




Dreamcatchers, Water Protectors, and the Question of Authenticity: Supporting Teachers in Choosing and Using Indigenous Children's Literature

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Abstract

Many early childhood teachers seek to promote diversity in their classrooms through the use of multicultural children's literature. While these efforts are well-intentioned, teachers may not be fully aware of the issues of culture potentially hidden within such books, nor may they have support in considering the authenticity of the texts they use. While these issues are pervasive within books representing all cultural groups, recent research by Indigenous scholars has highlighted the concerns and implications within Indigenous children's literature. This article is grounded within Indigenous ways of knowing to provide a helpful tool for supporting teachers as they seek to curate authentic Indigenous children's literature for classrooms. Resources presented within include a 3-step guide to choosing and using such books and a list of Indigenous titles recommended by members of Indigenous communities.

Keywords Indigenous · Children's literature · Diversity · Multicultural education · Authenticity · Picturebooks · Representation

Niigaanii, a first grade student, watches intently as his teacher reaches for the picturebook he has been eyeing atop the bookshelf all week. As she displays the cover to the class, the children become entranced by the playful images, the dancing colors, and the rich texture of the illustrations. As she begins to read, Niigaanii's heart, once bright and excited, starts to fall with each passing page. "I like all of those feathers!" Leah exclaims. "Those are pretty beads!" Owen echoes. "Wait a minute," Niigaanii thinks, "that's not what our dreamcatchers look like..."

In her seminal speech, Bishop (1990) shared that children's literature can serve as windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors, meaning that they can allow children to see into the world of others, to see their own identities reflected, and to step into the experiences of others. Yet, these opportunities are often limited; the children's picturebook industry

in North America has historically highlighted mainstream, Eurocentric characters while failing to provide representation for Black children, Indigenous children, and other children of color (Cooperative Children's Book Center, 2021). While data indicate that the total number of children's books written by diverse authors has steadily increased in recent years, the proportion of books written by and about marginalized groups remains starkly disproportionate to the overall number of children's books published. This disconnect has serious consequences for readers; contrary to Bishop's vision, the limited number of books available written primarily by non-Indigenous authors may instead serve as fun-house mirrors, blind spots, and curtains (Gultekin & May, 2019), thereby distorting cultural practices, providing limited insight into and/or omitting the essence of a culture, or shedding light on cultural practices that were never meant to be shared with an outside audience – phenomenon that are of particular concern for Indigenous communities.

Many well-intentioned teachers may hope to promote multiculturalism by reading multicultural children's literature to their students. More specifically, as social studies units on holidays, communities, and history highlight Indigenous groups and cultural practices, picturebooks of all kinds are often leveraged in the hopes of offering mirrors,

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windows, and doors to students. As two non-Indigenous former early childhood teachers and researchers at a Mid-Atlantic university, we truly enjoyed bringing these opportunities into the classroom ourselves. Over the years, however, we began to recognize the many issues of culture potentially hidden within such books, as well as the lack of support that teachers often have in considering the authenticity of the texts they use. Most importantly, we did not want students like Niigaanii, featured in the opening vignette, to ever experience fun-house mirrors, blind spots, or curtains (Gultekin & May, 2019) in what should be a safe and equitable classroom environment for all.

After reviewing a plethora of recent research by scholars who work closely with and/or identify as members of Indigenous communities (Hanson, 2016, 2020; Reder & Morra, 2016; Reese, 2018; Peterson & Robinson, 2020), we identified three fundamental questions: (1) as a non-Indigenous teacher, teacher educator, and researcher, what makes a piece of Indigenous children's literature "authentic"?, (2) how can teachers evaluate the authenticity of Indigenous children's literature?, and (3) what are the unique aspects of Indigenous children's literature that must be considered when choosing, using, and recommending Indigenous picturebooks? This article will support early childhood teachers in their own journeys of building their knowledge of authentic Indigenous children's literature, as well as offer resources for selecting pieces for classroom use respectfully based upon the recommendations of Indigenous scholars and knowledge keepers.

