

# “I” Is Not for Indian

## • Keep 'em Reading •

Grades  
K-2,3-6

by | Gwynne Spencer

### Breaking the Stereotypes of Native Americans in Books for Children

I grew up in Pennsylvania where Indians were always in the past tense. They all used to wear war bonnets, they used to live in tipis or wigwams or longhouses, and they used to collect scalps by sneaking up in their deerskin moccasins; they all carried tomahawks and traded with wampum. On Carol Hurst's Web site, she describes how in an East Coast school she's telling the kids she had just come from working with Indian children in North Dakota. They thought she was making this up and said, "There aren't any more Indians. We killed them all."

Students are often exposed to representations of Native Americans as barbaric, primitive pagans who must be subjugated, tamed, or exterminated or as wise, old, buckskin clad war-bonneted long gone chiefs. The distressing tenacity of Indian stereotypes haunts American children's books, especially in conjunction with Thanksgiving Day, which is considered a day of mourning for many descendants of First Americans who recall how early encounters with invading Europeans and the tribal gifts of food or friendship were rewarded with land theft, cultural destruction, forced assimilation, purposeful genocide.

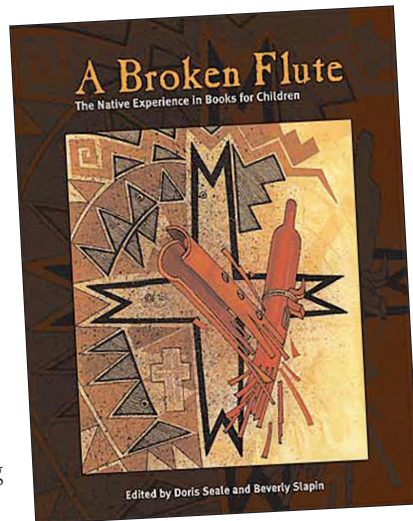
To help keep hurtful and damaging titles from further becoming part of library collections, books are thoughtfully reviewed by Oyate's Beverly Slapin and Doris Seale in *Broken Flute* and *Through Indian Eyes*. Both books list the most

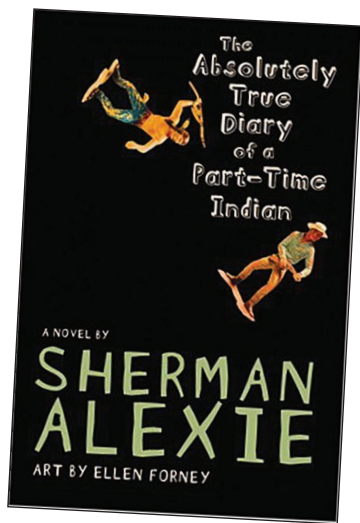
egregious examples and exactly what is wrong with them from the Indian point of view, regardless of author's intent. They also offer lists of recommended titles.

If you've watched Disney's *Peter Pan*, if you grew up in the fifties and remember Princess Summerfallwinterspring or Chief Thunderthud from *Howdy Doody Time* you probably also learned from *Curious George Learns the Alphabet*, "t is for tomahawk and tipi." In *Alligators All Around* by Maurice Sendak, you learned, "I is for imitating Indians." Kids are often admonished to stop being "wild Indians" when they are a bit rambunctious. All these are hurtful for the Indian child.

At risk of sounding like overzealous sore-heads, critics of contemporary children's books are on the lookout for titles that portray Indians as all being alike, or even worse, titles that make it sound like there are no more Indians. Highly offensive are those titles by non-Indians who co-opt sacred native stories and recast them in Eurocentric ways. An Indian teaching on a reservation drew the analogy for me: how would you like it if an anti-Christian author did a counting book, "Jesus 1-12" in wretched rhyme with derogatory cartoons?

Thoughtful critics make the point that sacred stories are not public property. Coyote stories are only to be told during certain times of the year. Some stories were never told in mixed-gender audiences. Some tales are only meant for adults, and were never told to children. All those strictures are lost when the stories are stolen and published as if they were in public domain. Most recently, a spate of "boarding school" survival stories by Anglos have flooded into classrooms, letting non-Indians tell the tales, as if the survivors had no voices of their own.





