

SELECTING CHILDREN'S PICTURE BOOKS WITH POSITIVE Native American Fathers AND FATHER FIGURES

by Craig Heller, Bruce Cunningham & Hannah M. Heller

Introduction

This article explores images of Native American fathers and father figures in children's picture books. The term "Native American," which includes indigenous peoples of North America as well as Alaska Natives and Native Hawaiians, is used here. This term more accurately describes the selection of children's picture books presented than the term "American Indian," which generally refers to the indigenous population of the continental United States.

While small in number, Native Americans occupy a large place in the imagination of people around the world. The popularity of Native Americans as a school subject, along with the widespread ignorance about the diversity of Native American peoples among writers and illustrators, has led to many inaccurate portrayals. These kinds of books expose children to multiple and conflicting stereotypes of Native American men, which range from drunken, bloodthirsty savages to eloquent, ecologically correct noble savages. Additionally, there has been scant research or writing on how to evaluate authentic portrayals of Native American fathers (Mirande, 1991).

Currently, there are about 2.4 million Native Americans, or about .9 percent of the total population of the United States (United States Census Bureau, 2000). Native American groups challenge that figure as too low. This population encompasses more than 550 federally recognized tribes speaking more than 250 different languages. A number of other tribes are petitioning for federal recognition. The population is growing at an above average rate and is younger and poorer than the general population of the United States. Approximately half of all Native Americans live off reservation; consequently, Native American people are found in every state and in every major city.

Some authors attempt to understand this diversity by dividing Native Americans into regional groups such as the Eastern Woodlands, the Plains, and the Pacific Northwest. These are still large groupings, so it is more appropriate to think in terms of specific tribes such as the Abenaki, the Lakota, or the Makah. Even at this level, tribal membership is a contentious issue due to mixed heritages of individuals and to the different levels of blood quantum required for membership in different tribes. All of this is made more complex by the Indian pan-renaissance movement, in which Native Americans adopt practices of different tribes.

This article offers background information about Native American cultures and the role of fathers and father figures. Distinctive children's books are presented along with important guidelines for selecting and evaluating these books.

Historical Events

While there is great diversity among Native American people, they have in common many of the historical events resulting from contact with Euro-Americans (Williams & Ellison, 1996). At various times and to various degrees, Native American peoples have been dislocated from their traditional lands, forcibly removed to reservations, unintentionally and purposefully decimated by diseases, and subjected to genocide. At other times, families were forcibly assimilated with children placed in boarding schools or adopted by Euro-American families where they were forbidden to speak indigenous languages or practice indigenous religions. Tribes had treaties abrogated, reservations dissolved, land taken away, and tribal status terminated. For Native American men, these events severely disrupted their roles as fathers—when not taking away their lives, then taking away a way of life to pass on to their children.

Traditional Ways of Culture and Family

As a result of historical events, Native American families vary widely in structure and cultural style. Families can be thought of as fitting along a continuum from traditional, to neotraditional, to bicultural, to acculturated, to pan-renaissance orientations. Any one family may move along this continuum at different times in the family cycle (Joe & Malach, 1992). While there is a great diversity among Native American families, there are also several common features that relate to the role of the father. First, families tend to be extended, reaching across several generations, households, and a broad range of kin. Rather than the father being the sole male figure in a child's life, other men such as grandfathers and uncles may play significant roles in the child's spiritual instruction or discipline (Joe & Malach, 1992). Second, there tends to be a strong sense of community, or "other-directedness," in which the needs of others are put before the needs of the individual. Personal identity emerges from group membership (Coggins, Williams, & Radin, 1997). Consequently, fathers may discipline children by the use of affective means such as scolding and shaming to set the individual apart from the group (Abraham, Christopherson, & Kuehl, 1984). Third, the style of teaching and learning tends to be listening and patient observation, rather than trial and error, so that when children attempt something they will succeed. These aspects of family and community life confer to male elders considerable respect and esteem for the knowledge they have accumulated (Joe & Malach, 1992).

