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Treatment of the American Indian in eight junior novels

Linda Ann Carlsen

University of Northern Iowa

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Abstract
American Indians have had to struggle for more than their physical survival. It is not only land that has been appropriated; it has been a fight to keep mind and soul together, for along with the United States Cavalry, missionaries, educators and the "Americanizers", have come the writers of books about Indians.
TREATMENT OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN
IN EIGHT JUNIOR NOVELS

A Research Paper
Presented to the
Faculty of the Library Science Department

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

Linda Ann Carlsen
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Read and approved by

Elizabeth Martin

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

American Indians have had to struggle for more than their physical survival. It is not only land that has been appropriated; it has been a fight to keep mind and soul together, for along with the United States Cavalry, missionaries, educators and the "Americanizers", have come the writers of books about Indians.

Down through the years the publishing industry has produced thousands of books about American Indians—a subject that fascinates many. Fact and fiction—it is not always possible to tell which is which—have rolled off the presses since "frontier" days. But American Indians in literature, today as in the past, are merely images projected by non-Indian writers.

Most minority groups in this country have been, and are still, largely ignored by the nation's major publishing houses—particularly in the field of children's books. American Indians, on the other hand, contend with a mass of material about themselves. If anything, there are too many children's books about American Indians.

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.

There are too many stories for very young children about little boys running around in feathers and headbands, wearing fringed buckskin clothing, moccasins and (especially) carrying little bows and arrows. The majority of these books deal with the unidentified past. The characters are from unidentified tribes and they are often not even afforded the courtesy of personal names. In fact, the only thing identifiable is the stereotyped image of the befeathered Indian.1

The preceding quotation is a strongly stated position of a spokesman that is quite critical of the treatment of the American Indian in children's literature.

Statement of the Problem

The focus of this research paper is the literary treatment of the American Indian in children's literature during two specified time periods. The expected findings will either: 1) support Byler's² assertion that, regardless of the date written, books on Indians foster "negative stereotypes" and "derogatory images"; or 2) that books written within the past four years display more sensitivity and social consciousness on the part of the author in writing about Indians.

As a media specialist, selecting that fiction, which deals with Indians in a fair and unprejudiced way, is important in augmenting your book collection. Also, the topic was chosen because this author teaches social studies, and this whole area of white injustice to the "Redman" is currently a "hot" discussion item. With this in mind, articles relating aspects of this subject sparked the author's interest further. The idea for the paper was originally conceived after reading the type of articles just mentioned.

Books used in this study were chosen from the University of Northern Iowa Youth Collection in the summer of 1974. The material selected was limited to four novels for junior high school readers written during or prior to the 1950's; and four books written for junior high school students from 1970-1974.

²Byler, loc. cit.
Novels used in this paper were gleaned from the card catalog in the youth collection. When going through the cards on American Indians, the only concern was with copyright date (the 1950's or 1970's) and whether a book was fiction. The name of the author, the title, and date was written on a slip of paper. After acquiring a dozen slips, the date was sorted into two groups according to date published. This was done in an attempt to balance out the number of books written in the 1950's with those of the 1970's. Then the titles taken from the card catalog were pulled from the shelf. In the eventuality a book was not available, slips were consulted and another title chosen. When finished, a collection of eight books had been assembled.

The time spans were included because one group of novels that had been written several years ago and another group published recently were desired. This time element, it was felt, would make it easier to generally conclude books of the earlier period did or did not treat Indians with less, equal or more sensitivity than works published more recently. The 1950's was chosen as an era far enough in the past to have had a different social and political climate than the 1970's, producing works with differing themes and points of view. The 1970's was designated as the other time span because "Redpower" is a current phenomena and books written as a result of this movement would express a social attitude of this decade.
Criteria established to evaluate the books selected were: 1) content promotes intergroup understanding. Intergroup understanding is defined as providing information, cultural attitudes, and human characteristics in such a way so as to enable one group in the population to gain empathy with another group. 2) Vocabulary gives positive reinforcement to the intergroup understanding and is, therefore, not debasing. 3) Portrayal of characters is realistic and unbiased.

