Lecture

An Indigenous Critique of Whiteness in Children's Literature

Dr. Debbie Reese

Thank you, to all of the people who are here, and to the Ho-Chunk Nation, and to the committee that selected me and the community that helped get me here. I'm nervous. It is a huge honor and I acknowledge that honor. I hope that what I say delivers for all of you because I do think it is important to talk about Whiteness in children's literature. I talk a lot about good books but it is equally important that we talk about the bad books because there's way more bad books in children's literature and we need those to be moved aside so people can say, "oh, this is actual Indigenous story." There are many stories Native writers tell about being out and hearing people say, "but that's not Native." The stories they present are seen as not Native because they don't match the expectations of Indians sitting around a campfire telling stories. So, I'm going to talk about Whiteness in Children's Literature, tonight. I also want to say the Diversity Jedi are here, so we have to applaud for them.

The work I started doing in the mid-1990s was shaped by this delightful child when she came into our lives. I had been a kindergarten and first grade teacher and

all the books that were in my classroom library became her books. We read a lot.

In 1993, we moved from our adobe home at Nambé Pueblo to a non-descript apartment in the midwest. Our goal: graduate school at the University of Illinois. My plan was to study family literacy but that changed not long after we arrived on campus and I encountered "Chief Illiniwek" and love for that racist mascot. Trying to understand why people were so moved by that clearly ridiculous image changed my plans. I started studying and talking about depictions of Native people in children's books.

Precocious child that she was, Liz—who is here tonight, and her dad, and Nick who is soon to be part of our family—was speaking up about stereotypes, too. When a teacher in her pre-school classroom pulled *Brother Eagle Sister Sky* off the shelf and got ready to read it aloud, Liz told her that the book wasn't right. Not understanding what Liz was trying to say, that teacher told her that she could play somewhere else in the classroom. Liz was only four years old but she knew that there were images in the world that weren't right and she was using that four-year-old voice to say so. I want teachers to listen carefully when children are telling you something. Their words have meaning to them. A year later in kindergarten, Liz came out of her classroom at the end of the day, plopped right down on the floor, opened her backpack, and opened *George and Martha, Encore* to this page.

She jabbed at George with that indignation of a five-year-old and said, "Mom, look! It's George, and he's a TV Indian." That's a phrase I was using with her, then, to describe stereotyping. See, just prior to moving to Illinois, we had both danced at Nambé. For us, dance is not performance. It's not entertainment. It is prayer. She understood the sacred nature of what we were doing and when we saw stereotypical Indians on TV westerns and cartoons,

I talked with her about what they looked like, and what we looked like, and that the ways that we are dressed when we are doing our traditional dances are not what we were seeing on TV. The Indians on TV weren't anything like us. They weren't real. So—TV Indians became a catch-all phrase for us to use when we'd see stereotypes in books. That particular incident with George became a Field Notes article in *Horn Book Magazine*. Its title—of course—is "Mom, Look! It's George, and He's a TV Indian!"

As Liz moved on through school, there was one book after another that we would need to address. In third grade, she spoke up about *Caddie Woodlawn*. I'll have a little more to say about that book, shortly.

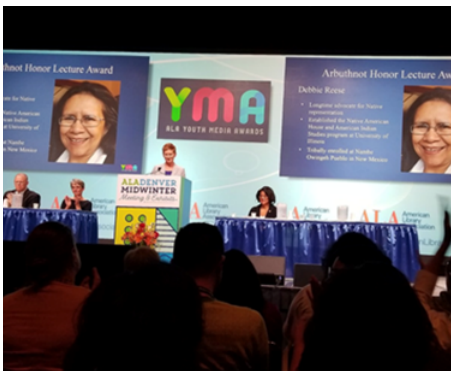
When you're the parent of a Native or child of color, your child's identity is not affirmed in the ways that the identity of white children is. You will be asking teachers for meetings to talk about problems in textbooks, worksheets, and children's books that your child brings home. Fighting for my daughter's well-being shaped my work as a scholar and critic. Since then, I've met many people in Education and Library Science and some writers, too, who focus on the well-being of children. Our work includes looking inside the pages of children's books but from there, looking outwards. What forces in society are shaping the words and illustrations we see in children's books? That is one question we, Jedi, bring to the work that brought us all here, tonight.

And it is a question that teachers and librarians can ask when they pick up a book to use with children. Who wrote or illustrated it? Does the book have Native or People of Color in it? How are they depicted? It is a questioning stance I want teachers to bring to every single book they pick up. Don't think that every author is going to do okay because each book has to be looked at independently.

Just after 5 p.m. on Saturday, January 20, 2018, I was on my way to bed (some of you know we turn in early, sometimes before it is dark outside). I was heading up the stairs and my phone rang. I glanced at it, didn't recognize the number, so I ignored it, got ready for bed, laid down. Then I saw that I had a message from the person who had called. I listened to it. It was Barbara Genco. She said something about needing to talk to me as soon as possible.