In the Present and Future

In the past 25 years there has been a resurgence of tribal sovereignty, which provides a renewed context for relationships between fathers and their children. Some of this resurgence comes from federal legislation in the areas of self-determination, education assistance, freedom of religion, health care, and child welfare; court decisions reaffirming tribal fishing, hunting, and water rights; and community development and income from the growth of casino gaming. These events have resulted in a measure of economic self-sufficiency for tribes and for families. Tribes have also used these resources to strengthen cultural identity through programs that promote parenting, education, health awareness, and traditional ceremonies.

One example of how the role of fathers has been reaffirmed from tradition comes from the *Seven Philosophies for a Native American Man* (White Bison, Inc., 2002). This guide instructs men, in their relationships with children, to spend time with them, to learn and listen, to teach the culture, to encourage education and sports, to converse with Elders for guidance, and to be a role model. Similar lessons are presented in the tradition of storytelling but adapted to current situations such as responsible single parenting (BrownEagle, 1992). One story tells of a young man of great power who confronts an Elder, only to be questioned as to whether he has the true strength to play with his children, to hold them gently, and to hold himself with dignity so that his children will learn from him. Research suggests that when Native American fathers follow this advice, their children experience greater success in school (Coggins, Williams, & Radin, 1997).

The Bibliography

Child-Rearing and Nurturing Activities

Eyvindson, Peter. *Old Enough*. Toronto: Pemmican Publications, 1986. Illus. by Wendy Wolsak. Grandfather-Father-Son.

A father wishes that his newborn son was old enough to fly a kite, walk on stilts, play baseball, build a snowman, go tobogganing, roll marbles, or ride a bike. Although the father likes to cuddle and hug his newborn son, he wants his son to grow quickly so they can enjoy recreational activities together. However, when the boy develops the skills and ability to participate in sports and recreational activities, the father is preoccupied with his career. Consequently, the father does not take time out of his busy schedule to enjoy the companionship of his son.

As the boy matures and becomes a man, the father is sad that he did not spend more time with his son when he was younger. The father eventually becomes a grandfather to a beautiful baby, which makes him very happy. The grandfather makes time to nurture, cuddle, and play with his grandson. The grandfather is determined to take advantage of this

new opportunity. He now considers himself “old enough” as a grandfather to find pleasure in things he and his son didn’t do when they were younger. In his younger years, he was more of an economic provider. Now as a grandfather, he is more involved in the nurturing that he regrets having missed in previous years.

The author provides no tribal affiliation or indication in the text that the family is Native American. The characters’ ethnicity comes through mainly in the detailed black-and-white illustrations of the grandfather, father, and son.

Occupational and Economic Activities

Hunter, Sally M. *Four Seasons of Corn*. Minneapolis: Lerner, 1997. Illus. with photos by Joe Allen. Grandfather-Grandson, Father-Son.

Russell, a seventh grader in St. Paul, Minnesota, leads a busy life. His heritage is a combination of Hochunk (Winnebago), Creek, and Seminole as well as French. Russell’s grandfather, his Choka, comes to visit from his reservation in the northeast corner of Nebraska.

Russell helps his grandparents to plant and harvest corn. His family and members of the tribe have harvested many different kinds of corn throughout their history. The author provides detailed descriptions of the different kinds of corn and their uses and features. Russell and his grandfather work together to grow corn and pray together for a successful harvest. They share stories and legends about corn. In late fall relatives and friends gather for a celebration of the harvest.

Grandfathers, grandmothers, fathers, mothers, and children are involved in growing and harvesting corn in preparation for the festival. Fathers and grandfathers have many roles as leaders. They provide for the family’s food, nurture the children, and make the festival enjoyable with the stories they tell and games they play with the children. The value of working together for success is greatly reinforced in family traditions.