By employing the above criteria in writing personal reviews, the determination of treatment of Indians in the eight selected books was subjective. Each of the three criteria was applied separately to the individual books and then a judgment was made from the point of view whether these standards were met. Then a decision was made as to the fair treatment of the Indian, taking each book in totality.

Delimitations

When undertaking a paper in which a person studies a problem and then draws conclusions, he is always subject to certain limitations.

The number of novels chosen for the study is a definite limiting factor. Because of the manageability, only eight works were chosen for this paper. Yet an attempt was made to draw general conclusions from the material read.

Subjectivity of the researcher is another limitation. The reviews and judgments about these books were made from
personal point of view.

Another area of limitation in writing from a white background with all the inborn ideas, attitudes, and cultural traits of the race. This impairs one's ability to be objective and knowledgeable about Indian customs and history.

Review of Related Literature

Material surveyed on the treatment of Indians in literature fell into two points of view.

The opinion of Mary Byler\(^3\) as quoted in the introduction of this paper represents one point of view. This is the opinion that most authors of non-Indian origin have no credentials which qualifies them to write books about the American Indian.

Some authors have little more qualification to write books than a plumber has to practice brain surgery.\(^4\)

Also, this line of thinking maintains the products of these non-qualified authors are degrading to the group of people that they are trying to depict. Careful selection of books written along with author credibility was another factor in the considerations of the first group of opinions. Dorothy Broderick\(^5\) stated "readers and media specialists should be discriminating in regard to books written on the

\(^3\) Byler, loc. cit.


subject of Indians." Rey Mickinoch agrees, suggesting you check out the author first. He believes, "you should avoid those works created by persons who live and love in New York."

Protection of basic freedoms guaranteed in the United States Constitution is the stand of the second category of opinion. Ferdinand Monjo is a vehement spokesman of this group. He asserts:

Should Blacks, only, write about Blacks; and Whites, only, write about Whites? Next, it may be women, only, can write about women.

No. Such a position is not only "undemocratic and unhealthy," it is also philistine. It is anti-art. It sets up walls at the very places where today's writers should be trying to build thoroughfares and bridges for communication. Bridges for interracial communication among others.

Whites and Blacks and Indians—people of all races—must be free to put one another in one another's fiction or non-fiction. Any time they want. Anyway they chose. Any way they can. So long as they're truthful, and try to write well. Everyone must continue to feel free, and to be free, to write about everything they want to write. And no one must ever dream of trying to limit this freedom.

Review of related literature found a large representation of both points of view by several other authors. All substantiating their findings and statement of opinion with supportive data.

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7Mickinoch, ibid.

Chapter 2

This section is devoted to an analysis of four novels written prior to or during the 1950's.

The Last of the Mohicans

The Last of the Mohicans⁹ was the earliest written of the selected novels.

The author, in great detail, tells of the breathtaking adventures encountered in the thick, sometimes forbidding forests of the Northeastern United States during the period of the French and Indian War.

Hawkeye, the fearless guide, leads inexperienced English travelers into this untamed country. Their trials and neverending brushes with danger, death and despair allow the story to never lack of reason to maintain the reader's interest. Chingachgock and Uncas, two Indians of the now virtually extinct Mohican tribe, are Hawkeye's trusted advisors and frequently share the label of "hero" with him.