The Question of Authenticity

In their article on Indigenous children's literature, Shelley Stagg Peterson and Red Bear Robinson (2020) assert that the "cultural authenticity of picturebooks used in classrooms, and of the reader's interpretation of the literature, are both important to support children's development of strong cultural identities" (p. 1). At the heart of the matter, early childhood teachers are critical figures in supporting identity development (Brooker & Woodhead, 2008; Jelic, 2014). Culturally authentic picturebooks are therefore integral tools. But, what is cultural authenticity? Peterson and Robinson (2020) describe cultural authenticity as encompassing the cultural perspectives, values, and experiences of the individuals represented in texts. From this stance, and in alignment with Reese's (2018) description of what makes a quality story, cultural authenticity of texts must be evaluated by an insider. Yet, the question of what makes a picturebook authentic is vast and one that, from our experience, is not often asked by early childhood educators who may not have the luxury of researching texts evaluated to be "authentic" when under pressure to quickly select a book "on the fly"

for classroom use. Research conducted in partnership with Indigenous knowledge keepers, such as that of Peterson and Robinson (2020), reminds us of the importance of this pause, as well as the need for prioritizing authenticity. In the following section, the importance of authentic literature will be presented.

The Importance of Authentic Texts

The aforementioned issues within the field of multicultural literature have highlighted the need for authentic children's literature. As a result, advocates such as Corinne Duyvis have been inspired to foster critical literacy movements, such as the creation of the hashtag #OwnVoices that is used to highlight texts written by and about individuals from the culture being portrayed. In support of these movements, Reese, (2018) notes that "the quality of a story is improved when the person creating that story is an insider who knows what to share and how to share it with outsiders" (p. 390). In the previously mentioned study by Peterson and Robinson (2020), Anishnaabe Knowledge Keeper Red Bear Robinson serves as the insider, though he does so with an understanding that his knowledge is representative only of his unique Indigenous group and authenticity is thereby determined from this perspective. Nevertheless, all Indigenous texts "deserve to be read in the light of the cultures in which they are produced, and with due attention to their difference from Western texts, rather than from within the assumptions of Western culture and textual practices" (Bradford, 2007, p. 227).

Evaluating the Authenticity of Indigenous Texts

In 2016, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action spurred a project that sought to provide Canadian Indigenous children with the right to access authentic, high-quality texts that provide representation (Dupuis & Leatherdale, 2018). One outcome of the project is an annotated bibliography of Indigenous children's literature that the authors used to select 10 picturebooks for evaluation, all of which Red Bear considered to be culturally authentic. The books were categorized using Bradford's (2007) scheme, with contemporary realistic fiction and traditional narratives being the predominant genres. More specifically, the texts represented three main themes: (1) Non-Autobiographical/Biographical Narrative (intergenerational impact of residential schools), (2) Non-Autobiographical/Biographical Narrative (spiritual lessons based in nature), and (3) Autobiography and Biography (intergenerational impact of residential schools and spiritual lessons based in nature). Pervasive across all of the themes was the cultural focus on

relationships, including relationships to the land, to others, and across time.

During Red Bear's reading and evaluation of the picture-books, several concerns arose that exemplified Gultekin and May's (2019) aforementioned cautions against misrepresentative children's literature. For example, in the story *When We Were Alone* (Robertson, 2016), several misinterpretations were depicted by the non-Indigenous illustrator. Specifically, while dreamcatchers are traditionally made from natural materials, the girl in the story is seen with one made of plastic beads and commercialized string. In another instance, a blackbird or crow is included in an illustration in reference to children losing their native language while at a residential school. Traditionally, blackbirds and crows were symbols of animal tricksters that appeared when people deviated from their journey, thereby making its appearance on the page contradictory to the plot. In sum, while well-meaning, the non-Indigenous illustrator may have been unaware of the importance of these Indigenous knowledges and the misrepresentation of the symbols she included within that could therefore lead to points of confusion for Indigenous children.