Locker, Thomas. *The Land of Gray Wolf*. New York: Dial, 1991. Illus. by the author. Father-Son.

This book concerns a young Native American boy named Running Deer who is, for the first time, old enough to help the men with their jobs in the community.

Running Deer excitedly prepares the forest for spring, sets up camp, and hunts. His father, Gray Wolf, shares with him his fear that the white settlers are destroying the land. Together they prepare, with the rest of the community, for a war against the whites.

Gray Wolf dies during this war, and Running Deer needs to take over for his father. As they are relocated to a reservation, Running Deer survives by trapping animals and trading their fur. He teaches his children the skills he learned from his father.

The author ends this sad story with the message of hope that one day the people will return to their land and hear again the howl of the wolf during the night.

Running Deer’s father provides him with the skills and

the strength to function as an adult and to be able to survive on his own. Running Deer also bonds with the rest of the men and becomes a leader in the community.

McMillan, Bruce. **Salmon Summer**. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998. Illus. with photos by the author. Father-Son.

Alex, a nine-year-old Aleut boy, shares a special experience with his father. He is now old enough to help his father set the gill net for their fishing trip. Through bright and vivid photographs, the author demonstrates the many and varied aspects of the fishing experience. As they catch fish for their family, father and son share the joys of nature and the excitement of bringing home a large catch.

The steps in preparing the food are also demonstrated, as Alex shares food with his little brother. Father and son help one another and take leadership roles in providing for the family.

At the end of the book, a glossary provides definitions of different words related to fishing. The story offers insight into both the meaningful father-son relationship and the challenge of fishing.

Pruski, Jeffrey. **Bring Back the Deer**. San Diego: Harcourt, 1988. Illus. by Neil Waldman. Grandfather-Father-Son.

This beautifully illustrated book describes a young Indian boy's journey to hunt a deer for food. Following in the footsteps of his father and his grandfather, he remembers their wisdom and learns the ways of the forest.

The young boy reaches a rite of passage as he goes out hunting on his own for the first time. Although his journey is dangerous, he gains strength by drawing on his memories of his family.

Both the father and grandfather function as teachers and protectors as they tell him how to survive in the forest and succeed in hunting. The boy returns with great joy and feelings of accomplishment.

Steltzer, Ulli. **Building an Igloo**. New York: Henry Holt, 1981. Illus. with photos by the author. Father-Son.

The arduous task of building an igloo in the snow is the main subject of this story. Black-and-white photographs illustrate the difficulties and challenges of building a shelter for protection from severe cold weather. Toolkillkee, an Inuit boy in the Northern Arctic, is faced with this job. His father oversees the work and helps him with the door and the window. Once they finish their hard work, father and son relax in their new home, share special moments together, and plan to hunt the next day.

Although weather conditions are difficult, father and son manage to survive by helping one another. The bonding of father and son is essential to the survival and continuation of the family.

Recreational Activities

Mitchell, Barbara and Doney, Todd L. W. **Red Bird**. New York: Lothrop, 1996. Father-Daughter.

A young girl named Katie joins her family and other

members of the Nanticoke, an Algonquian tribe, for their annual powwow. It is with great excitement that Katie takes on her Indian name of Red Bird and packs the things she needs for this special gathering.

The father helps with the packing and drives the family to their meeting place. As they leave the noisy city for the beautiful country, Katie becomes Red Bird, and she is inspired by the beauty of the cornfields and the pine trees.

Activities include dancing, playing of drums, festive foods, merchandise for sale, storytelling, and spending special time together with other members of the tribe.

The fathers and grandfathers lead the music and dances, generating great enthusiasm for the annual festival. They encourage family togetherness as they put forth a major effort to plan a successful celebration.

Father Figures

Bruchac, Joseph and London, Jonathan. **Thirteen Moons on Turtle's Back: A Native American Year of Moons**. New York: Philomel, 1992. Illus. by Thomas Locker. Grandfather-Grandson.

