

“We Are Still Here”: An Interview with Debbie Reese

Debbie Reese discusses with the guest editors her experiences providing guidance and criticism regarding depictions of Native people in children’s and young adult literature, as well as observing how the publishing industry has both improved some practices and remained in problematic stasis with others.

Debbie Reese is tribally enrolled at Nambe Pueblo, and her articles and book chapters on depictions of Native peoples in children’s and young adult books are used in education, library science, and English classrooms in universities in the United States and Canada. In an effort to provide teachers, parents, and librarians with easy access to her work, she launched her blog, *American Indians in Children’s Literature*, in 2006. She holds an MLIS from San Jose State and a PhD from the University of Illinois. A former schoolteacher and assistant professor, she conducts workshops and gives lectures on indigenizing children’s literature.



Debbie Reese

You have spent much of your career reviewing and providing guidance about the messages about Indigenous people in popular children’s and young adult books. What have you seen change over time with newer publications?

There is a long history of Native people objecting to depictions of Native people in stories told to children. The first was William Apess in *A Son of the Forest*, published in 1829 (<https://archive.org/details/sonofforestexper00inapes>). I’m one in a long line of Native people who push back on stereotyping and bias. In the early 1900s, Native parents in Chicago wrote to the Chicago schools to call attention to derogatory materials their children were

being asked to read. In the 1990s when I began this work, I learned by reading work by Native people like Mary Gloyne Byler and Doris Seale. Some writers and editors are reading this body of work, but too many aren’t reading it carefully.

One change in the last few years is characters who tell other characters to say “Native American” rather than Indian. A good example of this is in Tim Federle’s much-heralded *Better Nate Than Never*, which is about a gay teen. We need books like that but not ones that misrepresent us along the way. On page 264 of his book, the characters are at a Halloween parade in New York City:

Kids are starting to appear in costumes, on the street, looking just like the kids back home. The getups aren’t any better, and that really blows my mind; I’d think in New York the ghosts would be ghostier and the witches witchier. But I guess a kid’s Halloween costume is the same everywhere. A bunch of little boys, smaller than me, come toward us, dressed as a pack of cowboys.

“Look out for Indians,” Aunt Heidi says, and Freckles sort of fake-hits her and says, “Native Americans,” and we sort of laugh.

Assuming that Aunt Heidi accepts the suggestion, her revised line would be “Look out for Native Americans.” That is not an improvement. The suggestion tells us that the author, Federle, knows a little bit of the criticism but not with any depth. If there was depth to his understanding, he would

have Freckles say a lot more (assuming he kept the kids dressed as cowboys in that scene).

That scene indicates awareness, but not the depth necessary to do justice to all readers. I'm seeing a lot of that superficial kind of change which is, in the end, meaningless.

What has stayed the same?

The "big five" publishers continue to churn out books by white writers whose books about Native people are full of problems. Last year, Rae Carson's *Walk on Earth a Stranger* was published by HarperCollins. It is a gold rush story in which Carson depicts Indians as desecrating graves of white people who died along the trail. People in Native studies and Native people, generally speaking, know that white people robbed Native graves so much that it was necessary to enact a law to protect Native graves and facilitate the return of Native remains and artifacts to the nation they belong to. Carson's book was well received by people who seem ignorant of history. It was on the long list to win the National Book Award. I don't know if my review of her book played a role in the committee's selection of the short list, but her book didn't make it that far. Publishers put a lot of energy and money into marketing some books, like this one. With that support, Carson's book debuted on bestseller lists.

Out this year is *Sweet Home Alaska* by Carole Estby Dagg. Set in the 1930s, it is about a federal program through which white families could move to Palmer, Alaska. Throughout that book, the author refers to *Little House on the Prairie*, summoning imagery of courageous pioneers. In *Sweet Home Alaska*, the families are described as colonists. That is the word that Roosevelt used, too, for that program, but work done by Eve Tuck and others is pushing us to rethink words like that. Those families weren't colonists. They were settlers with funding from the federal government, to settle. To occupy. To take. To profit. *Little House on the Prairie* has derogatory and inaccurate information about Native people, but *Sweet Home Alaska* omits Native people completely. The only reference to Indigenous people is one line about how Will Rogers (who was, we know, Cherokee) asked for directions at an Eskimo village while he was in Alaska territory visiting Palmer. In the Author's Note, Dabb says she