Throughout the evaluation of the Indigenous texts, Red Bear offered critical insight into his evaluation of the elements of culturally authentic Indigenous stories. Though there were a multitude of Indigenous knowledges represented within, several cultural themes emerged from the text evaluations. For instance, Red Bear first shares that every aspect of nature has a related lesson that can be the potential focus of a story. Second, Indigenous stories of creation often include an animal trickster, typically one that is of importance to the local environment, who must create the world. Third, Indigenous stories may include the theme of introspection as a way of learning, with Indigenous knowledges affirming that all we need to know as human beings is already inside of us. Fourth, stories should accurately represent the interaction between Indigenous groups and government policies. Though recounting events that occurred as a result of this conflict may be traumatic, it is a part of the story that must be told to foster reconciliation and healing. Fifth, land is centered as a sacred setting within Indigenous stories; one must pay particular attention to the landscapes depicted within illustrations. Sixth, the selection of animals included within a story should be based upon native species. Horses, according to Red Bear, are usually not included in traditional Indigenous stories because they were not considered to be native to this continent, but rather were introduced to the Indigenous community by colonizers. Some Indigenous groups, however, believe that horses never went extinct within North America, but were rather protected by the Indigenous community, even as the governmental slaughter of horses became a targeted means of forced assimilation (Parks, 2020).

This last point particularly sheds light on the varied perspectives among Indigenous Knowledge Keepers that may arise when consulting on and evaluating the authenticity of children's literature. At the beginning of the piece, Red Bear prefaces his evaluations by explicitly stating that his knowledge may stand in contrast to others. Knowledge should therefore be considered unique to the Indigenous group itself, rather than be regarded as a blanket of commonalities or cultural norms laid across them. The insight that Red Bear provides throughout his evaluations therefore highlights the importance of these diverse Indigenous knowledges, not only to provide representation for Indigenous children in texts, but to ensure that these texts are high-quality and authentic stories as well.

Implications for Teachers

While the purpose of their study was to evaluate the cultural authenticity of Indigenous texts according to an Indigenous Knowledge Keeper, Peterson and Robinson (2020) assert that simply introducing children to culturally authentic texts is not enough. Rather, teachers must work to engage children with text experiences that build their appreciation for the richness inherent to Indigenous knowledges. Further, the authors acknowledge that although not every teacher can have an Indigenous Knowledge Keeper as a consistent part of their educational community, they can seek to join in partnerships with Indigenous scholars, educators, and community members to support Indigenous learning, as well as prioritize texts from Indigenous publishing houses in their region like the ones recommended within the article. While a non-Indigenous person's way of knowing may inhibit them from seeing the dangers of fun-house mirrors, blind spots, and curtains (Gultekin & May, 2019) present within texts, teachers can develop their funds of knowledge about Indigenous groups, thereby making informed decisions about selecting and evaluating Indigenous children's literature independently. Lastly, teachers can demonstrate support of reconciliation by acknowledging the harm that may come from promoting a mainstream, Eurocentric view of the world through children's literature. Instead, they can promote intercultural competence, understanding, and empathy among all students by engaging them with authentic Indigenous children's literature.

Cautions for Selecting Indigenous Literature

Red Bear Robinson situates himself as a member of the Anishnaabeg Bear Clan in Bawaating, the land of sparkling waters, present-day Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. While he provides the reader with his own unique insight into the world of Indigenous children's literature, teachers must be

aware of the aforementioned issue of “universal beliefs”; one Indigenous Knowledge Keeper’s perspective is not representative of the entire Indigenous community. Much like Ghaffar-Kucher’s (2014) work on the burden of representation in native research, Indigenous researchers, scholars, and community members should not be expected to be the voice for all. Thus, one article on authentic Indigenous children’s literature is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the major considerations to be taken into account when selecting authentic texts. Red Bear, as a co-researcher in this work, stresses the importance of teachers thinking locally, encouraging them to partner in kindness with Indigenous community members to learn from, honor, and best represent the Indigenous groups of relevance to their region. In this way, teachers can come to better understand these local groups and, over time, understand the nuances unique to them. Their communities, after all, may vary greatly from Red Bear’s Anishnaabeg Bear Clan.