(I took that photo last week for this part of the presentation.) I kind of panicked because I had been asked to be on the 2018 ALSC Charlemae Rollins President's Program panel at ALA and I thought, "dang, what did I do! Barbara is a big name in ALSC! Why is she calling me? Is she calling to tell me I can't be on that panel?!" I did not call her back. I was wide awake, afraid, and I saw that she was on Twitter, so, I sent her a direct message. She wrote me right back. She said we could talk the next day, and that she had good news.

The next morning, I sat by the fireplace, warm and toasty and listened to Barbara tell me that I'd been selected to do this lecture. "Are you sure, Barbara? I don't know… there's a lot of people out there who don't like me and what I do." She kind of laughed and told me that they were sure. She went into some detail about articles they read and videos of me they had watched. Clearly the committee knew what I do. So, I said okay. She told me the announcement would be made at ALA's Midwinter Meeting, specifically at the 2018 Youth Media Awards event and that I couldn't talk about it till then. I couldn't go to Midwinter, couldn't be "in the room" when they made the announcement, but I did something I had done before. I invited Jedi Tom Crisp to watch the livestream with me. He was in Georgia, I was in Illinois, and we texted back and forth with a running commentary as we watched. He didn't know that Nina Lindsay, also a Jedi, would be saying my name. In spite of Barbara's assurances, I was anxious because, quite frankly, I expected some polite applause and I was worried that some people might even boo loudly. If anyone did that, I knew that Tom would help me out. Nina made the announcement.



And there were cheers! And lots of applause, and Barbara called me right after the ceremony to say, "did you hear them?" It was a great day!

As I suspected, though, some people were not pleased. There was quite an active conversation about it on social media. One writer who was at Midwinter said she nearly leapt out of her chair to scream, "No!" when she heard my name. Others declared they would boycott the lecture. Some people wrote to the Arbuthnot committee, some wrote to ALSC leadership, and some wrote to me, saying I do not deserve the honor. Obviously the lecture was not taken away from me, and here we are!

The first children's literature conference I attended was here in Madison in the 1990s when I was in graduate school. That's when I met K.T. Horning and Ginny Moore Kruse. I've learned so much from them. Since then, I've been up here a few times. I remember meeting Janice Rice and formed a wonderful friendship with her. She's been a leading light in

the American Indian Library Association for years. And it is here that I met Omar Poler and learned of his outstanding work with tribal libraries in Wisconsin. When I learned that I'd be doing the Arbuthnot here, all those warm memories of these people felt good.

The title of my talk is "An Indigenous Critique of Whiteness in Children's Literature."

I started using the word Whiteness in tweets in December of 2017. The suffix "ness" turns an adjective into a word that exemplifies a quality or state of being. So, "ness" turns the word White into the adjective, whiteness. I use it to refer to individuals and institutions with power that goes back hundreds of years and has a huge impact on our lives. In my mind, it is shorthand for an idea put forth by Colonel Richard Henry Pratt, the U.S. army officer who founded Carlisle Indian Industrial School in 1879. His name is commonly associated with United States government boarding schools. In a speech about Americanizing Native students at Carlisle, he said:[1]

> A great general has said that the only good Indian is a dead one, and that high sanction of their destruction has been an enormous factor in promoting Indian massacre. In a sense, I agree with the sentiment, but only in this: that all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him and save the man.

Essentially, Pratt wanted to do whatever was necessary to kill our identities as Native people and train us to serve white people as their servants and laborers. He was an individual working within an institution that had nefarious plans for Indigenous peoples and the well-being of our tribal nations. Clearly, as you look around the room tonight, you can see that he failed. We are here, with our songs, our music, our stories.

I have the word Indigenous in my title, but I could have said "Native American" or "American Indian." All three are broad terms used to describe the peoples whose roots are in these lands that we currently call the United States. "First Americans," by the way, is not okay. Indigenous peoples were here long before the word, America, was used. Calling us "First Americans" erases our standing as nations that were here before the United States was a nation. I use Native American, or American Indian, or Indigenous unless I am talking about a specific person or nation.