decided to leave out any references to Native people because her sources were people who lived in Palmer and they never mentioned them. She also says she hopes readers will visit a museum there and learn about "the original colonists" of Palmer. Did Dabb use "colonists" to describe Indigenous people, knowingly? Or was she ignorant of what that use means to us? Either way, it doesn't matter. The end result of a book like that is not one that is helpful to Native peoples and what others ought to know about us.

Smaller publishers provide us with far better books, many of which are by Native writers. They, however, don't have the resources to promote those books. The result is that the good is overwhelmed by the bad, and the overall status quo (books with problematic content) remains intact. Cinco Puntos Press, for example, published Tim Tingle's *How I Became a Ghost* for middle grades and *House of Purple Cedar* for the young adult/adult market. Both of those books have received recognition within Native communities, and without, too, because they're terrific books, but their success is also due to word of mouth conversations among teachers and librarians who are looking for Native writers.

Among my favorite picture books is *Where Did You Get Your Moccasins*, by Bernelda Wheeler. Because of its show-and-tell format, it is perfect for preschool and early elementary classrooms. It, and Wheeler's *I Can't Have Bannock but the Beaver Has a Dam*, are both published by Pemmican Press. I'm also thrilled with the comic book and graphic novels Native writers are doing. Published online and in hard copy by Wacky Productions Unlimited, Arigon Starr's *Super Indian* is absolutely delightful. Roy Boney's *We Speak in Secret*, published by Indigenous Comics Collective (an imprint of Native Realities Press), about Cherokee code talkers, is gripping (<http://www.nativerealities.com/>). A leader in this area is Richard Van Camp, who has several graphic novels for young adults.

A must-read is Cynthia Leitich Smith. She's Muscogee Creek and one of the only Native writers published by one of the Big Five publishers. I read her *Rain Is Not My Indian Name* when it came out in 2001 but read it again last year. In that second reading of it, I noticed something that didn't catch my attention in 2001: Black Indians. It is one of the few books for children or young adults that engages

that, and she does it very well. Her *Indian Shoes* is for kids who are just starting to read on their own. That one is set in Chicago—one of the cities with a large Native population due to the government relocation programs. Her *Jingle Dancer* is the picture book I wish I had when my daughter danced for the first time. As we know, aunts, grandmas, cousins, everyone helps a child prepare for that first dance we do, no matter what community it is. From the regalia to the movements of the dance to the emotional preparation, it all matters, and it is all in *Jingle Dancer*. Last, I'll point to her Feral Pride series. There's an Osage character in it, but underlying the entire series is a powerful theme about othering and the damage that it does to a society.

How do you describe the responsibility of educators with regard to selecting and teaching books with Indigenous characters, themes, or about indigeneity?

Like anyone, teachers have favorite authors. Once in front of a classroom, however, they must set aside their affinity for a specific author so they can look critically at each book an author writes. That applies to both Native and non-Native writers. We want children to love reading but we also want them to read critically. Being able to do that means teaching them not to “fangirl” (or fanboy) writers, particularly because so many of the books by big writers in children's and young adult literature include microaggressions. Some examples: characters who sit “Indian style” or ones who use “low man on the totem pole” to refer to a character's lower status relative to others.

Many teachers might assume that choosing appropriate texts is more important if there are Indigenous students in their class. This means they may also assume the inverse—that issues raised in this interview are less important if the class doesn't include Indigenous students, or if the class is mainly white students. What do you make of these assumptions? How might teachers think differently about this?

You read about that a lot in discussions about children's literature. White librarians or teachers think that, because their school doesn't have Black

children, they don't need to buy or assign books about African Americans. I find that way of thinking troubling. As educators, we are preparing students to live in an increasingly diverse world. If we limit their reading to the words of white people, we're doing a disservice. We aren't, in short, doing our job. If we don't give them books by Native writers, they will grow up ignorant of our points of view on all manner of subjects.

