautiful pottery sold to art galleries and stores both near and far.

***Indian Shoes*, by Cynthia Leitich Smith. Illus. by Jim Madsen. 2002. New York: HarperCollins.**

On their way to a Chicago Cubs baseball game, Ray Halfmoon and his grandfather wander into an antiques store and see traditional Seminole moccasins for sale. Later, Ray returns to the store and trades his hightop sneakers for the moccasins as a gift for Grampa. Throughout the book, we see Ray, of Seminole-Cherokee heritage, equally at home in his hometown of Chicago or at the family lake in Oklahoma.

***Powwow*, written and photographed by George Ancona. 1993. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace.**

Crow Fair, a modern intertribal powwow, is held annually on the Crow reservation in Montana. There is a parade, opening ceremony, and various dances, including traditional, fancy, grass, and jingle-dress. The powwow is a powerful blend of the contemporary and traditional.

***Pueblo Boy: Growing Up in Two Worlds*, written and photographed by Marcia Keegan. 1991. New York: Puffin.**

Ten-year-old Timmy Roybal is a San Ildefonso Pueblo Indian who lives in New Mexico. He rides his bike to school and enjoys playing baseball and fishing. His father is a museum curator and his mother, a computer programmer. Timmy also has relatives who make traditional Pueblo crafts such as Kachina dolls and pottery. Timmy learns songs, dances, and traditions from his father.

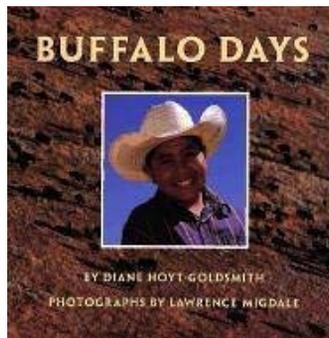
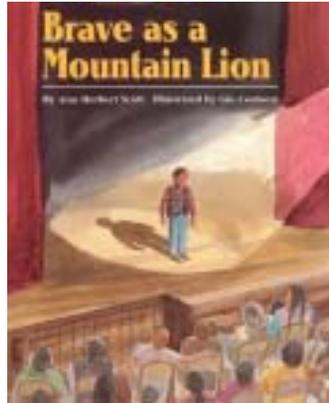
***Pueblo Girls: Growing Up in Two Worlds*, written and photographed by Marcia Keegan. 1999. Santa Fe, NM: Clear Light.**

Sisters Sonja and Desiree, 10 and 8, are proud of their San Ildefonso Pueblo heritage. They enjoy bike riding, playing with Barbies, playing basketball, cheerleading, and attending traditional dances. From their relatives, they learn

how to make pottery and bread and to fish. They speak English and Tewa and follow both Catholic and Pueblo religious traditions.

***Pueblo Storyteller*, by Diane Hoyt-Goldsmith. Photos by Lawrence Migdale. 1991. New York: Holiday House.**

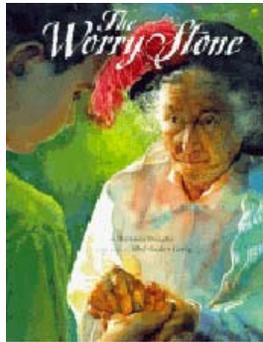
Because her mother died when she was young, April, now 10, lives with her extended Cochiti Pueblo family. She rides the bus to school and is learning to play the



saxophone and speak Keres, her tribe's language. She makes ba'a (bread) and clay storyteller figures with her grandmother. April enjoys the Buffalo Dance, and her uncle is a drum maker. At bedtime her grandmother tells stories of own childhood and of Pueblo legends.

***The Worry Stone*, by Marianna Dengler. Illus. by Sibyl Graber Gerig. 1996. Flagstaff, AZ: Rising Moon.**

An old woman and a young boy sit together on a park bench. The elder knows that the boy is sad and lonely because the big kids won't play with him. One day she gives him a worry stone she had found as a little girl, and she tells the boy the Chumash legend her grandfather told her about worry stones.



***Zuni Children and Elders Talk Together*, written and photographed by E. Barrie Kavasch. 1999. New York: PowerKids.**

Seven-year-old Vance introduces the first chapter with "I am Zuni." Readers also meet 8-year-old Lindrick, who likes to ride his bike, and 12-year-old Michael, who explains his Parrot Clan. An elder explains his Corn Clan and describes his work as a silversmith and jeweler. Other chapters explore celebrations, the land, families, Kachinas, food, prayer, language, and the future. (Part of a recommended series, The Library of Intergenerational Learning: Native Americans, which examines Apache, Blackfoot, Crow, Lakota Sioux, and Seminole cultures.)

## Recommended Web Sites

National Museum of the American Indian

[www.nmai.si.edu](http://www.nmai.si.edu)

Oyate

[www.oyate.org](http://www.oyate.org)

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[www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/c2kbr01-15.pdf](http://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/c2kbr01-15.pdf)

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Dorris, M.A. 1998. "I" is not for Indian. In *Through Indian eyes: The Native experience in books for children*, eds. B. Slapin & D. Seale, 19-20. Berkeley, CA: Oyate.

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Some children's books on Native Americans do not show one tribe in the illustrations but mix aspects of different tribes together (Reese, 1999; Roberts et al., 2005). One book that was reviewed, for example, showed a totem pole made by the Northwest Indians next to a tipi used by the Plains Indians (Reese, 1999). Illustrations like these do not accurately reflect the differences among Native American people and promote erroneous and stereo-typical ideas in children. Contemporary American Indian cultures in children's picture books. Retrieved May 15, 2008, from <http://www.journal.naeyc.org/btj/200511/Roberts1105BTJ.asp>. Starnes, B. A. (2006). Contemporary American Literature. Don DeLillo (© AP Images). Richard Ford (© AP Images). Books by non-American authors and books on international themes were also prominent on the list. Afghan-American Khaled Hosseini's searing novel, *The Kite Runner*, tells of childhood friends in Kabul separated by the rule of the Taliban, while Azar Nafisi's memoir, *Reading Lolita in Teheran*, poignantly recalls teaching great works of Western literature to young women in Iran. Often associated in the popular mind with a return to tradition and child-rearing, lipstick, and "feminine" styles, these young women have reclaimed the word "girl" -- some decline to call themselves feminist. What is often called "chick lit" is a flourishing offshoot. American Indian, member of any of the aboriginal peoples of the Western Hemisphere. The ancestors of contemporary American Indians were members of nomadic hunting and gathering cultures. These peoples traveled in small family-based bands that moved from Asia to North America during the last ice age. { "405873": { "url": "/topic/American-Indian", "shareUrl": "https://www.britannica.com/topic/American-Indian", "title": "American Indian", "documentGroup": "TOPIC PAGINATED LARGE", "gaExtraDimensions": {"3": "false"} } }. Contents. American Indian. people. Article.