

How to Turn a Traditional Indian Story into a Children's Picture Book (for fun and profit)

By Beverly Slapin

1. Go to a special collections library and peruse the traditional Indian stories told to and written down by non-Indian anthropologists. Don't worry about asking anyone's permission to use or change the stories you discover—Indians may consider many of them sacred, but according to copyright law, they are public domain and yours for the taking.

2. Choose a particular story that resonates with you. Carefully extricate all of its cultural markers. Be sure to remain oblivious to the language and lives of the people whose story you hold in your hands. That way, you can be more objective.

3. Magnify the details you think are important—and get rid of everything else. Cut out all references to violence, sex, bodily functions, spiritual beliefs, or anything else you don't particularly like or understand.

4. Belabor the prose to make it seem more authentic. For instance, if the story reads, "There was no fire here then, only far upriver at world's end," change it to: "Long ago, the animal people had no fire. Day and night, they huddled in their houses in the dark, and ate their food uncooked. In the winter, they were so cold, icicles hung from their fur. Oh, they were miserable!" (London, Jonathan. *Fire Race: A Karuk Coyote Tale*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1993).

5. Improve on the dialogue. Let your imagination run wild. If the story reads, "I am going!", change it to: "Farewell, my parents, and do not grieve. I have another home under the sea and I'm going there!" (Martin, Rafe. *The Boy Who Lived with the Seals*. New York: Putnam, 1993).

6. Find a talented illustrator who is good at copying artifacts in a museum. Make sure he has seen *Dances With Wolves*. Or, forget about authenticity altogether—find an artist whose imagination is as fanciful as yours. In any event, make sure that the illustrations match your interpretation—your vision, if you will—of your story.

7. Have your manuscript and illustrations vetted by several non-Indian anthropologists. Make sure to thank them in the introduction. Call up an Indian, too—any Indian. Even if she hangs up on

you, you can thank her in your introduction. After all, she picked up the phone when you called.

8. Think up an imaginative title that will make a publisher see income potential. Calling your story a Coyote story is good. Publishers like things called Coyote stories, even if they're not. If the publisher bites, you can always make your story a Coyote story.

9. Remember to write under your title the phrases, "a Native American legend" (or "myth") and "retold by" (you).

10. After your manuscript and illustrations are complete, write a short preface about the Indians who "told" this "myth" or "legend." (Remember to discuss them in the past tense.) Also make sure to refer to Indian spiritual beliefs (even if you don't really know anything about them) as "superstitions."

11. Done! Now sit back and collect your awards. Be well praised by reviewers for your warm, sensitive storytelling and the sympathetic voice you have given to "America's first people."

12. Be prepared to sit on multicultural panels throughout the country, educating and enlightening the thousands of eager teachers and librarians who thirst for your knowledge.

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Beverly Slapin is cofounder and director of Oyate, a grassroots Indian community organization working to see that Native lives and histories are portrayed honestly in books for children and teens. Visit www.oyate.com for more information, reviews, and recommended books.