Discussion

Cajete (1993), an Indigenous scholar, asserts that stories are the foundation for all human teaching and learning. To that end, storytelling is central to all aspects of Indigenous children’s literature (Peterson & Robinson, 2000). Yet, we must recognize that many within Indigenous communities have come to view books as dangerous. In her talk ‘Books Are Dangerous,’ Māori writer Patricia Grace contended four points of tension for Indigenous readers, including: (1) their failure to reinforce culture and identity, (2) the lack of representation that causes Indigenous individuals to cease to exist, (3) misrepresentation, and (4) negative messages and “othering” (Pihama, 2021). There is an urgent need, therefore, for authentic Indigenous children’s literature as it serves as a mode of representation that offers “the truth” (Smith, 2021, p. 39). Representative, authentic Indigenous children’s literature has the potential to be one of the new decolonizing tools Smith (2021) calls for, contributing to the decolonization of children’s literature and the honoring of Indigenous knowledges as truth. As Brayboy (2005) reminds us, “...our stories are our theories” (p. 426).

While selecting Indigenous children’s literature that offers authentic representation can be complex, research conducted in partnership with Indigenous knowledge keepers (e.g., Peterson & Robinson, 2020) highlights three tips that can support teachers in curating authentic Indigenous children’s literature for their classrooms (see Fig. 1). First, teachers can explore Indigenous publishers, particularly those from regions that they wish to represent. These publishers may not only feature local authors and illustrators, but are also likely to have books containing content that depicts events that are specific to the geographical area that they reside within.

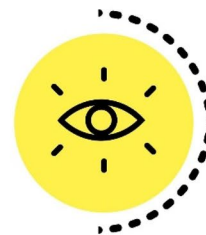
TIPS FOR CURATING AUTHENTIC INDIGENOUS CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

1

EXPLORE

Explore reputable Indigenous publishers, especially those from the region(s) you wish to represent. Examples include:

Theytus Books
Inhabit Media
Kegeдонce Press



2

PARTNER

Think of meaningful ways to partner with Indigenous community members. Is there an Indigenous author from your region that can be invited to do a school visit? Is there an Indigenous family who would like to do a read aloud of a book about their culture? Extend invitations for partnership to bring Indigenous voices into your classroom.



3

SEARCH

Search Indigenous databases and resources, especially those curated by Indigenous organizations, for books to curate. The following online resources can serve as great starting points:

American Indians in Children's Literature (AICL)

First Nations Development Institute

Okanagan College Library Children's Literature Resources

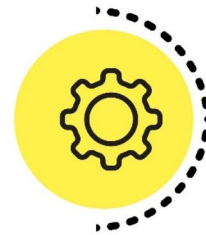


Fig. 1 Tips for curating authentic indigenous children’s literature

Since each region inherently possesses its own unique history, selecting books from these publishers serves to enhance authenticity.

Second, teachers can consider partnering with Indigenous community members. Local Indigenous authors may enjoy visiting classrooms or schools to share not only about their book, but about their Indigenous experience behind the story as well. Further, Indigenous family members within the school community may be interested in conducting a read aloud for their child’s class of an Indigenous book of their choice. Prompting students to consider