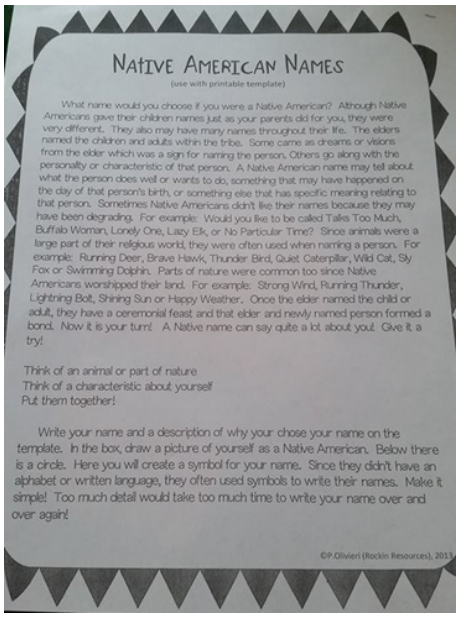
When I talk about myself, I name my nation. In naming it, I am being tribally specific. That's one of the things I want teachers to do: look for tribally specific materials. I am enrolled at Nambé, one of the 19 pueblo nations in what is currently known as New Mexico. I'm trying to use "currently" and "now known as" because the historical record tells us that things change. Borders change. Names change. We are peoples with unique histories, stories, songs, and languages. Some children's books tell you that the Indian word for baby is papoose, as if these hundreds of tribal nations all speak the same language. We don't. The Whiteness of the U.S. educational system means that most people grow up rather ignorant about Indigenous peoples. Most people—for example, can say the word "treaty" but not realize that it refers to diplomatic agreements between Native nations and other nations, including European nations. At Nambé, we've had diplomatic agreements with Spain, Mexico, and now, the United States. We've fought hard—successfully—to retain our identity and status as a sovereign nation. Next time you're in Washington DC, go see the statue of Po'pay. He led the Pueblo Revolt against the Spanish in 1680. We need a children's book about Po'pay. One is being written and I think it will come out in 2020.

Our present-day status as a sovereign nation, rooted in that history, and my personal history drive what I do. These two men (pictured, upper right) are my grandfathers. I have a white grandfather, but that doesn't mean that only three-quarters of me is a tribal member at Nambé. If you are a citizen of the United States and your grandma was born in France, that doesn't make you three-quarters of a citizen of the United States. You are a citizen, period. Understanding the concept of citizenry needs a lot of work in American society.

On the right is my dad's father. He was white, born in Arkansas in 1911. When he was born, his surname was Yates. That was his name all his life.

On the left is my mom's father. He was Hopi, born at a Hopi village in Arizona, around 1895. His surname was Sakiestewa, but when he went to a US government boarding school, he was given a new name. He became Rex Calvert for the rest of his life. Changing a Native child's name was standard practice in the boarding schools. Whiteness changed my grandfather's name but he retained his identity as a Hopi man and raised several children at Ohkay Owingeh. He always called my mom by her Tewa name, Oyégi. She was given that name through a ceremony. My Tewa name, and our daughter's Tewa name, were given to us through a ceremony. If you think about your own name, especially a name that is specific to your family or community, or maybe a name that came to you through a religious ceremony, you understand that names are important.

In 2015, my cousin's little boy brought home this worksheet (pictured, page 6 top left) from school: "Native American Names." He was supposed to pick an Indian name. The instructions on the worksheet say: "Think of an animal or part of nature. Think of a characteristic about yourself. Put them together!" His parents were appalled and wrote to me about it. Activities like this, I hope you



NATIVE AMERICAN NAMES

(use with printable template)

What name would you choose if you were a Native American? Although Native Americans gave their children names just as your parents did for you, they were very different. They also may have many names throughout their life. The elders named the children and adults within the tribe. Some came as dreams or visions from the elder which was a sign for naming the person. Others go along with the personality or characteristic of that person. A Native American name may tell about what the person does well or wants to do, something that may have happened on the day of that person's birth, or something else that has specific meaning relating to that person. Sometimes Native Americans didn't like their names because they may have been degrading. For example: Would you like to be called Talks Too Much, Buffalo Woman, Lonely One, Lazy Elk, or No Particular Time? Since animals were a large part of their religious world, they were often used when naming a person. For example: Running Deer, Brave Hawk, Thunder Bird, Quiet Caterpillar, Wild Cat, Sly Fox or Swimming Dolphin. Parts of nature were common too since Native Americans worshipped their land. For example: Strong Wind, Running Thunder, Lightning Bolt, Shining Sun or Happy Weather. Once the elder named the child or adult, they have a ceremonial feast and that elder and newly named person formed a bond. Now it is your turn! A Native name can say quite a lot about you! Give it a try!

Think of an animal or part of nature
Think of a characteristic about yourself
Put them together!

Write your name and a description of why your chose your name on the template. In the box, draw a picture of yourself as a Native American. Below there is a circle. Here you will create a symbol for your name. Since they didn't have an alphabet or written language, they often used symbols to write their names. Make it simple! Too much detail would take too much time to write your name over and over again!

©P.Olivieri (Rockin Resources), 2013

know, are a dime a dozen. They are inappropriate and I hope that when you see someone doing them, you'll engage them in a conversation and ask them to stop doing it.

In 1900—when my Hopi grandfather was a child—Whiteness was busy, changing Native children's names. Killing the Indian, as Pratt had instructed. Fast forward in time to 2015, and Whiteness was asking kids to pick an Indian name. Seen in light of this history, I hope you understand why I object when writers and people who make worksheets make light of Native names. When you pick up a children's book where the author has Native characters and makes light of their names, I'd like you to set it aside, but I'd also like you to tell others about what you are doing, and why.