One reliable way to differentiate titles worthy of purchase from those that are is by choosing those that win accolades. A solid resource for informed purchasing is the American Indian Library Association, founded in 1979, whose members are individuals

and institutions interested in the development of programs to improve Indian library, cultural, and informational services in school, public, and research libraries on reservations. Their American Indian Youth Literature Awards identify and honor the very best children's books by and about American Indians. In 2008, the chosen titles were:

- *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie
- *Counting Coup: Becoming a Crow Chief on the Reservation and Beyond* by Joseph Medicine Crow
- *Crossing Bok Chitto: A Choctaw Tale of Friendship and Freedom* by Tim Tingle, illustrated by Jeanne Rorex Bridge

Another prestigious award you can trust is the Michael Lacapa Spirit Prize, awarded by the Northern Arizona Book Festival which features titles that “celebrate the peoples, cultures, and natural landscapes of the American Southwest.” Lacapa (Apache-Tewa-Hopi) was a children's book illustrator-writer who worked with the Apache tribe in developing multicultural educational curriculum for Native school-age children and often used storytelling as a teaching tool. He also articulately argued for the cultural sovereignty of Native American stories. The 2008 Lacapa Spirit Prize goes to *Johonaa'ei: Bringer of Dawn* by Veronica Tsinajinnie, illustrated by Ryan Singer.

*Oyate.org*, a nonprofit organization, provides visitors to their Web site with critical evaluation of books and curricula with Indian themes. Their staff conducts “Teaching Respect for Native Peoples” workshops and provides a small resource center with a reference library. Most importantly, they post extensive reviews on their Web site of exemplary titles that provide honest and desirable depictions of Indian lifeways and

stories. *Oyate* also sells children's, young adult, and teacher books and related materials, with an emphasis on writing and illustration by Native people.

Debbie Reese (Nambe Pueblo) offers a wide range of critical research and academically oriented resources at [www.nah.uiuc.edu/faculty-Reese.htm](http://www.nah.uiuc.edu/faculty-Reese.htm) and her blog at [americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com](http://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com)

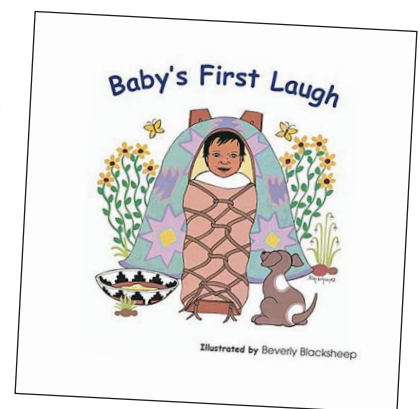
Cynthia Leititch-Smith offers extensive articles and lists and recommends authors and illustrators like Shonto W. Begay, David Beyer (Cree), Jeanne Rorex Bridges, Joseph Bruchac, Yvonne Wakim Dennis (Cherokee), Anthony Chee Emerson (Navajo), Louise Erdrich, Joy Harjo, George Littlechild (Plains Cree), Devon A. Mihesuah, Simon Ortiz (Acoma), Marcie R. Rendon, LaVera Rose, Gayle Ross, Hendle Rumbaut, Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve, Virginia Stroud (Cherokee-Creek), Tim Tingle, Luci Tapahonso (Diné), and Richard Van Camp (Dogrib). Go to [www.CynthiaLeitichSmith.com](http://www.CynthiaLeitichSmith.com).

