

Book Reviews

Beverly Slapin and Doris Seale, eds. *Through Indian Eyes: The Native Experience in Books for Children*. Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1992. pp. 312. \$24.95.

Through Indian Eyes is published by a non-profit organization called *Oyate*, which means "the People" in Lakota/Dakota. This coalition is made up of Native and Métis elders, activists, educators, and writers who are concerned with the future of our younger generations. The Haudenosaunee among the Iroquois Confederacy write their laws as codes of behaviour to insure the well-being of their seven generations to come. Similarly, this volume is written for use by teachers, parents, and librarians to counter ignorant stereotypes in general and American racism in particular that targets Native Americans as inferior peoples with backward cultures. The collection contains over one hundred brief reviews of children's books as well as articles, checklists, and a recommended bibliography. There are nine wide-ranging essays on confronting the impact of stereotyping in children's poetry, art, and stories. Gender parity has been respected among the contributors. "Grandmother's wisdom" is well-represented in several essays, among them Beth Brant's optimistic "Grandmothers of a New World," as well as a book review of Beverly Hungry Wolf's (Blood/Blackfoot) popular *The Ways of My Grandmother* (1980), what the reviewer calls an antidote to earlier distortions of Native women and their traditions. Lenore Keeshig-Tobias's insightful essay on "Not Just for Entertainment" is endorsed by the editors as "cutting straight to the heart" of what their book is about, in response to "Indians as public property." Her essay protests "cultural theft" while Indian voices have been marginalized. A favourite in generic women's circles, the mixedblood author Paula Gunn Allen writes about Native women from a feminist track. Her poem "Kopis'taya (A Gathering of Spirits)" addresses the natural compared to abstract concepts of existence that spirit voices convey to Native women who listen. *Through Indian Eyes* contains fifteen poems and represents the work of four visual artists, including photos and a logo for the *Northwest Indian Women's Circle Conference*. My favourite is "Na-

tive Mother and Child" (from Akwesasne Notes/LNS). This multimedia production is a useful resource guide to Native American authors and publications, a support group roster, and a comprehensive listing of further information on the subject of Indian children's literature.

A storyteller in the Indian world is a friend and most likely a relative. S/he is an historian, a philosopher, a literary artist, and a dreamer. S/he tells stories for fellowship as well as chronicling, what anthros call oral traditions and oral history. Most importantly, storytelling is also about healing. A storyteller doesn't speak for all the people, but rather uses the art to share experiences as well as pass on the stories of our ancestors, which are sometimes called legends, parables, or creation stories. Native storytellers also speak in circles within circles, as a way of spinning a yarn or weaving a tapestry towards a visionary or (w)holistic truth. As the book's editors Beverly Slapin and Doris Seale (Métis) express it, words "weave a pattern . . . to know the heart of a people." Storytelling from a Native American perspective is "serious business," as William Guy Spittel notes.¹ In this storytelling vein, *Through Indian Eyes* is an exceptional collection of wisdom and magic as an indigenous ethos for a multicultural enterprise. It presents a counter-columbian initiative by foregrounding Native American experiences and perspectives. Slapin, one of the co-editors and the only non-Indian contributor, points out the mythos of Eurocentric heroics surrounding Christopher Columbus and observes that "Indians were named for a geographical mistake." This collection exemplifies "multicultural literature" from a subaltern vantage point. The editors note that Indians have used humour to resist Euro-American historical and cultural bias in a mode of survival. At the same time, Native Americans take pride in our cultural legacies as indigenous peoples and find moral conviction for decolonization in our shared Native American experience in solidarity with other disenfranchised and dispossessed peoples. The multicultural movement can be a vehicle for survival and preservation while living "in the belly of the beast." Among the contributors protesting the columbian celebration is the provocative Cherokee artist and international activist, Jimmie Durham with his poem "Columbus Day," reinforced by Slapin's and Seale's essay, "The Bloody Trail of Columbus Day." Durham's book of poems *Columbus Day: Poems, Drawings* (1983), and his *Stories About American Indian Life and Death in the 1970s* are acclaimed by Seale in the section on book reviews.