As the book was assessed according to the established criteria, it is maintained that the content does promote intergroup understanding. An overview of the novel shows

that Cooper reveals the genuine humanness of the Indians, as well as the Whites. He displays to us that the values of honesty, deceit, cruelty, friendship, courage and compassion are found in all races. An example of this is found when, speaking of Uncas, Hawkeye says:

Winters and summers, nights and days, have we roved the wilderness in company, eating of the same dish, one sleeping while the other watched; and afore it shall be said that Uncas was taken to the torment, and I at hand. There is but a single Ruler of us all, whatever may be the color of the skin; and Him I call to witness, that before the Mohican boy shall perish for the want of a friend, good faith shall depart the 'arth, and 'Killdeer' become as harmless as the tooting weapon of the singer.\(^{10}\)

The above passage illustrates a single event, but conveys Cooper's quite fair treatment of the Indian in this book.

The vocabulary was not debasing. Statements, such as, "But you are a just man, for an Indian."\(^{11}\) are not uttered to create negative images. Other incidents of isolated dialogue that depict the American Indian as a savage are the actual terminology used in this particular period of history. They are not dwelled upon, exaggerated or eventually pieced together to put the Indian in a "bad light."

The characters were quite realistic as touched upon before in this analysis. The good and bad qualities of both Indians and Whites were exhibited through the use of the diverse spectrum of characters, whether it was the rascal

\(^{10}\) Cooper, op. cit., p. 332.

\(^{11}\) Cooper, op. cit., p. 40.
Renard Subtil, the very genteel Cora and Alice or the trusty Chingachgook.

Overall, this book treated Indians in a fair way. Even though it was written in 1826, the author showed great insight and sensitivity toward Indians. This could come as a result of Cooper's childhood in a wooded area of Pennsylvania with many Indians inhabiting the area.
Calico Captive

Calico Captive, written in 1957, is the story of the James Johnson family who was captured in an Indian raid on Charlestown, Vermont. They were taken from their home (after it was plundered), forced to march through the wilderness to the North, and sold to the French in Montreal, where they were held for ransom.

No apparent attempt was used to promote intergroup understanding in this novel. Although the author is a former English teacher and has written other juvenile books about Indians, nothing in the information about her background indicates the reason for the negative way in which she treats Indians in this book. Miriam summarizes the general atmosphere of the work when she thinks:

That philosophy was incomprehensible to Miriam. She could never feel anything but hatred for a redskin. She hated them more everyday of this miserable journey. She hated their unfathomable black eyes, their expressionless language. She shrank away from the food they offered for fear her fingers might touch theirs.13

The vocabulary gave nothing but negative images in regard to the Indians. Such terms as "redskin," "savage," "horrid Indian," and "Injuns," contributed to the stereotype of the Indian as something vile.

Character portrayal was not realistic and unbiased. One realized the sensory image that an Indian was a dirty,
smelly, insensitive, stupid creature that spent almost his entire life scowling, arguing in guttural tones or leering maliciously and lustfully at the white women folk. In fact, one got the impression that if one of these foul animals came near you, you might be better off killing yourself than to allow him to touch you, even in the most harmless way. As a whole, this book did not treat Indians fairly.
Waterless Mountain

Waterless Mountain, written in 1931, brings forth the tale of the Navaho Indians and their life in Northern Arizona. Younger Brother is the character around which the novel builds. Through the eyes of this eight year old, one gains perception into Navaho family life and the importance of their religion.

This novel promotes intergroup understanding in its very simplicity and gentle way of relating the saga of this Indian tribe. An attempt is made to relate a glimpse of what it is like to be a Navaho, not by description of special ceremonies and exciting events, but by the slow, peaceful way these people lived their day-to-day lives.

Vocabulary in this book, especially the names of people, leaves much to be desired. No character was given a specific first name and then a family name. Characters were referred to by such labels as Younger Brother, Elder Brother, Big Man, Baby Sister, and Grandchild. This was a strange technique and continues to make the reader uncomfortable throughout the entire book. This was a very negative factor and it created the impression of these Indians as non-people. Perhaps certain Indian tribes do refer to their members by such means, but it seems, for literary purposes, to be quite dehumanizing.

