



Picturing American Indians: Image vs. Authenticity

Susan Stan

Mount Pleasant, MI USA / Central Michigan University

(susan.stan@cmich.edu)

Abstract: The native peoples of North America have been misrepresented in children's literature as a vanished race, a monoculture, and as noble savages. This paper explains why such images as "playing Indian" are problematic in children's picture books and recounts the efforts of North American educators and librarians to eradicate harmful and misleading stereotypes. It offers examples of current European picture books that contain such stereotypes and urges Europeans who work with books and children to be mindful of such images and to work to dispel them.

Key words: First Nations, American Indians, Native Americans, stereotypes, picturebooks.

For better or worse, North Americans can thank Karl May, a German writer, for giving Europeans a romanticized and completely inaccurate view of North American indigenous people, in Canada referred to as First Nations and in the United States as American Indians or Native Americans. May (1842-1912) wrote the bulk of his adventure novels during the late 19th century, relying completely on travelers' narratives and on his imagination (Krinsky). Readers often wrongfully assumed that the tales were patterned after real adventures experienced by May and that the novels' protagonist, Karl, a German immigrant to America, was actually May himself. In truth, May did not visit North America until 1908, long after the stories were published, and then he only went as far west as Buffalo, New York (Kimmelman). In these stories, set in the American West, Karl functions as both protagonist and narrator; the stories' other hero is an Apache chief named Winnetou. Winnetou and Karl, better known as Old Shatterhand because of his powerful punch, become a duo –fighting injustice in the Far West.

These books, read extensively by Germans during the 20th century, were translated throughout continental Europe. "The only German writing that has been more often translated is Luther's Bible; May's work, first translated into French, then Hungarian, Czech, and Polish, has been rendered into at least twenty-eight languages including all the Scandinavian and most of the Slavic tongues. May's volumes have even outsold Goethe's, with more than 80 million copies printed so far" (Krinsky). The books were less well known in Britain and America, as English translations did not exist for most of the century. Karl May is virtually unknown to Americans, unless one is a student of German culture. Together, Karl May's novels and the twenty-three



films based on them shaped the perceptions of several generations of Europeans concerning America's indigenous peoples. "May framed a popular image of North America, with Indians as a dying race, tragically killed off by fate and by the spread of a new empire", notes Hans Ottomeyer, director of the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin (Kimmelman).

Myths about Indians derived from popular culture

May's books, together with Hollywood films and pulp fiction, have fed certain myths about American Indians that are so ingrained in popular culture as to be almost impossible to dispel. The biggest of these myths is that of the vanishing Indian: Indians as a people who lived in the past rather than people who continue to live in contemporary society. In Germany, this perception is supported by the thousands of adults who belong to hobby clubs and "play Indian" on the weekends. "They recreate tepee encampments, dress in animal skins and furs, and forgo modern tools, using handmade bone knives to cut and prepare food" (Lopinto). The notion of Indians as a people of the past is not restricted to Europe, however, but also pervasive in North America. Debbie Reese, a Pueblo Indian from Nambé, a village in New Mexico, recounted her visit to a preschool classroom in Illinois, where a 4-year-old girl asked why her skin was brown. When she replied that she was a Native American Indian person, the little girl responded, "But Indians aren't real! They're all dead!" (Reese, 1998: 637).

Another misconception fed by popular culture is that of an Indian monoculture: all Indians as part of one big tribe, rather than belonging to separate tribal nations. Just as continental Europe is comprised of ethnic groups with their own histories, languages, cultures, and folk arts, the North American continent once was home to thousands of distinct tribes and bands, many of which have been wiped out. Yet remaining are over 3 million American Indians, and today the United States recognizes 562 distinct tribal governments (BIA). In Canada, the number of First Nations people, together with Inuit and Metis (a distinct group formed from European-Indian) exceeds 1 million (INAC). This misconception derives from the fact that popular culture has only shown Plains Indians (e.g. Lakota, Shoshone, Arapaho), with feathered warbonnets, tomahawks, and painted faces, when in fact each tribal nation –be it Navajo, Ojibwe, Zuni, Cherokee, or other– has its own distinct culture, including language, belief system,



customs, and form of dress. Because popular fiction, films, and television have usually focused on stories where Plains Indians are in battle with settlers or U.S. soldiers and are the enemy, they have been portrayed as fierce savages with a propensity for scalping¹.