Joseph Bruchac, a publisher and poet, who is also known for his successful organizing of the 1992 "Returning the Gift" Native writers' conference, contributes the poetic "Storytelling and the Sacred: On the Uses of Native American Stories." He writes that Indian storytelling is linked with the sacred, and therefore requires the right time of day to tell a particular story. This can find non-initiates in trouble if they don't respect these stipulations. He calls attention to the prob-

lems found among non-Indian storytellers about Indians, such as incorrect and misleading translations as well as non-Indian sociopsychological projections. As Michael Dorris puts it in his essay "I Is Not For Indian," "Sadly, children must learn not to trust uncritically." And the same can be said for uncritically thinking adults. I can't help but recall the difficult moments in a classroom, which I'm sure all Native peoples can relate to, when the history teacher of either gender, "taught" about our Indian ancestors being "primitive," leading to their murder or capture by the colonialist calvary, because we were in the way of European settlers who were encroaching on our homelands. We were children then, and we didn't know how to stand up to this anti-Indian denigration. The "white" teachers and counsellors seemed all powerful and full of authority, but we took it home with us and talked to our parents and elders. They told us that the teachers' attitudes were due to ignorance and racism, and that we should be careful around them. In this context, we should all challenge any socialization process that is not congruent with our personal experiences and knowledge, both emic and etic derived from our Native philosophy. "Indianess" may even be a state of mind at this stage in our American colonization, but we still have our values and ideals from our respective indigenous (meaning natural) cultural and metaphysical world views, and this is despite significant loss of land and language. We still know who we are and what we are about in contrast to the non-Indian world that destroys culture in the manic pursuit of power and greed that overcomes any kind of principle or ethic. And this is what our storytelling reminds us in keeping alive our oral traditions as we continue on the path to fulfilling our Native destinies from our visionary outlooks.

English-speaking poets and their poetry share metaphors and analogies that the editors note can be completely at odds with Native thought patterns. In these works, however, Native poets deconstruct the meaning and significance of the dominant language imposed upon them, in order to bring forth the voice and wisdom of their ancestors with their own indigenous experiences. Among the notable poets in this fine collection are Durham (already mentioned) in his poignantly sharp poetry; the gifted poet, novelist, and environmental activist, Linda Hogan with her poem, "Calling Myself Home"; the philosopher poet Chrystos, who writes a dialect of protest in her "Interview With a Social Worker"; Beth Brant with "Ride the Turtle's Back" on the continuity of Native womanhood; and Wendy Rose, the intriguing poet of *The Halfbreed Chronicles* (1985), who insists on Native rights to ancestral burial sites in her "Three Thousand Dollar Death Song." A favourite of mine is Diane Burns's "Sure You Can Ask Me a Personal Question," a poem that confronts Indian stereotypes head on. All the contributors to this book write on the basic themes of self-identification and self-expression affirming the genuine meaning of freedom of speech.

As an educational guidance tool, "How to Tell the Difference: A Checklist," by Slapin and Seale, with Rosemary Gonzales, provides examples of how to look at picture books for stereotypes, loaded words, tokenist distortions of history, lifestyles and dialogue, standards of success, and the role of women and elders. The discussion of texts considers impact on a child's self-image, and is followed by a resource list, selected bibliographies, contributors' notes, and an index. It is also important to note the main points of this text: that we must learn to pay attention to the roles that both Native women and elders play in our stories. We are advised to look for the authors' and artists' backgrounds in contributors' notes, to notice what is being included and what might be left out, in order to have some ideas of where writers are coming from, their bioregion and cultural orientations. A very constructive contribution in this vein is Rosemary Gonzales's essay, "Notes From An Indian Teacher."

The insightful questions posed in each book review were: Does this book tell the truth?; Does the author respect the people (s/he is writing about)?; Is there anything in this book that would embarrass or hurt a Native child?; Is there anything in this book that would foster stereotypical thinking in a non-Indian child (or adult)? Seale has no problem calling those obviously racially biased writers to task in some of these reviews. One particularly disgusting book is Harry W. Paiges's *Johnny Stands* (for grades 5-7, 1982), whose blatantly racist inferences negatively stereotype the Lakota. The editors provide book cover graphics with each review for easy identification. With the intent of providing useful information to teachers and parents in the selection of these books, the reviewer, co-editor Seale, assesses these popular works from her own Native perspectives as a woman, teacher, and parent, herself. Much of the commentary in the assessment of these reviews points out the problems and strengths in both Indian and non-Indian authors writing about Indian peoples and ideas. A wide range of books is reviewed, including an Indian food cookbook, a Native children's activity book for self-esteem building, and an anthology of American history and Indian legacies that enriched world culture. Seale reviews distinctive Native cultural stories, the Navajo and Iroquois among them, and a 1981 "treasure trove" titled *One Thousand Years of Storytelling*, co-authored by distinguished Indian scholars, Jeanette Henry and the late Rupert Costo. In addition, Seale discusses Jane B. Katz's "sensitively produced" *This Song Remember: Self-Portraits of Native Americans in the Arts* (1980), which includes the visual and performing arts, and literature for grades 8 and up. Seale also reviews third world Indian stories, like the Mayan, as well as stories for Spanish-speaking mestizo Indians.