Table 1 Exemplary indigenous children’s literature

Choose	Connect	Use
<p><i>We Are Water Protectors</i> (2021), written by Carole Lindstrom and illustrated by Michaela Goade</p>	<p><i>Connection: Lindstrom is a member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Ojibwe Indians and Goade is from the Raven moiety and Kiks.ádi Clan from Sitka, Alaska</i></p> <p>This Caldecott Medal-winning book draws its inspiration from the Indigenous-led movements that rose in protest to contamination of water in North America. Poetic and symbolic, the text shows the importance of natural resources and our connection to the environment and each other. Water, as the book reminds us, is a universal that affects and connects us all</p>	<p>This book can invite classroom dialogue about the power of water. Ask students to consider:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How do you use water in your everyday life? 2. Imagine if you didn’t have access to clean water. What might life be like? 3. What are some ways that we can conserve, or protect, water? <p>Following discussion, students can create signs to promote water protection throughout their classroom and/or school</p>
<p><i>Fry Bread: A Native American Story</i> (2019), written by Kevin Noble Maillard and illustrated by Juana Martinez-Neal</p>	<p><i>Connection: Maillard is registered as Seminole Indian</i></p> <p>Winner of the 2020 Robert F. Silber Informational Book Medal, a 2020 American Indian Youth Literature Picture Book Honor Winner, and a National Public Radio (NPR) Best Book of 2019, <i>Fry Bread</i> presents a rich depiction of a modern Native American family. Using a staple food that many tribes throughout North America recognize, the story explores family, identity, and history in a flowing narrative that speaks to community amongst all indigenous groups in America</p>	<p>This book can inspire students to think about foods that are important to their own culture. Review the recipe for “Kevin’s Fry Bread” at the end of the book. Invite students to think of a food from their homes that they enjoy. Invite students to draw and write about the steps in making this food. At the end of the activity, compile the recipes they create into a class cookbook for all to enjoy</p>
<p><i>We Are Still Here!: Native American Truths Everyone Should Know</i> (2022), written by Traci Sorell and illustrated by Frane Lessac</p>	<p><i>Connection: Sorell is a Cherokee Nation Citizen</i></p> <p>A 2022 American Indian Youth Literature Picture Book Honor Book as well as a 2022 Robert F. Sibert Honor Book, <i>We Are Still Here</i> is the powerful portrayal of twelve Native American children presenting history and contemporary laws, policies, struggles, and victories that are part of the Native American experience</p>	<p>Intended for older children (Grade 2+), this book offers insight into the Native American experiences and challenges navigating the U.S. government. After reviewing governmental terms with students, ask students to consider:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Which laws/policies surprised you? 2. Which laws/policies would you advocate to change? Why? 3. What part of their experiences are you still wondering about today?
<p><i>We Are Grateful: Otsaliheliga</i> (2021), written by Traci Sorell and illustrated by Frane Lessac</p>	<p><i>Connection: Sorell was raised in the Cherokee Nation</i></p> <p>A 2019 Sibert Honor Book and an Orbis Pictus Honor Book, as well as listed on NPR’s Guide To 2018’s Great Reads, this picturebook shares the life experiences of a Cherokee family, exploring culture, language, and traditions. Readers are invited to view the world through the cultural lens of the Cherokee and consider the ways in which the Cherokee celebrate, reflect, and are grateful for all of their experiences, both big and small, that make up their lives</p>	<p>After reading the book aloud, create a class “Grateful Tree” that invites each student to draw or write about one experience, tradition, or person in their lives that they are grateful for. Assemble the leaves onto the class tree and discuss the experiences that each student shared</p>

Table 1 (continued)

Choose	Connect	Use
<p><i>Native American Stories for Kids: 12 Traditional Stories from Indigenous Tribes Across North America*</i> (2022), written by Tom Pecore Weso and illustrated by Gloria Félix</p> <p>*While not a true picturebook, this title is a valuable illustrated storybook anthology that can serve as a complimentary resource for other titles featured within this table</p>	<p><i>Connection: Tom Pecore Weso is a member of the Menominee tribe</i></p> <p>A compilation of tales from the rich Indigenous storytelling traditions, this book offers readers a collection of tales from across America's indigenous groups. From <i>The World of Ice of the Menominee</i> to <i>The Hero Named Sweet Medicine</i> of the Cheyenne to <i>Origin of the Flute</i> of the Lakota, these twelve stories offer a glimpse of the narratives that exist throughout the first peoples' nation</p>	<p>Create mini booklets with 12 pages for every student in the class. After reading aloud each tale, invite students to illustrate their favorite part of the story. At the end of several weeks, students will have their own booklet of Indigenous stories to share with others as they orally storytell Weso's tales</p>
<p><i>Finding My Dance</i> (2023), written by Ria Thundercloud and illustrated by Kaitia J. Fuller</p>	<p><i>Connection: Ria Thundercloud is a member Ho-Chunk Nation and a traditional, Ingenious dancer</i></p> <p>This beautifully illustrated book shares the memoir of a young Indigenous girl who learns to find herself and comfort in expressive Indigenous dances</p>	<p>Use this book to inspire a class dance party. Using a playlist of your choice, lead the class in a game of freeze dance, dancing when the music plays and freezing when the music stops. Encourage students to imagine Ria and her dance moves, testing new motions and movements throughout the party</p>
<p><i>Birdsong</i> (2019), written and illustrated by Julie Flett</p>	<p><i>Connection: Julie Flett is a Cree-Métis author, illustrator, and artist</i></p> <p><i>Birdsong</i> is a highly acclaimed book by Cree-Métis author, illustrator, and artist, Julie Flett. It has been awarded an American Indian Youth Literature Honor Title, a 2020 Boston Globe—Horn Book Award Honor Title for Picture Books, a Capital Choices 2020 selection, a NCSS-CBC Notable Social Studies 2020 Title, and a Chicago Public Library 'Best of the Best' Title. The story follows a young girl, new to her town, who befriends an older neighbor who shares her passion for nature and art. In a gently crafted narrative, the reader is able to follow the intergenerational friendship that blossoms through shared passions</p>	<p>After reading aloud this book to the class, upcycle paper tubes into bird-watching "binoculars" by gluing them together, hole punching the ends, and tying string for a strap. Encourage students to decorate their pretend binoculars using a variety of craft feathers, sticks, or other natural materials. Once dried, lead the class on a bird-watching walk, searching for different sizes, colors, and species of birds to foster an appreciation of nature</p>
<p><i>Still This Love Goes On</i> (2022), written by Buffy Saint-Marie and illustrated by Julie Flett</p>	<p><i>Connection: Buffy Saint-Marie is Piapot Cree and Julie Flett is Cree-Métis</i></p> <p>This incredibly illustrated text uses the song lyrics of songwriter Buffy Saint-Marie's song, <i>Still This Love Goes On</i>, to paint a picture of the Cree culture and worldview. Full of reflection and promise, the book offers readers a chance to connect to places and memories that are most dear to them</p>	<p>What does love look like? Does it look like a horse running through a field? Does it look like a flower blowing in the breeze? Does it look like a baby bird with its mama? After reading aloud this book to the class, offer students a large piece of paper and a variety of craft materials like paint, crayons, markers, and other supplies. Encourage students to use these supplies to create a picture showing what love looks like to them</p>