The character have no growth factor. No attempt was

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made to introduce the reader to each of the main characters as the story began, to identify us more with them, and feel as the story closes, that the reader knew them well. It appeared an incomplete way to build characterization. In totality, this book did acquaint the reader with the unfamiliar customs of the Navaho. Armer studied the Navaho customs at a reservation and as a first time author, told the story of this lesser written-about tribe of Indians.
Komantcia

Komantcia, written in 1958, tells of the cruel and warlike Comanches. Banished from Spain, Pedro Pavon, his brother Roberto and mother, Dona Delores, had just arrived at their uncle's sprawling rancho when Comanches tortured and murdered all adults and abducted the two Spanish brothers of genteel upbringing. The theme revolves around these two brothers as they live among the Indians.

The intergroup understanding that is promoted centers on the idea that the Comanches were a tribe of thieving and killing "Injuns." The following passage is an example of this:

His mother somehow evaded the figure standing over her and ran lightly through the door onto the patio, but the man overtook her before she had gone half a dozen steps. Grasping her by one arm, he brought his cudgel down upon her head in a short, sideways arc. As long as he lived, Pedro never forgot the sound of that blow. It reminded him of the squashing noise of a melon hurled against a stone wall. Quickly, working with incredible swiftness, the attacker tore off the scalp with one powerful sweep. He was attaching the bloody trophy to his girdle when Pedro reached him.16

No positive attributes were presented to offset the violence. The cruel and inhumane treatment of the horses and non-provoked massacre of white settlers was one's lasting memory of the Comanches.

The vocabulary did not create a negative image by excessive labelling and name calling. This lack of favor-


16Keith, ibid., p. 18
able picture was conjured up by collective use of vivid and very descriptive adjectives and verbs. For example:

Cooly, Belt Whip went to work. Pedro felt an excruciating pain, but not from the area of his stomach. Instead, the knife's razorlike edge cut across the tendon just below his right knee cap. It was over in half a minute. Belt Whip knew what he was doing. For a full week, Pedro was kept tied down by day but freed at night. Every morning after staking him down anew, Belt Whip would bend the knee back and forth enough to tear the healing tissue and open the wound afresh...17

This work left an overall depiction of Indians as little more than wild beasts. The author's portrayal of the Indian in this book was perhaps influenced by the fact that he originated from Oklahoma territory and since the discovery of oil on Indian lands, a prevalent white attitude is one of hatred.

17Keith, op. cit., p. 94.
Chapter 3

This section reviews the more recent books published about Indians.

The Ordeal of Running Standing:

_The Ordeal of Running Standing_, written in 1970, is the story of the Kiowa Indians in Oklahoma in the early part of this century. Thomas Fall, the author, is of Cherokee ancestry and grew up in western Oklahoma among many families of Plains Indians represented in the book. This might account for the insight and knowledge of this tribe of Indians.

This literary work provides persuasive insight of what it is like to be born a male Indian, have heard all the old legends of daring deeds, buffalo hunts and accounts of personal bravery against the white man that are part of your ancestry. Yet the world has changed. Indian tribes no longer move from one good camp to another; the buffalo hunt is no more and you must accept and follow the laws and customs of the white man.

Running Standing or Joe Standing, as he prefers to call himself, is caught between the old world and the new. Scouring all the old Indian beliefs and practices, such as

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the medicine man, interpreting animal calls, and their moral code, he takes on the trappings of the white man's society, such as, monogamous marriage, Christianity and adherence to the Jesus Road.

Joe's wife, Crosses-the-River, experiences the same struggle between two worlds, but has resigned herself to the fact that the whiteman's way is the most advantageous for the time in which they live, and therefore accepts it.

The story revolves around Joe's success in buying up the mineral rights to Indian lands. He gets involved in fraud, is pursued by the federal government, and finally is killed.

Content did an excellent job of conveying intergroup understanding. The author was superb in identifying the two worlds beckoning to Joe and yet exhibiting how torn he was between the two. This included really simulating, for the reader, the anguish to be born with values of a time now past, realizing this displaced position, yet finding it difficult, awkward, and even impossible to accept a life style that you have been reared to despise.

