

### A DEMAND FOR EXCELLENCE IN BOOKS FOR CHILDREN

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The purpose of this paper is to discuss, from a scholarly viewpoint, the differences between demanding excellence in books for children and censorship. Books written expressly for children are judged by the criteria for literary and artistic excellence. Books with minority characters are held to an additional set of criteria for excellence. In the case of *The Indian in the Cupboard* trilogy by Lynn Reid Banks, objections to her books by American Indians is supported by the aforementioned criteria and is not an example of censoring a book because someone may not like it. The paper outlines why the historical and linguistic inaccuracies and the negative stereotypes of the Iroquoian characters in these particular books make them unacceptable for either required reading in the grade schools or as a read-aloud book.

Those who uphold the right of children to freely explore literature interpret any questions about the appropriateness of a particular work as an intellectual assault. I am usually one of those people. However, while I believe that children can read whatever they want in their private time at home or school, books identified for study or focus in the classroom must be of exceptional quality. At a glance, this stem philosophy appears to contradict my own upbringing.

My parents took very seriously the educational responsibilities of raising five children and encouraged our interest in reading at young ages. True to their liberal nature, they never censored what we chose to check out from the local library. We would haul home stacks of books each week and I think my parents' only hope was that one day one of us would get a book returned on time. It never happened; huge library fines were commonplace and we eagerly awaited those days of forgiveness when all overdue books could be returned, no fines levied, no questions asked.

My parents believed that the family values that surrounded us as we grew up would withstand the assault of any contrary views from the rest of the world. I have raised my own children with a similar philosophy. I may shake my head as my daughter, Lizzy, reads one R. L. Stine horror story after another (how many babysitters will have to be terrorized before she chooses another author?) and I would probably have chosen anything other than *Helter Skelter* (Bugliosi, 1974) for my son, Andre, to read this year in senior English. But I believe that what my children read for pleasure is their own business. I know that they have been raised on good literature and have a firm foundation of liberal values and political beliefs. The countless hours we spent snuggled up on the couch as we shared the likes of *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel* (Burton, 1939), *The House at Pooh Corner* (Milne, 1928), *James and the Giant Peach* (Dahl, 1961), *Sounder* (Armstrong, 1969), and *Where the Red Fern Grows* (Rawls, 1961) can withstand the assault of formulaic plots and the graphic biographies of modern-day villains.

However, I must raise serious questions about the school use of a tremendously popular book that has been hailed as a modern classic in literature for children: *The Indian in the Cupboard* (Banks, 1980). This book was named by the *New York Times* as the best Novel of the Year in 1981, it won the 1984 Young Readers Choice Award of the Pacific Northwest Library Association, and it won the California Young Readers Medal in 1985. In spite of this acclaim, I recommend that neither this book nor the other two in the trilogy: *The Return of the Indian* (Banks, 1986) and *The Secret of the Indian* (Banks, 1989) be read aloud to children in the primary grades or used as required reading in the middle grades. Although that view may sound suspiciously like censorship, I believe it is instead a demand for quality in the literature that is shared with children in the schools.

School children are pretty much a captive audience and they tend to accept the words of their teachers and the apparent facts in books as truth. Of the thousands of books that are published for children each year, only a handful are chosen for classroom use. We must select carefully for our students; we must demand excellence.

What constitutes excellence in books for children is based on knowledge that has been thoughtfully collected over time and is widely known by teachers and librarians. Several of the professional societies: The

International Reading Association, The National Council of Teachers of English, The Children's Literature Association, and The National Association of Bilingual Education examine children's literature from a scholarly, critical viewpoint. Journals published by these organizations report literary trends and issues to constituents in the field. Any textbook used in a college children's literature class would list the definition of, and the criteria for, evaluating children's literature. This information is based on academic consensus, not transitory emotional opinion.

By definition, children's literature consists of books that are written specifically for children and meet high literary and artistic standards (Sutherland & Arbuthnot, 1986). The needs of children, their cognitive abilities, and their psychological and social development are taken into account when professionals make decisions about books they would like children to read. Strict standards for evaluating the literary elements are applied, no matter when a book is written or what kind of book it is. The setting, point-of-view, characters, plot, theme, and style are held to rigorous scrutiny. And for each of the nine genres of literature for children there are criteria for excellence. For example, *The Indian in the Cupboard* is Modern Fantasy; one criteria for excellence in that particular genre is that the author must use appropriate language for the characters (Norton, 1991). If a book is illustrated, then the elements of artistic style (mood, color, line, shape, texture, page arrangement, media, and style) are carefully judged. Attention is also given to the preferences of children when books are selected for them (Sutherland & Arbuthnot, 1986).