thoughtful questions they may have for the guest reader can be a great opportunity for not only an experience with authentic texts, but with authentic discussion as well.

Third, teachers can search for authentic Indigenous children's literature using databases curated by Indigenous organizations. Often, these books are meticulously vetted for positive representation, historical accuracy, and authenticity by the curators. Online databases such as those operated by American Indians in Children's Literature (Reese & Mendoza, 2023) at <https://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com/search/label/not%20recommended> will feature not only books that the organization recommends as authentic, but also books that they do not recommend using. Similarly, the First Nations Development Institute (2018) at https://www.firstnations.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Revised_Book_Insert_Web_Version_March_2018.pdf and the Okanagan College Library (2023) at <https://libguides.okanagan.bc.ca/IndigenousStudies/IndigenousChildrensLiterature#s-Ig-box-16403812> maintain reading lists containing high-quality Indigenous children's literature that teachers can explore.

Exemplary Texts

This manuscript would be remiss without offering at least a small, curated selection of the rich Indigenous texts available for readers. Over the years and in our many roles as teachers, researchers, sisters, daughters, and friends, we have been honored to connect with and learn from Indigenous individuals that have offered their personal suggestions for authentic children's literature. It is with gratitude and their permission that we are able to recommend several of these titles to our fellow educators. Below are eight; but they are only a small representation of the authentic narratives that can help all children explore and better understand the life stories and cultures of Indigenous peoples. Connections to the author's and/or illustrator's Indigenous identities are described in Table 1, as well as simple suggestions for using these texts with children.

Concluding Thoughts

The opening story of Niigaanii in his first grade classroom captures the internal conflict that can occur for Indigenous students who experience inauthentic texts within their classrooms, as well as implicitly sheds light upon the stereotypes about culture that his mainstream peers may be learning. As two non-Indigenous educators and researchers, we felt compelled by our own experiences to explore the question of authenticity in Indigenous children's literature, as well as to consider the ways that we can support fellow educators

in curating meaningful titles for their classrooms. The three tips for selecting authentic Indigenous children's literature offered in this article, including exploring reputable Indigenous publishers, partnering with Indigenous community members, and searching Indigenous-led databases, proved to be useful for us in fostering authenticity in our own classrooms. We hope that these tips, as well as the hand-selected titles described in this article, can guide others as we seek to honor the urgent call for cultural authenticity in Indigenous picturebooks (Peterson & Robinson, 2020).

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