The use of vocabulary along with characterization enhanced the personal attachment of the reader to the story. The choice of words gave a keen perception into the emotions and deeds of the people. Realism was, indeed, one of the qualities used to build the characters. This book was quite successful in treating the Indians fairly.
A Stranger and Afraid

A Stranger and Afraid, written in 1972, unravels the life of the Pueblo Indians of the Southwestern United States. The book is based on actual records of the expeditions of Coronado in the 1500's.

Sopete and his younger brother Zabe, members of the Wichita tribe, had been taken prisoners by the Pueblos and treated much as servants. Suddenly, word arrives that the Spanish are approaching. Sopete is given to Coronado as a guide and stays on top of the action as the Spanish come under the guise of friendship, discover great storehouses of gold, and set out to kill and destroy the Pueblo cliff-dwellers.

Intergroup understanding of the Pueblo Indians and the Spanish is sought. The author is well known for her Indian stories, and in this one, reveals her mastery of sensitivity to the human condition. Aspects of enslavement of one tribe by another and eventually to the Spanish is done in a way that the motives and sentiments of both groups are apparent. The author, Betty Baker, is noted for her interest in the past of the West and perhaps her study of Indian culture enables her to relate her detailed knowledge of tribal life to her readers.

The range of vocabulary is clear, concise, and con-
ducive to build positive reinforcement of the image of the Pueblo Indian. The only character that the author developed in depth is Sopete. We view the unfolding of this event in history through Sopete's eyes. This novel was quite acceptable in its treatment of the Indian.
Only Earth and Sky Last Forever

Only Earth and Sky Last Forever, written in 1972, was set in the Black Hills, and deals with the age old custom of courtship. Dark Elk is very much in love with Lashuka and must prove himself as a warrior to secure her grandmother's permission to marry. The novel revolves around the adventures he encounters to win his beloved—whether it is giving the grandmother forty ponies, catching an eagle and presenting Lashuka with eagle feathers, or holding his own in battle.

The content of the book contributed in an excellent manner to intergroup understanding. The story was related from Dark Elk's point of view and is quite insightful. He provides background information when he relates:

.....the Crows made a big thing of horse stealing, whereas we did it only when we needed the horses. We and the Cheyennes thought of ourselves as warriors above everything else, and I think most people will agree we were. Long ago, before they had guns, the Cheyennes were a peaceable people and others took advantage of them so when they got guns they vowed to be more warlike than anyone else, and they succeeded.

Vocabulary and characterization are inseparable. They are delightful. Benchley, in the preface of the book states his dialogue is written in such a way so as to avoid the "heap big paloface" fixation. This could be partially attributed to previous experience and success in writing juvenile books about Indians. The efforts put forth by the

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21 Benchley, ibid., p. 118.
author to make the characters human beings that just happen to be Indians was successful. As one reads, an awareness that the characters were Indians returned, but one readily identified with their laughter and tears.

Following is an illustration of why the writing style made it very easy to relate with:

Lashuka led her off, looking back over her shoulder at me with a glance that spoke thanks and compassion and--I liked to believe--love, and I went off to find a place to lie down. As they moved into the darkness I heard the old lady saying:

.....rudest young man I've ever seen. Leaves me to the soldiers hoping I'll be killed, then comes back and has the gall to try and tell me about battles. When I was his age I'd been in more battles than.....I wrapped my blanket around my head, and lay down to sleep. It had, as I told the old lady earlier, been a long day.22

Overall, this particular book did an excellent job of giving an insight into Indian life.

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22Benchley, loc. cit.
The Spirit of Cochise

The Spirit of Cochise, written in 1972, is really "up-town," "tell it like it is" Indian story time.