Because of Karl May's influence, Europeans generally have a more restrained yet equally stereotyped view of American Indians: the Indian as environmentalist who lives in harmony with the land and is in tune with nature in a mystical way. While American Indians did live off the land for centuries, such a romanticized view idealizes Indians and contributes to the myth of the noble savage. This term, as Philip Deloria notes, "both juxtaposes and conflates an urge to idealize and desire Indians and a need to despise and dispossess them" (4). In addition, the romanticized view leaves little room for the here-and-now Indian, who often lives in stark contrast to this stereotype. One enrolled tribal member who is also a university professor has pointed out the discrepancy between the way that Indian life is portrayed in popular culture and the reality of many contemporary Indians' lives. "No one wants to be living below the poverty level on a reservation. It lacks a certain romance" (Lopinto).

Dispelling stereotypes in North American books

As noted, inaccurate perceptions and negative images of American Indians exist on both sides of the Atlantic, not just in Europe. The major difference between the European and North American attitudes toward American Indians, however, is that Europeans have no vested interest in correcting these misperceptions, while North Americans do. Inaccurate portrayals, misconceptions, and stereotypes result in hurtful experiences for Native children and keep non-Native children in ignorance. Indian children growing up in cities and towns all across the United States and Canada are confronted with messages in popular culture that they are savages, that they no longer exist, that they speak broken English. Non-Native children also take in these messages, and when confronted with someone who self-identifies as American Indian, they are confused. In a first-grade classroom, Reese was told that "Indians don't have cars! They have horses" (Reese, 1998).

¹ Whether scalping was introduced by Europeans or predated their arrival is taken up in "The Unkindest Cut, or Who Invented Scalping?" by James Axtell and William E. Sturtevant.



Up until the 1960s, no one in the library or language arts fields, where children's literature was primarily covered, was looking at children's books with the idea that they should be culturally authentic, although Native people certainly were (Reese, 2010). In 1965, the Council on Interracial Books for Children (CIBC) was formed as a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting anti-racist and anti-sexist literature and instructional materials for children, and in 1969 the CIBC began publishing a bi-monthly bulletin in which they ran articles related to their mission and reviewed books that included minority characters and/or themes. This work resulted in "10 Quick Ways to Analyze Children's Books for Racism and Sexism", which has been reprinted in brochure and pamphlet form by many organizations since 1989, when the CIBC was disbanded. Among the suggestions are to examine the text for the use of loaded words such as *fierce* or *savage*, and to monitor the illustrations for misleading or stereotypical images. In *Through Indian Eyes: The Native Experience in Books for Children*, Doris Seale and Beverly Slapin offer even more specific guidance by including illustrations from existing books published in the United States to demonstrate their points. For instance, they instruct, "Look at picture books. Is I for Indian?". The accompanying illustration shows a tomahawk-wielding caricature with text that reads, "The Indian wears bright colors. He likes to live outdoors". Not only is the visual image demeaning and inaccurate and the text blatantly wrong, but the underlying concept of equating Indians with items such as apple, ball, or dog objectifies them, reducing them to the status of a simple object.

"Playing Indian" is problematic for similar reasons –it assumes that being Indian is something that can be put on or taken off at will and completely ignores the cultural heritage of Native people. Further, we don't "play Chinese" or "play African," and we certainly don't "play White". It's even common to see animal characters "playing Indian". Images from American picture books throughout the last few decades of the twentieth century include example after example of "playing Indian". We see it in books by beloved illustrators Syd Hoff, James Marshall, and Maurice Sendak, and others published up through the 1970s. Due to heightened awareness prompted by organizations, librarians, and educators, images such as these taper off in American and Canadian children's books originating in the 1980s and onward. Perhaps that is one reason that when we do see these images, they stand out even more.



American Indian stereotypes in modern European picture books

Unfortunately, the picture books that come from Europe today contain the same kinds of stereotyped images that North American educators are trying to dispel. *Kevin Spends the Night* by Liesbet Slegers is one of a series of board books first published in Belgium in 1999 and reprinted in the United States in 2002. As stated on the back cover, the books have an admirable purpose, “to quell children’s fears” as they set out on first experiences –the hospital, school, an airplane, and, in *Kevin Spends the Night*, a sleepover with a friend. In one spread, the English text reads: “We use Grace’s dress-up box it’s filled with funny clothes” (Slegers). Opposite is a picture of Kevin in a feathered headdress, which he also wears to bed and home the next day; that is also the image on the cover. This page speaks directly to one of the misconceptions outlined above –that Indians wear “funny clothes” and, just like a clown costume, you can put them on to entertain yourself and others.