A Native American boy named Sozap spends special time with his grandfather as they discuss the 13 Native American Moons. Time, for the 13 tribes depicted, is measured by the 13 moons, representing the 13 scales on a turtle's back and designating the passage of the seasons. The turtle's back functions not only as a calendar; it also reminds people that "all things are connected and we must try to live in balance."

As Sozap's grandfather shares the wisdom, values, and legends of the various tribes, Sozap realizes the significance of each moon, each season, and each historical event. Different animals and elements of nature play vital roles in the 13 different moons. For example, in the Second Moon (Potawatomi tradition) a mother bear and her cubs are given credit for saving the life of a small girl who was lost in the snow. In the fifth moon (Huron tradition) "Ju-ske-ha," the Sun, is honored for carrying winter away and allowing spring and summer to come. In the eighth moon, the Moon of Wild Rice, the Bear People and Thunder People share the gift of wild rice in a Menomonee tale.

Sozap bonds with his grandfather and begins his journey toward adulthood. He appreciates the balance of nature and will hopefully continue these values for the next generation.

Children of La Loche and Friends. **Byron Through the Seasons**. Saskatoon, Saskatchewan: Fifth House Ltd., 1990. Illus. by various children. Grandfather-Grandson.

This delightful picture book has text in both English and Ojibwe. The two languages are shown adjacent to the beautiful illustrations by Dene children.

Byron's grandfather comes to school to share stories and personal experiences about the seasons in La Loche. As the grandfather tells his stories, Byron dreams beautiful pictures of what happened. His mind is not in the school building,

as he is totally immersed in the customs and culture that are handed down through the generations. The children listen attentively as the grandfather tells about catching fish in the fall, pulling toboggans and making moccasins in the winter, cutting ice for the spring, cooking on an open fire and planting seeds in spring, and enjoying nature in the summer. As a grandfather, he is an economic provider as he plants and harvests food, and he is a recreational companion as he shares his stories and plays games with the children.

At the end of the story, there is a short article about the traditions and customs of the Dene people.

George, Jean Craighead. **Arctic Son**. New York: Hyperion, 1997. Illus. by Wendell Minor. Father Figure–Son.

This colorful book depicts life in the Arctic. The author explains that life in Alaska, near the Arctic Ocean and the North Pole, is very different from life anywhere else. The sun never shines in the winter, and the moon is not out in the summer. Since winters are severe, people who live there must work hard to find food and stay warm.

A young boy named Luke is given the Yup'ik name of Kupaaq by his father's friend Aalak. Aalak functions as a father figure as he nurtures Kupaaq. He trains Kupaaq to dig up the fish that are under the ice of the ocean. Aalak protects Kupaaq from the polar bears.

When spring comes, Alaaq and Kupaaq rejoice together as they go whaling. When winter returns, Kupaaq listens to stories of how his namesake (Alaaq's father) rescued hunters being carried out to sea on ice floes.

Kupaaq and Aalak share a special relationship as Kupaaq grows to become an adult and a leader of his community.

Lacapa, Kathleen and Lacapa, Michael. **Less Than Half, More Than Whole**. Flagstaff, Ariz.: Northland, 1996. o.p. Illus. by Michael Lacapa. Uncle-Nephew, Grandfather-Grandson.

Being a child with parents of mixed racial background can be a challenge when it comes to identity and self-image. When Tony and his friends see their reflections in the lake, they notice that Tony is in between races; he is not dark like Will nor light like Scott. Tony's brother and sister have a hard time explaining to him that being biracial does not make him "less than half," as his friends say. It is not until Tony sees his Tewa uncle and grandfather that he feels reassured. They show him that having a distinct skin color makes him special. They point out that although Tony's parents have different backgrounds, they are each special in their own ways. The grandfather shows Tony the different colors of Indian corn, noting its beauty because of its different colors.