Joe Murdock, an Apache who just happens to have been an Army Sergeant, returns to his San Pedro reservation. He hated the swamps of Viet Nam, but he despises the Indian Agent and the exorbitant prices at the general store even more. At first, he resorts to brute force to vent his hostility toward the whole situation. As the story progresses, Joe, aided by the Deputy Agent, realizes he can really help his people if he does so in a legal, conventional way. He is successful in earning benefits for his people and gains the respect of even the elders of the tribe.

The book, by all established criteria, would be an excellent addition to a collection. Content feeds on now-ness! What is life like today on an Indian reservation? The reader is shocked at several of the archaic and rather ridiculous practices of the United States government.

Intergroup understanding was promoted 100 per cent. Elliott Arnold's previous experience as an author of juvenile fiction about Indians and on the staff of the American Indian made him skillful in writing yet another book. Viewing life on a reservation today, with the mass unemployment and food shortages, was quite an eye opener. One could hardly believe

people really live like that. And one also asks the question, why doesn't Washington do something?

Vocabulary and character portrayal are inconspicuous because all elements of the book are woven so well together. The Joe Murdock that arrives home from Nam with a chip on his shoulder and immediately wants to wreck the general store, so enraptures you that you almost wish he would succeed in busting the system.
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The cries of discrimination and prejudice by Black Americans had barely been stilled; the women's right groups were experiencing partial success in obliterating sexism from textbooks; thus, the stage was set for the publishing houses to find themselves besieged by spokesmen for the American Indians reiterating the demands and complaints of the two groups that preceded them.

This topic was of special intrigue to me because it was current, recent journal articles had been informative and aroused my interest, and I wanted to assess this matter for my own satisfaction.

Concerning the first purpose of this paper, to determine whether books written about Indians do foster "derogatory images" and "negative stereotypes," books were found that supported this contention. **Calico Captive** and **Lomantcia** were such books. Works that portray the positive end of the spectrum were **A Stranger and Afraid** and **Only Earth and Sky Last Forever**. Thus, even though some books used in this research did support this charge, not all of them did so.

Taking books dealing with the subject of Indians written several years ago and then reviewing current material on the subject, I honestly anticipated that my reading
would result in a conclusion that books written many years ago were authored by sadistic and senseless racists; thus, making these works rather poor examples for students to read. Material produced on the steam from the very vocal protests of Indian groups would be excellent portrayals, I surmised. This preconception was confirmed. However, the distinction was not as great as was expected. Some books written in the earlier time period used in this study are excellent stories of Indians. The Last of the Mohicans is one of these stories, in that Indians were treated fairly. The use of vocabulary and names that can be tagged as "derogatory" in most of the books of this period weren't intentionally chosen to degrade the Indian. However, some books, Calico Captive, for instance, show the White point of view with no attempt to portray the motives and culture of the Indians involved.

The books published in the 1970's reflect the same attitudes of most of the earlier writing. In The Spirit of Cochise, the author shows the basically sensitive attitudes toward the Indians displayed by Cooper; the only difference noted between the selected time periods is in time placement of the characters. Most of the later authors, perhaps sensitized by the increasingly sympathetic media treatment of the Indian's plight, have chosen now, not long ago as the stage upon which their characters live. The Indian is seen, not as something past, but as someone very much a part of the present. Perhaps the lasting power of Cooper's work is
in that he too, writes of now, and this sense of "it is happening" is still conveyed, although the time is now past.

In the quotation at the introduction of this paper, Dyler strongly asserts that non-Indian writers do not possess the requisite background to write about Indians. She tends to have the view that "it takes an Indian to know an Indian." Clearly, the books discussed in this study reveal that such ethno-centric attitudes need not be true. Given knowledge of Indian culture and values, many writers have shown themselves capable of writing fairly and sensitively on what is, perhaps, a "it takes a human to know a human" basis. It is apparent from books discussed in this study, that some non-Indian writers are capable of sensitive treatment of Indians.
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