The theme of *Amazing Grace* by Mary Hoffman, illustrated by Caroline Binch, is that neither gender nor ethnic background should prevent anyone from pursuing his or her heart’s desire. This book originated in Britain and was published both there and in the U.S. in 1991. Grace, a young British girl of African descent, loves to act out stories. She is Joan of Arc, Anansi the Spider, a pirate, and “Hiawatha, sitting by the shining Big-Sea-Water” (Hoffman). In the illustration accompanying this text, Grace wears a feathered warbonnet and war paint. Grace acts out characters from literature, and here she is drawing on Longfellow’s 1855 epic poem “Song of Hiawatha”. Longfellow’s inspiration for this poem was the trickster character Nanabozhu (spelled various ways) in Ojibwe oral tradition, and he relied on inaccurate renditions by Henry Schoolcraft as well as taking artistic license with the character, including giving him an Iroquois name (Trachtenberg). In short, Hiawatha became a character who fulfilled Longfellow’s romanticized view, not in the least an authentic portrayal. On top of this, Binch returns to the visual stereotype of the Plains Indian when she pictures Grace wearing a warbonnet. Thus this illustration is an apt example of feeding and perpetuating the myth of the monoculture.

Finally, *When I Grow Up, I Will Win the Nobel Peace Prize* by Isabel Pin, first published in Germany in and reprinted in the United States in 2006, is a splendid example of dramatic



irony, relying on the disjuncture of pictures and text for its subtle humor. The narrator, a young boy who is actively engaged in decidedly non-peaceful activities with his friends, proclaims the lofty goal of the title. Meanwhile, in the illustrations Pin cleverly frames this series of pronouncements with a visual narrative of a game of cowboys and Indians, with the narrator chasing someone who is probably his sister. As his mother reads him a book, his captive stays tied up under the bed and is only freed at the end. Their twenty-first century game of cowboys and Indians underscores the ongoing influence of Karl May, bringing us back to the beginning of this paper. Just as it is important that North American children recognize that their countries' indigenous people are still here, so too is it important for European children to understand that Indians in America are alive and well and living alongside their fellow American and Canadian citizens. To nurture the fantasy of the noble savage by reproducing false images does the European child a disservice.

Works Cited

- AXTELL, James and William STURTEVANT (1980), "The unkindest cut, or who invented scalping", in *The William and Mary Quarterly*, n° 3, pp. 451-72.
- BIA, Bureau of Indian Affairs [<http://www.bia.gov>] Consultation June 2010.
- DELORIA, Philip (1998), *Playing Indian*, New Haven: Yale University Press.
- HOFFMAN, Mary (1991), *Amazing Grace*, New York: Dial.
- INAC, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada [<http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca>] Consultation June 2010.
- KIMMELMAN, Michael (2007), "In Germany, wild for Winnetou" [online], *New York Times* [<http://www.nytimes.com>] Consultation June 2010.
- KRINSKY, Carol (1999), "Karl May's western novels and aspects of their continuing influence, *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* n° 2, pp. 53-72.
- LOPINTO, Noemi (2009), "Der Indianer" [online], *Utne reader* [<http://www.utne.com>] Consultation: June 2010.
- PIN, Isabel (2006), *When I grow up I will win the Nobel peace prize*, New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux.
- REESE, Debbie (1998), "Mom, look! It's George, and he's a TV Indian", in *Horn Book*, n° 5, pp. 636-43.
- (2010), email correspondence with author, 26 June.
- SLAPIN, Beverly and Doris SEALE (1998), *Through Indian eyes: The Native experience in books for children*, Los Angeles: American Indian Studies Center, University of California.
- SLEGGERS, Liesbet (2002), *Kevin spends the night*, La Jolla: Kane/Miller.
- TRACHTENBERG, Alan (2002), "Singing Hiawatha: Longfellow's hybrid myth of America", in *Yale Review*, n° 1, pp. 1-19.