Like every other reviewer, I have my pet peeves. I would have liked to have seen some things more fully discussed. The editors, for example, did not mention the early work of OHOYO, a federally funded

Women's Equal Education Act (WEEA) project that established a Native women's national organization as well as an Indian women's network nationwide, specifically to counter negative Indian stereotypes in children's literature and education in general. Another oversight is the relative lack of contributions from the Southwest. I was raised in this region, myself, and therefore I'm conscious of my Indian identity that is derived from this land and environment. Although there is an intertribal Navajo/Mohegan/Pequot among the contributors, Cení Myles, who writes of boarding schools and teacher prejudice against reservation life in her short story about pride, titled "Fiery Red," I am inclined to think that the general orientation of this enterprise could have been enhanced by more contributions from the desert peoples, and specifically from the mestizo (of Indian/Spanish mix to the South) with our tricultural experiences. This would counter the general impression I got that this area of representation was slighted in favour of the Métis (of Indian/French/etc. mix to the North) experiences and perspectives in literature.

Yet, this imbalance is not the case in terms of the varied selection of books that were reviewed, which consider most aspects of Native peoples throughout the Americas. Among those reviewed are colourful Indian names, such as Awaikta, Kahionhes, Cogisgi, and Hooty Croy. I was disappointed that there was not an essay dealing with Indian naming traditions throughout the birth and death cycle of a person's life. However, there is a review of "How Names Were Given" by Okanagan writer Jeannette Armstrong (1984), on Indian naming traditions in the context of a Coyote legend. In addition, I would have liked to have seen some children's contributions to the volume. Also, despite the book's attractive cover (a bronze on turquoise with black and white print colour scheme) and art work, the editors could have been more imaginative in their layout of book covers, and therefore eliminated a lot of wasted space in the textual format. One final note is regarding reference to the *American Indian Movement (AIM)*: it would be appropriate to indicate the movement chapters throughout the country, such as Arizona AIM, Colorado AIM, Corpus Christi AIM, Minneapolis AIM, San Francisco AIM, or South Dakota AIM, etc. in order to give due recognition and credit in the broader networking of this decentralized movement. I was pleased to see the editors' acknowledgement of AIM and *Women of All Red Nations*, among other Native American activist organizations, in recognition of their struggle for all indigenous peoples' rights.

I endorse this book in its intent to alert readers to the effect certain stories have on children's self-image and self-esteem. Non-Indian teachers and foster parents are made aware of Native children's Métis and mestizo/a experiences, as "mixed-bloods," which involves their *etic* knowledge that may be at odds with their *emic* awareness from bicultural and tricultural backgrounds. I was saddened one day in a public

school classroom to watch Yaqui students in an Arizona Indian education program make paper dolls and masks of how they would like to look. Every one of those children, without exception, depicted the same blond, blue-eyed, and fair-skinned image, despite what was familiar to them and their own physical reality. It is a difficult educational process to convince them to value themselves when competing with the Eurocentric norm that determines American "ideals" of beauty and intelligence. *Through Indian Eyes*, then, can be seen as a manifesto to challenge the denigration of Native beauty as well as the negation of our wisdom.

In any work of this nature, it is essential to retain the wisdom and magic of the Native American experiences and perspective as an indigenous and visionary world view that contradicts the superiority of "western civilization." At the same time we are seeking the universal truths among humans and non-human species, in order to live in harmony and peace with one another. This is not to say that non-Indians are incapable of writing sensitively and appropriately about Indians, but they are writing from a non-Indian vantage point that often leads to misunderstandings in language interpretations and cultural misappropriations. For their efforts, I applaud the editors of this fine collection, especially for including well-known Indian women and men as multicultural contributors, and for producing an important education tool. This is a significant collective contribution to children's literature and moves teacher/adult education in the right direction by calling for social reform in the decolonization of North American Native groups. This is what I believe the editors of *Through Indian Eyes* had in mind with this third edition, as it comes forth in the selected articles, poetry, reviews, and art. Finally, Seales' "Let Us Put Our Minds Together" is what I believe this creative enterprise is in essence about, working towards an indigenous ethos for empowerment and knowledge that can be passed on in children's literature to our future generations, and for the sake of our children among Indians and non-Indians in a multicultural environment. As one Choctaw poet, Marilou Awiakta, so eloquently puts it, we Indians are "dying back" in the circle we call life, since death leads to rebirth and resurrection within the light of a new day.

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NOTE

- ¹ Introduction to *Myths of the Iroquois* by E. A. Smith. Oswegen, Ontario: Iroqrafts, 1983. np.