Let's look at some statistics now. If my cousin went looking for books to read with his child, he'd have had very few new books to choose from. That year, 2015, CCBC received 42 books published in the US and Canada with enough Native content to be counted as being about Native people. That 42 is the 0.9% you see in the graph (pictured below).

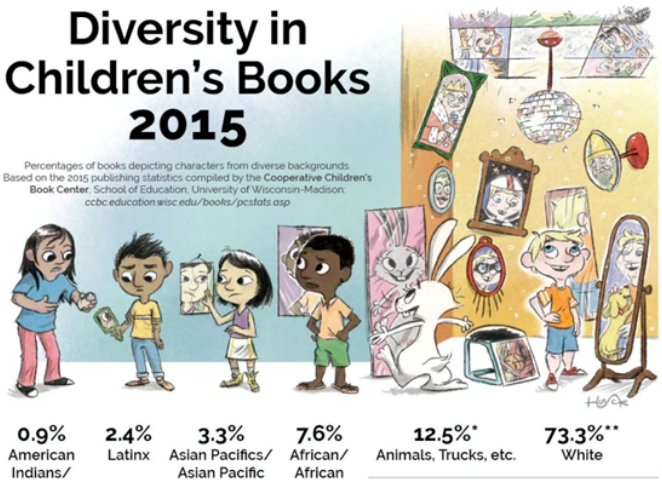
Of that 42, only 19 were published in the United States. Canada publishes more books than the United States does. If my cousin was looking for fiction, he'd have **ten** books to choose from. If he was looking for books by Native writers, he'd find **three**. None of those three are published by one of the "Big Five" publishers. Being published by one of them is important. They have marketing departments that can promote a book by sending copies to bloggers and giving them away at conferences. In short, lots of visibility. Books from major publishers have a visibility that books from small publishing companies do not have. In my analyses, year after year, books from the Big Five are ones I cannot recommend. They are not written by Native writers and they are full of stereotyping, bias, and factual errors.

The graphic shows 7.6 percent in the African/African American category. I want to say a few words about that. In 1965, *The Saturday Review* published Nancy Larrick's article, "The All-White World of Children's Books." Larrick studied books published from 1962 through 1964 and found that 6.7% of the books included in her study included one or more African Americans. Not much change. We're looking at 50 years, and less than a one percent change. Most of them, Larrick wrote, showed a life far removed from that of contemporary children. This line in her article has resonance for us—the Jedi—today:

> "To the child who has been involved in civil rights demonstrations of Harlem or Detroit, it is small comfort to read of the Negro slave who smilingly served his white master."[2]

Smiling slaves then, and, smiling slaves now, as we saw in 2015 and 2016 in *A Fine Dessert* (Random House, 2015) and *A Birthday Cake for George Washington* (Scholastic, 2016). I put the red x's on the covers (pictured below) because I want the image you carry away with you tonight to be one that says, "these books are not okay."

Larrick focused on books about African Americans, but what, I wondered, were the depictions of Native people in children's books like? And how many were there? I did a search on the Worldcat database for 1962 through 1964, limiting my search to fiction and got 130 books. *Little Runner of the Longhouse* and *Red Fox and His Canoe* were among the first ten hits that I got. Both are "I Can Read" books and both are illustrated by Arnold Lobel. Both are stereotypical. That pose, of Indians peering into the distance, is hard to get rid of.

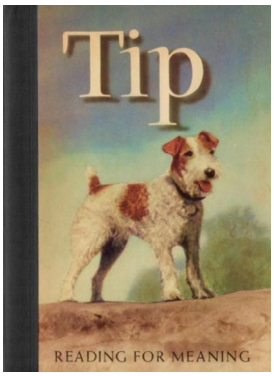


I started first grade at Nambé Pueblo Day School in 1964. When I was there, the librarian from the local public school came by every couple of weeks with a box of books we could choose from. I don't have a clear memory of reading these "I Can Read" books, but I probably did. Thirty years later, when I was teaching children's literature at the University of Illinois, a student brought a book from home to share with the class. Seeing it gave me a jolt. It was definitely one of the books from that box. I recognized it immediately. When I started turning its pages, I had another jolt. So much stereotyping!

I don't recall being upset by what I saw in *Little Owl Indian*. I probably already had some semblance of that TV Indian in my head. I was, after all, surrounded by my Native family and relatives and community and I liked school. I loved to read and I did well in school. See? (Top of next column.) That is me, holding an award that I got from my teacher. If I zoomed in on the award, you'd see that it says "Debra." That wasn't my name. My parents told my teacher, "her name is Debbie." The teacher had told my parents they made a mistake in my name. "Debbie," she told them, is a nickname. My proper name, according to Whiteness, was Debra. Whiteness put that name on my award.

