

“Daddy, Today My Teacher...”
A Critical Look at Depictions of Native Peoples in Children’s and YA Literature
2017 Wisconsin State Reading Association

The letter (below) is drawn from stories Native people tell each other about things that happen to their kids. It is my effort to convey the content of my presentation for WSRA. Please share it. I invite everyone to study the materials at <http://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.net>. I created that site to provide teachers with resources that can help them develop lesson plans and evaluate children’s books. Questions? Please write to me at dreese.nambe@gmail.com

Dear Teacher,

After our daughter went to bed last night, my husband told me that when he picked her up at school today, she greeted him with “Daddy, today my teacher...”. We haven’t had a chance to talk with you about the experiences our daughter has had prior to this. Several times in her school years, something has happened that pains us because it is hurtful to her. In fact, it is harmful to other students, too.

See, she and I are tribal members (or citizens) of a sovereign Native Nation.

My husband isn’t Native. With her blue eyes and blonde hair, our daughter takes after him. Most people don’t know she is Native. Because of widespread images on TV and in books, most people think Native people have a certain look (high cheekbones, dark skin and hair) and that being Indian means we wear feathers and dance. Some think that if we don’t look like that, or don’t do those things, we aren’t “real” Indians!

In fact, we’re quite diverse in appearance, culture, language, history, and location!

The most important thing to know is that our diplomats made treaties with European and (later) American diplomats. Those treaties matter, today, in a great many ways. The primitive and nomadic imagery on TV, in children’s books, and in textbooks, too, is a disservice to the reality of who we were—and are—as citizens of one of the 567 federally recognized nations in the U.S. Actually, it is a disservice to all Americans. We all ought to know the full history because it impacts us today. Not knowing that history means misunderstanding what is happening at Standing Rock, and why laws like the Indian Child Welfare Act are so important to us.

Our daughter knows all about our Native Nation. Books and worksheets that say Native Americans were the “First Americans” seem inclusive but she knows that is an error. When she sees errors like that, she can’t really hear what you say after that, or concentrate on what you want her to learn. It is one reason Native kids don’t fare well in school. Other kids, meanwhile, take that as fact. When they’re older, they’ll have to unlearn that “fact” and others like it. Some may feel betrayed, or angry, or sad that they were taught something that isn’t true.

The same thing holds for most books about Christopher Columbus. And Thanksgiving. And pioneers. And our traditional clothing. And the significance of our names. And... well, you get the picture, right?

I imagine, as you read this letter, you feel overwhelmed and uncomfortable. You might feel defensive, too. And maybe, embarrassed. I completely understand why! I felt that way a lot, too, when I was teaching. But, it is important that we think of the children who come to you each day, to learn from you.

I know of resources to help you! Here are three:

1) *Tribal Nations and the United States: An Introduction*, published by the National Congress of American Indians is a terrific place to start. www.ncai.org/resources/ncai_publications/tribal-nations-and-the-united-states-an-introduction

2) *Lessons From Turtle Island: Native Curriculum in Early Childhood Classrooms* by Guy W. Jones and Sally Moomaw is excellent!

3) I’m a former schoolteacher and a former professor in American Indian Studies. I have shelves laden with materials that I use to evaluate books and materials. There are hundreds of posts about books and lesson plans at my website, American Indians in Children’s Literature. <http://www.americanindiansinchildrensliterature.net>

I’m willing to help. Write to me at dreese.nambe@gmail.com

Sincerely,
Debbie Reese, PhD
American Indians in Children’s Literature