Books with minority characters are held to an additional set of criteria for excellence, regardless of the author or genre. Multicultural literature must meet the following criteria: the characters must be portrayed as unique individuals rather than cultural and/or racial representatives, the book must transcend stereotypes in appearance, behavior, and character traits, physical diversity must be evident, the culture must be accurately portrayed, if the story deals with factual information, it must be accurate, dialect cannot be presented as substandard English, and offensive and degrading vocabulary must be avoided (Norton, 1991).

Greenfield (1985) harshly criticizes authors who transmit racism and stereotypes in literature. She emphasizes that these books "constrain rather than encourage human development. To perpetuate these attitudes through the use of the written word constitutes a gross and arrogant misuse of talent and skill" (p. 19). Specifically, Byler (1977) states that the representation of American Indians in literature for children suffers from harmful stereotypes:

There are too many books featuring painted, whooping, befeathered Indians closing in on too many forts, maliciously attacking 'peaceful' settlers or simply leering menacingly from the background; too many books in which white benevolence is the only thing that saves the day for the incompetent childlike Indian; too many stories setting forth what is 'best' for American Indians (p. 28).

Some of the predominant representations of American Indians in literature for children show them to be savage, depraved, cruel, silent, inferior, childlike, and helpless (Herbst, 1977). Oftentimes, American Indian culture is portrayed as inferior to the white culture, valueless, quaint, and superficial. When the aforementioned criterias for literary and artistic excellence and the criteria for excellence in multicultural literature are applied to *The Indian in the Cupboard* trilogy, the books do not meet them.

*The Indian in the Cupboard* (Banks, 1980) is a modern fantasy story about a young English boy, Omri, who gets an old cupboard for his birthday. Any toys placed in this cupboard become real. The story is complicated when Omri decides to bring one of his toy Indians to life. The Indian, named Little Bear, is an Iroquoian transported through time from the 1700s. The other two books in the series describe further adventures of Omri, Little Bear, and the other toy characters who become real.

The misrepresentation of the Iroquoian language and culture in this series is unfortunate since the writing style is wonderful; Lynn Reid Banks is a gifted author and her skill in drawing readers into a captivating plot is noteworthy. The main character, Omri, is carefully developed, and the dominant theme of the story, that the responsibility for and to the life of another person is overwhelming, is powerful. The idea of the book, that toys can become real, will attract children of many ages. So it is regrettable that the negative, inaccurate depiction of the Iroquoian character stimulates serious questions about the use of the book either as required reading or as a read aloud book for young children. Had the American editors (it must be kept in mind that the author is British) made a few changes, this would be a book we could cherish.

Editors often make changes in text prior to publication. It would be a mistake to assume that books written for children are not changed from the time the manuscript is submitted to the time it is published. Chris Van Allsburg's book *The Z Was Zapped* (Van Allsburg, 1987), was originally entitled *The K Was Kidnapped* but

the editors would not allow a book for young children to have the word "kidnapped" in the title. Mem Fox originally wrote the book *Possum Magic* (Fox, 1983) with mice for the main characters and called it *Hush The Invisible Mouse*. Her editor decided that there were too many children's books about mice and wanted the story to be more Australian. So Hush became a possum and *Possum Magic* became an overnight sensation. Jose Aruego wanted to name one of the pigs in his books "Imelda" to reflect his negative views about Imelda Marcos (Aruego is from the Philippines) but his editor forbade it because she feared for his safety if he did. Todd Strasser selected an ex-Nazi uncle as a character in *Angel Dust Blues* (1979) until a wise editor had him rewrite the book without any Nazis since his ignorance of them was evident. Banks' editor should have asked for an accurate portrayal of the Indians in the trilogy.

To understand the intricacies of another culture can take years of intensive study. Since the *Indian in the Cupboard* trilogy is Modern Fantasy, lengthy, factual passages aren't required. But the bits of information that are presented in the story must be accurate. Lynn Reid Banks presents them as such when she refers to the library research that Omri, the main character, does to learn about a Little Bear, the Iroquoian Indian in the book:

The first thing he did was head for the school library for a book on Indians . . . he soon found one, under the section labeled 'Peoples of the World'-a book called *On The Trail of The Iroquois* (Banks, 1980, p. 50).

