



Considerations for Selecting and Assessing American Indian Resources

This document is adapted from *Choosing Good Books: Guidelines and Commentary on Assessing Indians in Children's Literature* (2006) by Gregory O. Gagnon, and the *American-Indian Internet Search Checklist* by the National Museum of the American Indian.

- **What is the context of the resource?** Is the resource tribal specific or is it just generic Indian? Some authors not only identify the cultural setting of the book but explain where they got the information. Generally, those that are tribal specific are better, but beware a book that says it is based on Navajo culture but has illustrations that show tipis and men with eagle feather headdresses. The Navajo did not have these in pre-reservation times and certainly do not feature them today.
- **Are Indians presented as if they no longer exist?** Does the author's narrative say in so many words, "Indians used to _____?" Naturally, some resources will not convey an impression one way or another but one of the truly important truths that should inform resource selection and presentation is that American Indians are very much alive and contemporary. As said by a student, "We don't always wear beads and feathers and live in tipis but we are alive and well."
- **Is the book condescending about Indian lifestyles whether contemporary or in the past?** Are the Indians presented as superstitious, relentlessly concerned with ecosystems, and do they "believe" that animals have spirits? Are the descriptive words loaded?
- **Does the book distort history?** This is a really difficult measure to consider because it is hard for even those who teach Indian Studies. Often authors will present Indians as ruthless savages who kill women and children and massacre settlers---without indicating that the Americans were ruthless as well. Of course, one should watch out for the "Dances With Wolves" syndrome which has the evil cavalry laying waste to the entire West while hounding the peaceful, cheerful, and humane Lakota. **Watch for balance of presentation as you would with any history.**
- **Is it "good" Indians help the Whites and "bad" Indians fight them?** Of course one can read James Fenimore Cooper and Zane Grey but there needs to be some anecdotal evidence presented if these authors are chosen for literary reasons despite their biases. **A good resource presents the facts of conflict, and these facts are rarely so easily evaluated.** One thinks of the "Narratives of America" series by Alan Eckert as a reasonable approach.
- **Are there stereotypes?** A dead giveaway is if "all" Indians behave in a certain way.
- **Watch for tokenism!** If the resource has a non-Indian context, do Indians appear as just a browner version of the other characters? Quite a few elementary school books came out in the sixties and seventies that demonstrated diversity by just changing the color of characters from earlier books.
- **Does I stand for Indian?** In other words, **are Indians just presented as objects** in alphabet books...A is for Apple, I is for Indian and so on. Indians are people and should be presented as people.
- **Are norms ethnocentric?** Are Indians foils for describing flaws in American society? For instance, are ecological, generous Indians contrasted with environment destroying, selfish non-Indians with the obvious moral of the story being that "we" should act more like Indians? Do Indians reflect an emphasis

on individualism? For instance, does a girl character yearn to be a boy and do all of the things that boys do? This would not be appropriate if the story has a pre-reservation setting, but it is appropriate for an Indian girl to be a feminist today.

- **Are the women and children real people?** Are the fathers real people? Is the main character a chief's child?
- **What is the author's background for writing a book about Indians?** What about the illustrator? It is a lot easier to find out these things today because most authors have web pages as do many of the illustrators. Also, does the author tell you what sources were used to verify the context of the resource?
- **Does the spoken vocabulary of the resource sound reasonable or do Indians talk in a stilted manner?**
- **What preparation have you made for selecting resources?** There are some reviews available for books. Sometimes the *Hornbook* has reviews, *Choice Magazine* might review non-fiction books, web pages can be used, and there are several books that assess Indians in children's literature. *A Broken Flute* edited by Doris Seale and Beverly Slapin, *American Indian Stereotypes in the World of Children* by Arlene Hirschfelder, et. al, and *Native Americans in Children's Literature* by Jon Stott have numerous evaluations of individual books. Note: reviews are not necessarily right. There are references that are available for teachers/adults as well.
- **Would you be embarrassed to read the book you selected to Indian children and their parents?**

Of course these guidelines do not guarantee that you will select the best resource but they will help you prepare readers for the books they are going to read. Reading is a participatory activity so readers need to learn to judge too. One of my students indicated that she dealt with books that were less than correct with the understanding that readers have more than one book. One book does not ruin a student's understanding of Indians as long as there are many good ones too.

Additional Considerations

- What is the **age level** of the students or audience you will be using the resource with? Remember that younger children revel in stereotypes and clear presentations of "good" and "bad." Just make sure that Indians are often well presented too.
- If resources present difficulties, are you ready to explain them the way you would when describing the presentations of "Poor White Trash" in *Huckleberry Finn*? Older children are capable of understanding imperfections in literature. **Books that present negative descriptions of people offer a good chance for discussion.**
- Eschew hypercriticism! **Don't come to the conclusion that all books with Indians in them must be discarded because they contain errors.** Sometimes critics get carried away and use impossible standards. Critics often have their own axes to grind and are not really concerned with whether a book about Indians is appealing to children.
- Sometimes critics do not pay attention to what the **intent of the resource** is so the resource gets panned for not being what the critic thinks it is trying to be.

- **Don't leave your esthetic standards behind.** Are the illustrations good? Are the characters rounded? Is the story interesting?

About the Author (at the time of publication)

Gregory O. Gagnon is an associate professor in Indian Studies at the University of North Dakota. His specialty is contemporary tribal government and federal policy and he is a consultant on governance and faculty development for several tribal colleges. He teams with Ellen Gagnon to offer Indians in Children's Literature as part of the Indian Studies program at UND. He was Vice President for Instructional Affairs at Oglala Lakota College for the better part of seventeen years before joining UND's faculty. He has conducted professional development workshops on Indian Studies for elementary, secondary, and college level teachers on reservations and for school systems in several states. He is an enrolled citizen of the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa.

Internet Research

The internet can sometimes be a good place to find information about American Indian topics. However, there are some important things to keep in mind when looking for resources and information about American Indians on the internet. Here are a few of them:

- Does the website have a **clear purpose**? Do **the contents relate** to the purpose?
- What **kinds of links** are on the website? Check to see if the links are mutual. It's hard to know for sure, but anyone can link to any other site. Just because a site links to a valid, respected site does not legitimize the information in the first site.
- Is it a **"living" site**? Look for contact info for the website builder. Check to see when the site was last updated. Sometimes, a website is built and then abandoned, which means there's no one keeping track of the information and it could be out of date.
- What is the **point-of-view** of the site—Native or non-Native? Info that comes from personal American Indian experiences and perspectives compared to information from a secondary source is an important factor in deciding how to use what you've found.
- What **kinds of images and icons** are on the site? If a site is about a specific region or tribe, make sure that the images relate to that region or tribe. For example, there should not be an image of a tipi on a site about the Seminole tribe, nor should there be a buffalo on a site about the Iroquois Confederacy.
- Who **"owns"** the site? Look for validity by checking if the site is run by a tribe or university or if it is a commercial (personal) site. **Check for "official" tribal sites.**
- **How does the site refer to Native Americans?** Is it very general or specific? It's always a **good sign if the site refers to people by specific tribal or community name.** For instance, Santa Clara Pueblo or Warm Springs Chiricahua Apache instead of "Indians of the southwest..." Also look for sites that refer to the names a tribe calls themselves, i.e. Dine or Lakota, instead of Navajo or Sioux.
- **Avoid websites that over-simplify or stereotype** Native American people, history, experiences, and spirituality. There are a lot of websites that simply focus on Native American topics in mystic and romantic ways. For instance, remember that while Native American cultures respect and honor the earth, Indian culture is about more than just the environment and nature.