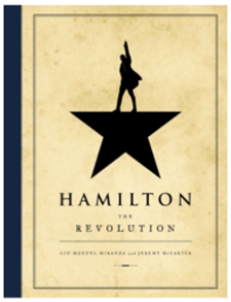
Little Owl Indian did not hurt me, but a basal reading series did have an impact on me. I learned to read from the *Tip* series published by Houghton Mifflin.

When we moved to Illinois for graduate school, I was struck by the tree-lined streets, houses with pitched roofs, big piles of leaves, and—it seems silly to say it now, but—the sidewalks.



Lingering in the recesses of my mind was Janet, in her blue coat, hat, and roller skates. Why did I find all of that so striking? I think it was the power of Whiteness. My life as a child growing up on our reservation was not in any of the books that I read. I had internalized that "good life: tree lined street, leaves, roller skates." That's what life was supposed to be about. How could I not internalize that? Whiteness is very powerful. I wanted to be Janet. I'm sad about that memory now, but thinking about it—holding on to it—helps me remain aware of how powerful story is, how it can shape and manipulate us.

Music does that, too. A lot of people are captivated by Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton: An American Musical.* For some, the music and the color-conscious cast tug on their heart strings. Jean Mendoza, a Jedi, and I saw Miranda's musical in Chicago a couple of years ago. The almost all white audience was clearly under Miranda's spell. Jean and I sat there…grumbling. The song that stands out most in my mind is Song 22 in Act I: "Dear Theodosia."



It is a duet sung by Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton. Both men are new fathers singing to their children that they will "come of age with our young nation. We'll bleed and fight for you, we'll make it right for you."

We heard people around us sniffling, they were in tears. It is a moving song. Dads singing to their babies is very moving. I was moved, too, but I was also angry. The audience is meant to think about these men fighting for independence from the British. The audience is supposed to think about how wonderful that new nation was going to be for white children. The audience is not being asked to think about the Native parents, of that time period, imagining the future of their children and their nations. That is not part of Hamilton's musical. Miranda left Native people out and he glossed over the fact that Hamilton owned slaves. The history—as historians have pointed out in books and articles—is wrong. In our forthcoming young adult adaptation of Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz's *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States,* Jean

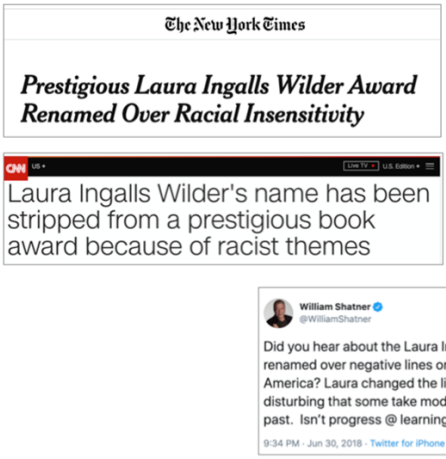
and I ask readers to think critically about the history that is told through the musical. Ticket sales tell us that Whiteness loves this rags-to-riches immigrant story. Historical accuracy doesn't matter.

In recent years, a great many people have shown their support for immigrants by joining marches or protests. It was invigorating to see and be part of that, and to know, too, that Yuyi Morales was working on a picture book about her journey from Mexico to the United States. When it was released in 2018, many of us were deeply touched by the story and the vibrant, joyful, multi-media illustrations of a mother and her child.

We were sure that we'd hear Jamie Campbell Naidoo announce that *Dreamers* had been selected to receive the 2019 Caldecott Medal. But that didn't happen.

With a blockbuster musical about immigrants and a societal-wide embrace of immigrants, I can't help but wonder what happened with the 2019 Caldecott Award. Was an unconscious Whiteness at work, there, in the room? Is that why the committee chose Sophie Blackall's *Hello Lighthouse*? Blackall won the Caldecott in 2016 for *Finding Winnie.* Is it really the case that out of the thousands of books published, her art is the most distinctive, in two separate years? I posed these questions on Twitter. As you may imagine, it made some people angry.

To me, *Dreamers* was the perfect book for this time. But, was it, in unconscious ways, deemed too "politically correct?" I have no doubt that people think books like *Hello Lighthouse* are "neutral" or "apolitical." That's Whiteness at work. From my perspective, the politics in *Hello Lighthouse* are front and center. Its nostalgia for times past is palpable. In Blackall's book, the life of a white family is affirmed and the lighthouse that they live in is on what used to be Native lands. There's no neutrality there. In fact, if we think about it, every children's book for which the setting is this continent, is set on what used to be Native lands. If we could all hold that fact front and center every time we pick up a children's book set on this continent, how might that change how we view children's literature? How might that shape the literature as we move into the future? I don't know, and it's hard to think about, but I want to think about it. I think we should think about that.


