

CHEROKEE TALKING LEAVES

Of Interest to Women
By Ellen Spirit Seeker Fisher

Education

What is Native America to our children? What is their image of a Native American and how was it taught to them?

What does mainstream media offer to our children as an image of being an indigenous person? Disney gives us Sakajawea; almost any sports team has an image of Native America. These images are often dehumanizing and downright degrading to Indians. These images seem perfectly all right in the public eye with team names such as "Redskins" very popular. There are derogatory terms for all ethnic and minority groups, but why are Indians the only ones with sports teams named after them? Why do we have the Washington Redskins, but not the Pittsburgh Darkies or the Dallas Rednecks or the San Francisco Coolies or the Knoxville Beaners? Why do these hypothetical teams sound so offensive or shocking, but the Atlanta Braves and Cleveland Indians, complete with Chiefs Nok-A-Homa and Wahoo, do not?

These are the images taught to our children through mainstream media. Is a better image taught in public schools? Certainly not. Nothing much is said at all after middle school except in terms of Pilgrims and Thanksgiving, and sometimes as adversaries to be overcome in the "settling" of the West. As far as most Americans learned in school, Indians pretty well ceased to exist after 1890. The picture painted in public schools is not a true one, there is hardly any picture at all, just a backward glance at truly monumental tribes and dismissal of any worth they hold.

What can we as native peoples do to educate our children about indigenous people and their particular kin? For it is we who need to tell the stories and legends and guide our children to the truth of their native ancestors and we need to do this by example as well as by lessons, although story telling is an excellent way to give our children lessons in their culture.

That being said, since most of us do not have access to physical examples of the lives of our ancestors, other ways of teaching are needed. Books are the easiest and least expensive way to share our culture with our children and help them grow in the way of their people. Not all books are worthwhile, though.

Things to consider

Is the vocabulary demeaning? Are terms like "squaw", "papoose", "chief", "redskin", "savage", "warrior" used?

Do the Indians talk like Tonto or in the noble savage tradition? See *Indian in the Cupboard* and *The Legend of Jimmy Spoon* for examples.

Are the Indians all dressed in the standard buckskin, beads and feathers? Any book in which any character "dresses like an Indian".

Are Indians portrayed as an extinct species, with no existence as human beings in contemporary america? This is the whole "vanishing Indian" concept.

Is Indian humanness recognized? Do animals "become" Indians simply by putting on "Indian" clothes and carrying a bow and arrow? Do children "dress up like Indians" or "play Indian?" For comparison, do animals or children also dress up as African-Americans or play Italian?

Do Native Americans appear in alphabet and counting books as objects that are counted?

Do Native American characters have ridiculous imitation "indian" names, such as "Indian Two Feet" OR "Little Chief"?

Is the artwork predominated by generic "Indian" designs or has the illustrator taken care to reflect the traditions and symbols of the particular people in the book?

Is the history distorted, giving the impression that the white settlers brought civilization to native peoples and improved their way of life? Are terms like massacre, conquest, civilization, customs, superstitions, ignorant, simple, advanced, dialects (instead of languages) used in such a way as to demean native cultures and achievements to indicate the superiority of European ways?

Are Indian characters successful only if they realize the ignorance of traditional ways and decide to "make it" in white society?

Are white authority figures - teachers, social workers - able to solve the problems of native children that native authority figures have failed to solve? (Are there any native authority figures?)

Are the perceptions of women as subservient drudges present? Or are women shown to be the integral and powerful part of native societies that they are?

Finally and most importantly, Can the child look at the book and recognize and feel good about what he sees?

Books to consider

The Story of Squanto, First Friend to the Pilgrims / Cathy East Dubowski. New York; Dell Yearling, 1990. (Grades 4-8) Of the many books for children on Squanto and

the Pilgrims, we finally get a historically accurate biography of the Wampanoag survivor of the village of Patuxet who was so critical in the survival of this early group of colonials. New research being done in the Massachusetts coastal area lends detail and authenticity to the Indians/Pilgrims/Thanksgiving story that is typically myth and legend, especially in accounts for children. Nanepashemet, a Wampanoag Research Associate at Plimouth Plantation, also lent his expertise. A very well-balanced, realistic and entertaining biography.

The First Americans : Tribes of North America / Jane Werner Watson. New York : Pantheon, 1980. (Grades K-3) A very easy-to-read and understandable book, which introduces the major Native American regional groups: plains, woodlands, Inuit, northwest and southwest. The short glimpse into each of the groups is handled by providing factual information about dwellings, duties of adults and children, and respect for religious rites and ceremonies. Illustrated with pen and ink sketches.

Books to avoid

A,B,C's : The American Indian Way / by Richard Red Hawk. Sacramento : Sierra Oaks. 1988. (Grades K-3) An unfortunate attempt to "Indianize" the usual ABC book. This version comes out over-simplified often to the point of confusion.

Indian Campfire Tales : Legends About the Ways of Animals and Men / W.S. Phillips. New York : Platt & Munk, 1963. (Grades 3-5) This is an example of generic "Indian legends". What Phillips has compiled is a mishmash of tales of unknown origin. No effort was made to identify the source of the stories or the people who created them. The reader is led to believe that one "Indian" legend is about the same as any other. The illustrations are based on pictographs and rock paintings that have no relation to the stories being told. The introduction claims that "the stories are histories of the tribes", which makes no sense in the context of this book.

Much more information can be found at this website, from which I adapted this article:

<http://www.nativeculturelinks.com/ailabib.htm>

