

SPECIAL FEATURE

Whose Story? Indigenous Peoples in Fiction



A book reviewed in this issue of *Fiction Focus* raises the question of who has the right to tell stories. As educators, should we be concerned about this aspect of telling fictional stories?

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian by Sherman Alexie is a sobering representation of life on a large Indian reservation in the USA. Sherman Alexie, who writes from his own experience within the American Indian community, is well credentialed to tell this story. However, a writer not of American Indian background may not be credible, and, American Indian people may consider it offensive for an 'outsider' to write a story such as this.

Debbie Reese at the University of Illinois is a Nambe Pueblo Indian from New Mexico who writes a blog about American Indians as they appear in children's books. She believes that it is essential for American Indian children to see themselves as they really are, rather than as the often stereotyped, homogeneous group presented in many mainstream books; books written by well meaning people looking at American Indians from outside the culture. Her blog aims to bring books that present American Indians in their diversity, to the attention of teachers and librarians.

A more controversial aspect of her blog is her critical reviews of award-winning favourites of an earlier age such the *Little house* series by Laura Ingalls Wilder, which she finds unsatisfactory. Tanya Landman's ***Apache*** (Shortlisted for the 2008 Carnegie Medal and reviewed in *Fiction Focus*, Issue 1, 2008) is also given her 'Not Recommended' tag. Some blog readers find it hard to come to terms with her views and you can read a sample of negative reader responses following her 2007 blog post, *Jan Brett and Sherman Alexie*. Reese specifically notes the

authenticity of Sherman Alexie's ***The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian***, because of who he is, as a counterpoint to her criticism of the picture book, ***The Three Snow Bears***, by well respected writer/illustrator, Jan Brett. Two negative comments from readers of this post, and the ensuing discussion bring out the difficulties of any 'outsider' trying to write about a culture of which they are not a part.

Parallels within Australia

Our *Fiction Focus* reviewer, Deb Robins, points out that Sherman Alexie's story has resonances for young teenage Aboriginals in Australia, which led me to thinking about the range of fictional stories written about Australian Aboriginal people.

These range from stories by Aboriginal people such as Boori Monty Prior and Sally Morgan to Pat Lowe, Meme Macdonald and Leonie Norrington, with their close connections to Aboriginal people, and James Moloney, Jackie French and others who write about Aboriginal people from an 'outsider' perspective of friendship and concern. And what about older books by respected writers such as Nan Chauncy, Patricia Wrightson? How should I be evaluating the worth of these stories? Must the writer be part of the Aboriginal community? Is it sufficient that they have strong family or friendship links to Aboriginal people or have done extensive research?

I'm not aware of anyone in Australia who provides the advice that Debbie Reese does on behalf on Native Americans, and I can only read a story about Aboriginal people and say I think it is well written and worth discussing with students.

The most we all can do is to be sensitive when selecting reading materials for students. If you

live in an area with a high proportion of Aboriginal students it is important for the school (the Principal and/or the teacher librarian) to make contact with local community leaders to ensure that books in your library are not inadvertently offensive to that local community.

Jill Midolo, CMIS Evaluation

Further reading

Debbie Reese's blog, American Indians in Children's Literature

<http://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com>



Her reasons for writing the blog
www.alsc.ala.org/blog/?p=67



Books by and about American Indians

<http://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com/2009/04/books-by-and-about-american-indians.html>



Jan Brett and Sherman Alexie

<http://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com/2007/12/jan-brett-and-sherman-alexie.html>



'Not recommended' titles

<http://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com/search/label/not%20recommended>



Search the CMIS Resource Bank

<http://amlib.det.wa.edu.au/webquery.dii?v20=1&v22=20A>



Subject: Aboriginal Peoples – Fiction. Use the Phase of Development restrictor for Early and Late adolescence.

More about Australian Aboriginal writing...

The Australia Council has produced a series of guides to 'help do the right thing with Indigenous culture'. The writing guide, *Writing: protocols for producing Indigenous Australian writing* is designed to help all Australians better understand the use of Indigenous cultural material in written works such as novels, short stories and information books. One section of the guide deals with non-Indigenous writers writing about Indigenous themes.

A number of interesting case studies within the document provide examples of some of the positive aspects of writing about Indigenous peoples and issues. Two recent books, *The Secret River* by Kate Grenville and *Journey to the Stone Country* by Alex Miller, are used as examples of how both authors consulted with the Aboriginal communities at the centre of their stories and the positive outcomes that these consultations had to the veracity of their stories.

For the scope of this Australia Council work see:

www.australiacouncil.gov.au/news/news_items/guides_to_help_do_the_right_thing_with_indigenous_culture



Writing: protocols for producing Indigenous Australian writing

www.australiacouncil.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0009/19737/Writing_protocol_guide.pdf