So what does library research actually reveal about the lives of the Iroquoian Indians? First of all, Iroquoian is a language spoken by several Northeastern tribes. The word "Iroquois" was the name given to these tribes by their enemies; it means "poisonous snakes." There were five nations within the Iroquois League and there were other leagues: the Huron League, the Erie League, and the Tobacco League. They referred to themselves by tribal and clan names (Riddington & Riddington, 1982).

Each tribe remained independent in the internal affairs of its own government and the League only acted in intertribal affairs. Peace chiefs, or sachems, were elected from each tribe and clan headwomen chose the candidates. Elder women could also sit on the tribal council.

The five tribes of the Iroquoian League-the Cayuga, the Mohawk, the Seneca, the Oneida, and the Onondaga-formed a formidable political union. It should be noted that our system of government is said to have been modeled after the Iroquoian Confederacy. The six foundations of the League were health, happiness, righteousness, justice, power, and strength of character (Riddington & Riddington, 1982). The League had three levels: the league itself, the nation, and the village. Obviously, the principles of democratic government, brotherhood in society, and equality of rights were more characteristic of many American Indian tribes than they were of white European societies from which most immigrants came (Oakley, 1991).

The longhouses in which Iroquoian people lived were a metaphor for the Iroquoian League; they sheltered families as the political structure sheltered the tribes. Symbolically, in the Iroquois Nation, the Eastern border was guarded by Mohawks and the Western boundary was guarded by Senecas. The tribal chiefs were symbolized by the posts of the longhouses, the clan leaders were the braces that supported the posts. The Onondagas were the keepers of the fire since they lived in the middle of the territory. By the late 1700s longhouses gave way to single family dwellings and became a thing of the past (Monroe & Williamson, 1993).

Women headed the families and lineage was traced through the mothers. When sons married they moved in with their wife's clan although men often helped raise the children of their sisters. When a sachem died, the elder woman of the clan would select new candidates from that lineage (Riddington & Riddington, 1982).

Since there was essentially no written language, oral skills were not only depended upon as the primary mode for communicating information and ideas, but valued highly because oration and storytelling were admired and respected. Sacred ceremonies accompanied both birth and death. Children took tribal names and their mothers chose another name for them from a list owned by the clan that was not currently being used by a living person.

The inaccurate portrayal of Little Bear, the Iroquoian in the book, and his stereotypical speech are not consistent with the criteria for quality in either Modern Fantasy literature or literature with minority characters: the characters must be portrayed as unique individuals rather than cultural and/or racial representatives, the book must transcend stereotypes in appearance, behavior, and character traits, physical diversity must be evident, the culture must be accurately portrayed, if the story deals with factual information, it must be accurate, dialect cannot be presented as substandard English, and offensive and degrading

vocabulary must be avoided (Norton, 1991).

The dress of Little Bear is an obvious inaccuracy. The author, Lynn Reid Banks, very likely had no input into either the few drawings in her books or the book jackets. She was upset that the artists did not draw the right kind of cupboard on the front of *The Indian in the Cupboard* (Banks, 1980). But it was the responsibility of her editor to make sure the artist knew what he or she was doing. Little Bear, since he was a warrior, would have worn his hair in a roach, not braids. He would not have worn a headband with feathers, although he may have worn a cap with feathers. His moccasins would have reflected his tribe and would have gathered around the ankle. The loin cloth should have been shorter and it was very unlikely that he ever wore a vest. Trousers were not decorated with feathers. When Little Bear gets a wife (also Iroquoian, since they speak the same language) she wears a red dress. She should have worn either a leather dress or leather skirt and blouse or pullover.

Little Bear would not have become a chief simply because he was the son of a chief. He would have to have been nominated by an elder woman within his clan and then elected. He would not have painted turtles, beavers, or herons on a tipi, but symbols, and pictographs, and floral designs. Given the time period from which Little Bear came (vaguely, the 1700s) it is possible that Little Bear would not have traveled widely enough to have even known what a tipi was. Little Bear would have been used to a wide variety of food and would not have demanded only meat and corn.

Little Bear would not have called himself an Iroquois, which would have been insulting, but given a name that reflected his nation and clan. Simply because of distance, his enemies would likely be the Huron, not the Algonquin. When the baby is born to Little Bear and Bright Stars in *The Return of the Indian* (Banks, 1986), since it was a boy, he should have been dipped in water to make him strong and fearless and given a taste of animal fat to clean out his system and feed his guardian spirit. Little Bear would not have named the baby.