The New York Times

Prestigious Laura Ingalls Wilder Award Renamed Over Racial Insensitivity

CNN

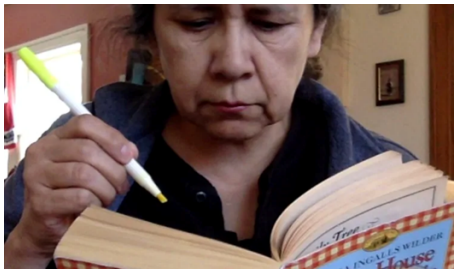
Laura Ingalls Wilder's name has been stripped from a prestigious book award because of racist themes

William Shatner
@WilliamShatner

Did you hear about the Laura Ingalls Wilder Award being renamed over negative lines on the indigenous people of America? Laura changed the lines in the 50's. I find it disturbing that some take modern opinion & obliterate the past. Isn't progress @ learning from our mistakes?

9:34 PM · Jun 30, 2018 · Twitter for iPhone

Let's take a look at another book about a white family on Native lands: *Little House on the Prairie.* That book and Laura Ingalls Wilder have a tremendous hold on many people, especially in Wisconsin and some of these midwestern states. I've written a lot about problems in *Little House on the Prairie,* with its history and representations of Native people in her books. I do a lot of workshops with teachers and librarians—that's me highlighting passages in the book; I buy lots of used copies of it, highlight passages, take them to workshops, and ask participants to read them aloud. People generally don't remember those passages.



I receive a lot of letters from Native parents who are frustrated that their child's teacher is using a book they know has potential to hurt their child's sense of well-being. Wilder depicts Native people as primitive, mostly naked, and more animal-like than human. And three times, a character says, "the only good Indian is a dead Indian." I know, some of you are thinking, "but Pa and Laura…they like Indians." But their sympathies are with the good Indians. When Pa says, "that's one good Indian," he's talking about an Indian who chose to fight other Indians in order to protect Pa and his family. If that Indian had chosen to join the others, I doubt Pa would be calling him a good Indian. If you think Pa and Laura are sympathetic towards Indians, I think Whiteness might be manipulating you.

On February 7, 2018, I read a post to the ALSC blog that surprised me. It was an invitation to ALSC membership to join their leadership discussions at the Midwinter Meeting to talk about the book award names. They wanted to "consider the implications of having awards named for individuals whose currently recognized place in the canon of children's literature is not consistent with" ALSC's organizational values.[3] Those goals and values include inclusiveness, integrity, respect, and responsiveness. The board planned to start by looking at the Laura Ingalls Wilder Award. I was stunned. Skeptical. Having done years of work on stereotypical imagery in books—especially *Little House on the Prairie*—I thought this would go nowhere. But I was wrong. At the annual meeting in June, the board of directors listened to the findings of the task force they had charged with studying the award names. And then, they voted. Again, I was stunned, because they voted to change the name. That was huge

news. The print and cable news media covered it. *The New York Times* article was titled "Prestigious Laura Ingalls Wilder Award Renamed over Racial Insensitivity" and CNN's headline was "Laura Ingalls Wilder's name has been stripped from a prestigious book award because of racist themes." Twitter exploded. Even William Shatner weighed in [his tweet began with "Did you hear about the Laura Ingalls Wilder Award being renamed over negative lines on the indigenous people of America?"]

To so many people, the idea that anyone would object to Wilder or her books was astonishing. In fact, Native and People of Color have been objecting to the content of children's books and stories for a very long time. I often cite William Apess's autobiography, *A Son of the Forest*, published in 1829, because in it, he shares a story from his childhood. He was Pequot. As a young child he was placed with a white family. He went to school with them and through story, he learned to be afraid of Indians. As an adult he wrote about the impact those stories had on him as a child. I imagine that if he were alive today, he'd be using social media to talk about it.

Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, Facebook, and blogs are all forms of social media that have provided disenfranchised people with a platform. In 2015, people used Twitter to talk about Sophie Blackall's *A Fine Dessert* and E. E. Trujillo's *When We Was Fierce*. In 2016, we used it to talk about *A Birthday Cake for George Washington* by Ramin Ganeshram and *The Continent* by Keira Drake. In 2017, we talked about *The Secret Project* by Jonah Winter. In 2019, Amélie Wen Zhao's *Blood Heir* and Kosoko Jackson's *A Place for Wolves* were the focus of much discussion. All these books and conversations about them were the subject of lots of articles or news segments in *The New York Times, Newsweek, The Washington Post, NPR, The Guardian, Fox News, MSNBC,* and so on. Instead of taking children, children's literature, and the analysis of that literature seriously, however, the mainstream media covered it as entertainment and drama and assault on freedom of speech. To the Jedi, those mainstream articles were ignoring the criticism that can shape children's literature and they were ignoring the audience for all these books. That audience is young people.