After talking to his relatives, Tony realizes that rather than being less than half, he is more than whole. They function as father figures as they nurture and reassure Tony, encouraging him to have a more positive self-image.

Martinson, David. **Cheer Up Old Man**. Duluth, Minn.: Duluth Indian Education Advisory Committee, 1975. Illus.

by Vince Cody. Father Figure–Children.

This book concerns an older man who recalls the fun he had when he was younger. His love of the outdoors led him to activities such as running with the deer, swimming with the fish, and racing in a canoe. The young children cheer him up as they now engage in the fun outdoor activities that he once enjoyed. As a father figure in this Ojibwe community, the old man is loved by the children and respected as a wise man by the community. He often tells children stories about the past as they sit around the fire at the powwow. Passing down history and legends to the future generations cheers this man up as he realizes the importance of his life.

Peters, Russell. **Clambake: A Wampanoag Tradition**. Minneapolis: Lerner, 1992. Illus. with photos by John Madama. Grandfather-Grandson.

This story presents the life of Steven Peters, a Wampanoag from Plymouth, Massachusetts. Steven has a special relationship with his grandfather, Fast Turtle. Fast Turtle wants to keep traditions alive, so he passes them on to his children and to his grandchildren. Steven and his grandfather prepare for the "appanaug" clambake festival to celebrate a change in season or to honor an important person in the tribe.

Fast Turtle offers directions for preparing this ceremony. He and Steven walk along the water's edge and wade into the water to find special rocks, which they arrange in a circle. They gather special wood for the fire. The author shares the Wampanoag tradition of preserving the environment as he shows the Fast Turtle and Steven trying to keep the land clean and safe for future generations.

Colorful photographs show Steven sharing special times with his grandfather as he learns the ways of his tribe. The grandfather is an economic provider, using the land to feed the family. He also nurtures and provides recreation for Steven and his friends in the community.

Plain, Ferguson. **Eagle Feather**. Winnipeg: Pemmican Publications, 1989. Illus. by the author. Grandfather-Grandson.

This story is a memoir of a young Ojibwe boy who tells the reader about his wonderful *Mishoomis* (grandfather). Although his grandfather is no longer with him, the boy has fond memories of their special times together. He remembers the walks they took together when the grandfather would tell stories and legends from the past. The grandfather taught his grandson about healthy and unhealthy plants and medicines. The grandfather would remind his grandson that "everything shows its life."

When the grandfather is ill and near death, the grandson visits often and they continue to share stories, legends, and songs.

At the annual powwow festival, the grandson is awarded an eagle feather because he has made his grandfather so proud. Before he dies, *Mishoomis* gives him a poem of inspiration and encouragement, a reminder to appreciate the gifts of nature.

The grandfather has functioned like a father in nurturing

and educating his grandson. He also protects his grandson by showing him how to handle any dangers he encounters. Their relationship is truly amazing and an inspiration to all readers.

Plain, Ferguson. **Grandfather Drum**. Winnipeg: Pemmican Publications, 1962. Illus. by the author. Grandfather-Grandson.

The Ojibwe narrator shares a special story told by his grandfather. He remembers his grandfather's wisdom and the lessons he learns through the stories. The boy and his grandfather would chop wood together for the wood stove. Often, the grandfather would sit beside his wood stove with a hand drum and chant softly. He would teach his grandson the songs that were passed down through the generations. When hunting evil spirits, the grandfather played his drum in a special way. He had rules for his songs, and, with his special techniques, he was able to protect the village.

The grandson admires his grandfather as a wise man who provides protection, food, entertainment, and meaning in life. He knows that as he gets older he will also become a great leader to share traditions with his people.

Stroud, Virginia A. **Doesn't Fall Off His Horse**. Illus. by the author. New York: Dial, 1994. Great-grandfather-Great-granddaughter.

This story presents a special relationship between a Cherokee great-grandfather and his young great-granddaughter.