From that space of ignorance, what will they do? Will they be the doctor whose office hands out stickers from the movie *Home* that say “Greetings, Native Savages!” (<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/new-brunswick/listuguj-discrimination-campbellton-hospital-1.3463910>)? Will they be the congressional representative who votes to cut educational funding for federally recognized tribes?

What do you wish teachers, especially teachers of grades 7–12, understood about selecting and teaching books with Indigenous characters or themes, or about indigeneity?

We are still here, living our lives as Native peoples of our respective nations, because our leaders fought to protect our homelands and ways of being. Our leaders weren't primitive people who “roamed” the earth. They were diplomats who entered into negotiations with leaders of European nations. Because of their work, we are here today, as sovereign nations who continue to select leaders who fight for our nations. I wish that teachers would do all they could to push against that monolithic “primitive” and “uncivilized” depiction that is so pervasive and damaging to our youth, but all youth, too, who play and learn alongside our children. Many of them grow up to be people of influence whose work is shaped by ignorance of who we were, and who we are.

What are some promising practices that you have seen teachers do to offset problematic depictions or messages about Indigenous peoples in longstanding classics or state-mandated readings?

Some teachers have written to me asking for help in getting their district to stop using classics. Most recently, a teacher in California wrote to ask for resources to show her colleagues that *Island of the Blue*

Dolphins ought not be taught. My response to those requests is to recommend, for example, Eric Gansworth's *If I Ever Get Out of Here* because it is set in more recent times (1970s) and is an outstanding book about Native people. In it, he touches on problematic narratives in school and society, but teachers in California need a work of historical fiction set in California that is about Native peoples.

In some places, teachers are forced into difficult positions. Tim Tingle (he's Choctaw) talks about visiting a school in Texas where he read from his outstanding book about the Trail of Tears, *How I Became a Ghost*. The teacher apologized to him, saying that she had to teach kids that Choctaws are extinct because that is the answer they'll need on a test she has to give them. That happened in Fairbanks, too, with McGraw Hill's basal reading series. Parents didn't want problematic books used, or if they had to be used, they wanted teachers to

point out what was wrong with the books. In theory that sounds good, but how does that work in practice? Can you imagine yourself being a fourth-grade teacher using a book with errors in it and trying to come up with a way to tell ten-year-olds what to do on the test? Would you say, "This book has a mistake in it. But on the test, you have to pretend that there isn't a mistake, because if you answer it correctly on the test, the machine that grades the tests will mark your answer as wrong"? These are high-stakes tests with ramifications for the children and their teachers. Putting them into this situation is unconscionable. Given the high stakes of these tests, I imagine many teachers will decide it is not in the children's or their own best interest to tell them the book has a mistake in it at all. In short, there is growing awareness, but institutionalized materials and institutionalized racism create obstacles to improvement. 

Castiglione's Advice to Young Women

(from *The Courtyer*, Book 3)

Naturalness of manner, and skilled in conversation
Weary him not with the tedious
She must use the brush to hide the art

Cultivate (constantly) that *vital quality of nonchalance*

One must preserve excellence in judgment
That she not be *spotted with any fault*,
Endowed with a natural civility
(Be it *favor of the stars*)

Fashioned by the whims of gods,
Distant from dullness and
Fairly noted as fair of face

Lady, *come just to certain limits but do not pass them*
Walk lovely, fragile light.

Response from a Young Woman

My natural talents demand exploration
And I will share them even if he finds me
Tedious. I shall use my brush to paint my destiny.

A cultivated existence is a false one.
And nonchalance is overrated, if not pretentious.
My faults make me exceptional, and I am
Endowed with a (wild) civility.
(Watch me as I sprint toward the knowing sun.)
The goddesses cheer me on,
Fairly noted.

I shall come just to certain limits and surpass them
Running wild in the bright light.

—Tracy Tensen
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Tracy Tensen (tensent@gilbert.k12.ia.us) teaches senior composition classes and directs a creative writers group at Gilbert High School. She was inspired to write these poems after reading about Baldassare Castiglione at an NEH Shakespearean seminar in 2015. She has been a member of NCTE since 1986.