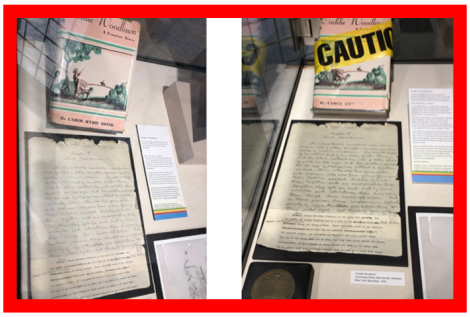
There's another important dimension to what is happening with these books. I've placed them on the slide in a deliberate way (see below left). Books on the left are available to you, today. You can go get them. Books on the right were recalled or cancelled. This is an early observation I am making here, and it may not hold water over time, but is there a pattern developing? The books on the right are by writers of color. The books on the left are by white writers. Is it the case that writers of color are more in tune with the impact of story on children? When they withdrew their books from publication, they cited criticism from people who know what they're talking about. There was a lot of drama on Twitter, or, "pile ons" from some people who don't use their real names. They made the conversations uncomfortable and painful for the writers, but I believe the decisions the authors of color made were in response to criticism that they believe has merit. They know it matters.

For the mainstream media, articles about these books were part of the 24-hour news cycle. They were big news in these 24-hour periods; gone from the next one. But for the parents, teachers, and librarians who use children's books, and for the writers, editors, publishers, reviewers, and critics who create, promote, and study children's books, our concerns about books aren't a 24-hour news cycle. For those of us who believe in the power of children's books, we are in it 365 days a year, 24 hours a day. We know that children's books shape the future. For hundreds of years, Whiteness has had its way, but today, we are pushing against that Whiteness.

In January of 2015, the American Library Association held its first-ever Day of Diversity at its Midwinter Meeting. Co-chaired by Allie Jane Bruce and Jamie Campbell Naidoo, it was a day-long, invitation-only event that brought many people together to discuss strategies to ensure that all children have access to diverse literature and library programming. It was, in short, an all-out effort to interrupt the Whiteness of children's literature. Roger Sutton, the Editor in Chief at *The Horn Book*, was there, and a few weeks after the Day of Diversity, Roger asked a provocative question on his blog: "Are We Doing It White? Are we reviewing books from a White perspective?" A long conversation took place. One of my take-aways from it was that people can, will, and do find ways to say, "No, we're not doing it white. You know—literary merit…."

That question is on my mind because of a children's book exhibit in Minneapolis that I hope to see before it closes. The exhibit is called "The ABC of It: Why Children's Books Matter." It was first curated by Leonard Marcus and mounted at the New York Public Library in 2013. Now it is at the University of Minnesota's Andersen Library. When they were bringing that exhibit to Minnesota, they also worked with the University of Minnesota press and published a companion book for the exhibit. Before the exhibit opened, people were telling Lisa Von Drasek that

certain parts of the exhibit needed historical context. Without that context, problematic books and authors in it were being celebrated, uncritically. In particular, people had concerns about the Dr. Seuss books and about *Caddie Woodlawn.* With enough pressure—some of it on social media—Lisa has begun to make some changes to the exhibit. In the case for *Caddie Woodlawn,* she started to make changes right away. In the photo on the left (see below), the card (in the red circle in the photo) wasn't there when the exhibit opened. Lisa put it there after the exhibit opened. People told her that wasn't enough. So, Lisa put that yellow caution banner on the cover, and that caught people's attention. That helped people to ask questions about why it was on there. Lisa has been blogging about the exhibit. She's been trying to respond to criticisms. She reported that the caution tape is generating a lot more interest than the card did. This afternoon as I was double checking my notes about the blog post, I went to the site to find out what Lisa was calling that card and got one of those "Error 404" messages. I don't know what's going on; I guess we'll see.



I am glad to know that there are changes to the physical exhibit, that there are people at the Kerlan who are interrupting the Whiteness of the exhibit by providing this kind of context. That is really important because that is a powerful institution. The book, however, created by Marcus, is another matter. Lisa is making changes to the physical exhibit, but what's happening to the book? When she was bringing the exhibit to Minnesota, she wanted to have a children's book that would go along with it, that could be used in children's literature courses. I've been doing an on-going analysis of that book. It is very white. Is it going to be edited? I hope so. There is a pdf copy of it. I think edits can happen but you have to make those things happen by asking the questions.

I'll circle back now and tell you about the term "Diversity Jedi" and how it came to be.