Saygie listens to many stories from her great-grandfather and yearns to hear more. He shares with her his Indian name, "Doesn't Fall Off His Horse," as he acts out a memorable scene from long ago. He asks her to remove the contents of an old trunk. Wrapped in a white sheet are a quiver and a leopard hide. He shares his experience of making a coup, a special war victory. He tells of how, on a raid against the Comanche, he managed to stay alive by holding tightly to his horse.

As he relives his memories, the older man demonstrates values and wise lessons from the past with his great-granddaughter. She, in turn, will be able to share these stories with future generations.

Waboose, Jan Bourdeau. **Morning on the Lake**. Toronto: Kids Can Press, 1997. Illus. by Karen Reczuch. Grandfather-Grandson.

Written in the first person, this book is a narrative of a young Ojibwe boy who spends a special day with his grandfather. Grandfather and grandson experience the outdoors as the grandfather leads the way. The boy seeks to emulate his grandfather; whatever the grandfather feels and does, the grandson interprets that he himself feels and will do the same. When they are in the canoe, they bond in moments of special silence.

The grandfather is a role model when they encounter different animals, and he demonstrates the safest ways to handle danger. The grandfather is very nurturing as he reassures and encourages his grandson that he doesn't need to

be afraid. When they climb a steep cliff together, the grandson is able to put aside his fears and fatigue and to enjoy the ecstasy and excitement of reaching the top. After an eagle flies onto the grandson, the grandfather tells him to be proud because the eagle is a sign of honor and wisdom. The grandfather serves as an educator when he shows his grandson how to handle nature and the stresses of daily living. This book underscores the importance of extended family in Native American cultures. 

See "Evaluating Children Books" chart on page 48

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Evaluating Children's Books

Many children's picture books contain inaccurate, stereotypical, and damaging portrayals of Native Americans. Several sources provide guidelines for evaluating books about Native Americans (Caldwell-Wood & Mitten, 1991; Slapin, Seale, & Gonzales, 1992).

AVOID

IN GENERAL:

- ABC books in which "E" is for Eskimo and "I" is for Indian
- Counting books in which Native Americans are objects to be counted, as in "10 Little Indians"
- Books that feature animals or Euro-American children dressing up and playing as Native Americans
- Books that show Native Americans as one-dimensional stereotypes such as savages, or overly romanticized as being in perfect harmony with their natural environment
- Language that uses loaded words like "savage," "squaw," and "warrior"

ILLUSTRATIONS:

- Show all Native Americans with the same exaggerated physical features and red-tinted skin
- Mix objects and designs from different Native American cultures
- Use props such as headbands and feathers as the only way of depicting ethnicity
- Show one token Native American in a group of people

CONTENT:

- Shows events from a Euro-American perspective
- Places Native Americans only in a historical setting or context
- Has Native Americans speak in a telescoped, unarticulated form of English or in overly eloquent, romantic language
- Names characters with ridiculous, cute, or pseudo tribal names
- Judges the worth of Native American characters by Euro-American standards or how the Native American characters have helped Euro-Americans
- Contains the theme that Native Americans are unable to solve problems and must rely on the help of Euro-Americans

LOOK FOR

IN GENERAL:

- Books that show Native Americans as fully human with different roles, engaged in the everyday tasks of living as part of a complex society
- Information about the background of the author and illustrator that qualifies them to write about and depict Native Americans

ILLUSTRATIONS:

- Depict characters as true individuals with different physical features
- Are authentic to time, place, and culture
- Show attention to accuracy and detail
- Show individuals as part of a community or group

CONTENT:

- Shows events from a Native American perspective
- Portrays Native Americans in historical and present-day settings and contexts
- Gives meaning and explanation for Native American terms and names
- Has Native American characters speak with the skill and flow of people accustomed to an oral tradition
- Shows Native American characters as being admired for helping their own people