None of this information is difficult to find, most of it can be uncovered in one afternoon in the library. We must insist that authors depict cultures and history accurately. It is not an impossible task.

On the other hand, without a doubt, writing in dialect is one of the most difficult things any writer can attempt. For example, even author James Welch, himself a Blackfoot-Gros Ventre, chooses to represent culturally accurate thought patterns rather than attempt to use extensive dialect in his books.

Dialect is a stumbling block for many writers and to do it well requires either that one speak that particular dialect or research it painstakingly. To write a language that one has never spoken, very likely, never even heard, and furthermore is not written, may be impossible. Representing a language the way white people may think it sounds is not acceptable and using movies and television as linguistic models is a mistake.

Relying on the media for a language model is not viable. Little Bear ends up sounding exactly like every American Indian in old television shows and movies. He is described as "grunting" (Banks, 1980, p. 9) and "growling ferociously" (Banks, 1980, p. 10). Some examples of his speech from the books in the trilogy:

"You touch, I kill" (Banks, 1980, p. 10).

"Chief need wife" (Banks, 1980, p. 83).

"Want one beautiful" (Banks, 1980, p. 83).

"No good him get angry" (Banks, 1986, p. 78).

While the study of second language acquisition is extremely complicated linguists do know some basic principles that are universal, regardless of what the first or second languages are, that can be applied by authors (Towell & Hawkins, 1994). First of all, Little Bear would have used numerous gestures to accompany his speech and he would have used many Iroquoian words. First language transfers to the second language in lexicon. There is also phonological transfer; Little Bear would not have had such perfectly pronounced English unless he grew up in a bilingual longhouse. There would be syntactical transfer. His word order, the placement of parts of speech, is about perfect. Unless Little Bear learned to speak English as a child this would not be the case. There would be morphological transfer. Little Bear should conjugate verbs using Iroquois rules, he does not. There is also a universal order for the sequence in which grammatical structures are mastered (Towell & Hawkins, 1994).

Clearly, an author is challenged by representing the language of another culture accurately. However, the reason we cannot accept the inaccuracies in either the cultural and historic aspects of *The Indian in the*

*Cupboard* series, or the language of the American Indian characters, is because when this book is used in the classroom, either as a read aloud or as an assigned novel, it is endorsed by the teacher and believed by the children. The character, Little Bear, reinforces the American Indian stereotypes most children see in movies and on television. This book becomes one more bit of information that goes into the development of bias and prejudice that is soon accepted as fact. Children who have no personal experience with a particular cultural or ethnic group form their opinions from what they hear from adults, what they read, what they see on television and movies. By the time they may actually have firsthand experience that contradicts all this, it is too late, the "facts" are already in place and for humans, changing our world view is very difficult.

Because children have little choice in what books they may read, we must be scrupulous in our selections. Few of the books published for children make it into school libraries or classrooms, and those that do are chosen by adults. Even when children vote on books for children's choice awards, the books from which they choose are preselected. When children are given reading choices in their classrooms and libraries they are selecting from books chosen for them. The responsibility for teachers and librarians is awesome; we have tremendous power and we must not abuse it. If something is presented as factual, it must be accurate. Accuracy is not a criteria we can choose to overlook, even if much of the book is good, as is the case with *The Indian in the Cupboard*.

Obviously, most people write best when describing their own culture or ethnicity. As more African Americans, Asian Americans, and Hispanics have become well-known authors and illustrators of children's literature the variety and quality of works available with minority cultures and characters has increased dramatically. But there is still a shortage of American Indian authors who write and illustrate books for children. Furthermore, while there are a limited number of excellent books available for children that do have a native focus, few of these are Modern Fiction or Modern Fantasy. These genres, with their strong characterization and captivating story lines, would give young readers a view of the diversity of contemporary American Indian cultures.

Publishers are committed to publishing multicultural books for children. Unfortunately, in the absence of a predominance of American Indian authors, books written and/or illustrated from a non-native perspective will be published to keep up with the increasing demand. Works, like *The Indian in the Cupboard*, must be judged individually and carefully, as are all books used in classrooms, according to established literary and artistic criteria. Appropriate judgements and careful selection of reading material is not an attempt to censor, but rather, a commitment to excellence in books shared with young readers.

Because we cherish children, because we respect the authority they relegate to us, because we abhor the racial, ethnic, cultural, and gender stereotypes of the past, we cannot use books with children that are less than excellent.

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