## Resources

Here are just a few titles recently released and favorably reviewed:

### Books for Younger Readers and Babies

- *Baby's First Laugh* by Jessie Eve Ruffenbach. Salina Bookshelf, 2003.
- *Buffalo Song* by Joseph Bruchac (Abenaki). Lee and Low Books, 2008.
- *Children of the USA* by Maya Ajmera, Yvonne Wakim Dennis, and Cynthia Pon. Charlesbridge, 2008.
- *Crossing Bok Chitto: A Choctaw Tale of Friendship and Freedom* by Tim Tingle (Choctaw). Cinco Puntos Press, 2006.
- *The Girl Who Helped Thunder and Other Native American Folktales* by James Bruchac, Joseph Bruchac, and Stefano Vitale. Sterling Publishing, 2008.
- *Johonaa'ei: Bringer of Dawn* by Veronica Tsinajinnie. Salina Bookshelf, 2007.



## Keep 'em Reading

- *Muskrat Will be Swimming* by Cheryl Savageau (Abenaki-French Canadian), featuring a Seneca traditional story retold by Joseph Bruchac (Abenaki). Reissue by Tilbury House, 2006.
- *Niwechihaw/I Help* by Caitlin Dale Nicholson and Leona Morin-Neilson (Cree). Groundwood Books, 2008.
- *A Welcome Song for Baby* by Richard Van Camp (Dogrib First Nations). Orca Books, 2007.
- *When the Shadbush Blooms* by Carla Messinger and Susan Katz. Tricycle Press, 2007.
- *When Turtle Grew Feathers* by Tim Tingle. August House, 2007.
- *Three Little Sheep* by Seraphine Yazzie (Diné) and Ryan Huna Smith (Chemehuevi/ Diné). Salina Bookshelf, 2006.

### Books for Older Readers

- *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie. Little, Brown and Company, 2007.
- *Counting Coup: Becoming a Crow Chief on the Reservation and Beyond* by Joseph Medicine Crow. National Geographic, 2006.
- *Game of Silence* by Louise Erdrich (Ojibwe). HarperCollins, 2006.
- *Hidden Roots* by Joseph Bruchac (Abenaki). Scholastic, 2006.
- *Geronimo* by Joseph Bruchac (Abenaki). Scholastic, 2006.
- *Slash* by Jeannette Armstrong (Okanagan). Theytus Books, 2007.
- *Wabi: A Hero's Tale* by Joseph Bruchac (Abenaki). Puffin, 2007.

### Resource Books

- *American Indian Themes in Young Adult Literature* by Paulette Molin (Ojibwe). Scarecrow Press, 2005.
- *Broken Flute: The Native Experience in Books for Children* by Beverly Slapin and Doris Seale. Alta Mira Press, 2006.
- *Do All Indians Live in Tipis? Questions and Answers from the National Museum of the American Indian*. Collins, 2007.
- *Native Americans Today: Resources and Activities for Educators Grades 4–8* by Arlene

Hirschfelder and Yvonne Beamer. Teacher Ideas Press, 2000.

- *Through Indian Eyes: The Native Experience in Books for Children* by Beverly Slapin and Doris Seale. University of California Indian Studies, 1998.

### Web Sites

- [americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com](http://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com)
- [www.CynthiaLeitichSmith.com](http://www.CynthiaLeitichSmith.com)
- [www.NAZbookfest.com/lacapa.htm](http://www.NAZbookfest.com/lacapa.htm)
- [Salinabookshelf.com](http://Salinabookshelf.com)
- [aila.library.sd.gov/](http://aila.library.sd.gov/)
- [www.oyate.org/catalog/](http://www.oyate.org/catalog/)
- [carolhurst.com/subjects/nativeamericans.html](http://carolhurst.com/subjects/nativeamericans.html)
- [www.nativewiki.org/Storytellers%3A\\_Native\\_American\\_Authors\\_Online](http://www.nativewiki.org/Storytellers%3A_Native_American_Authors_Online)
- [www.hanksville.org/NAresources/](http://www.hanksville.org/NAresources/)
- [jan.ucc.nau.edu/~jar/AIE/index.html](http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~jar/AIE/index.html)
- [library.sd.gov/forlibrarians/native/index.htm](http://library.sd.gov/forlibrarians/native/index.htm)
- [www.u.arizona.edu/~ecubbins/useful.html](http://www.u.arizona.edu/~ecubbins/useful.html)

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