On October 9, 2015, Edith Campbell, a Jedi, shared some thoughts on Facebook about *Large Fears.*

Large Fears

Written by Myles E. Johnson; illustrated by Kendrick Daye

A self-published picture book by Myles E. Johnson and Kendrick Daye, it is about a queer black boy. Edi was happy to know about the book because, she said, "there are not enough books for marginalized young people." Well, Meg Rosoff, a white author of several books for children and young adults, responded to Edi, saying,[4]

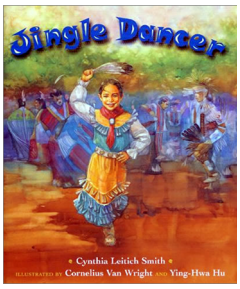
> There are not too few books for marginalised young people. There are hundreds of them, thousands of them. You don't have to read about a queer black boy to read about a marginalised child. The children's book world is getting far too literal about what "needs" to be represented.

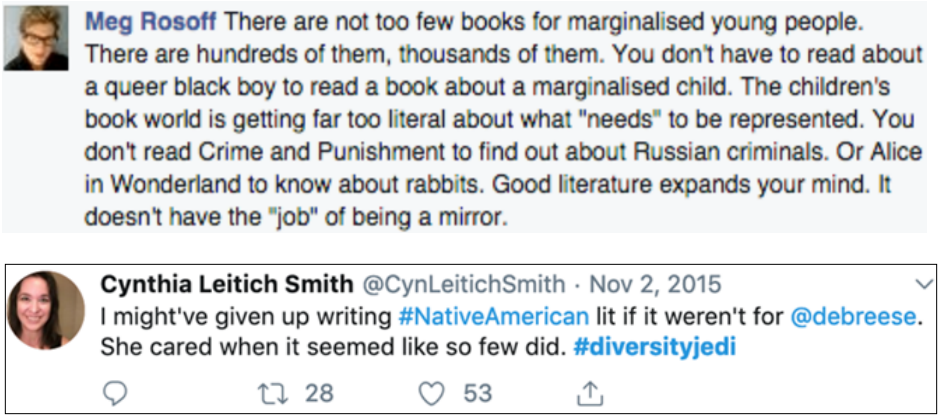
A conversation about Rosoff's comments ensued on Facebook and Twitter. It came on the heels of discussions of the depictions of the smiling slaves in Sophie Blackall's *A Fine Dessert* and in the midst of conversations about "civilized" Indians in Laura Amy Schlitz's *The Hired Girl.* Three weeks later, Rosoff tweeted about all of us and our conversations, calling us "the Debbie Reese Crimes Against Diversity stormtroopers."

Stormtroopers? The bad guys in *Star Wars*? Sarah Hamburg, a Jedi—pointed out the historical roots of that word. Stormtroopers were Nazis. Rosoff's characterization of us was clearly unacceptable. René Saldaña offered a different term: Jedi Knight. I started thinking about what we might call ourselves. Then, on November 2, Muscogee author Cynthia Leitich Smith sent out a tweet with the hashtag #DiversityJedi. She said she might have given up writing stories about Native peoples if it weren't for people who care when so many others don't.

Her words had tremendous resonance for me and for others who hold fast to the fact that the words and illustrations children see in their books can reflect their existence or mock their well-being.

Cynthia's picture book, *Jingle Dancer*, is one that I talk about a lot. It is the book I wish we had when Liz danced for the first time, back in 1994.





Relative to the rest of the scholars and critics in children's and young adult literature, we Diversity Jedi are few in number but we're making a difference. We research and write and talk about the numbers of books published, and the quality of those books, and the politics of what and who gets published. As scholars, we're pushing the industry. We do in-depth study of books, situating our words within hundreds of years of Whiteness.

I'm supposed to give a lecture that is a significant contribution to the field of children's literature but I could easily spend this hour talking about the Jedi because their work is a significant contribution to children's literature. I want everybody to know about Naomi Bishop's leadership in the American Indian Library Association, and their decision to rescind the award they gave to Sherman Alexie. I think everybody should read Ebony Elizabeth Thomas's *The Dark Fantastic*. You should all know about Laura Jiménez's blog and her research on graphic novels and social justice in children's literature! I want to tell you about the work that Sarah Park Dahlen and her team did to launch the open access journal, *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature*. Look that up as soon as you can and download the article, "The Cat Is Out of the Bag: Orientalism, Anti-Blackness, and White Supremacy in Dr. Seuss's Children's Books," by Katie Ishizuka and Ramón Stephens. You should also look up Edi Campbell's blog posts about the research she's doing on monkeys in children's books. I want you all to read Zetta Elliott's books and her blog, too, where she asks some hard questions about the choices writers of color make. And I gotta tell you to go read the work of Allie Jane Bruce and the people who blog at Reading While White! Before a week passes, order Daniel Heath Justice's *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*. My heart swells every time I see the tweets from the Native teens in Florida. They tweet from the @OfGlades account on Twitter and they blog about books at Indigo's Bookshelf. I want to talk about the work that Shannon Gibney, Thaddeus Andracki, Breanna McDaniel, Sujei Lugo, Anne Ursu, Angie Manfredi, Ann Clare LeZotte, Cris Rhoades, Stacy Collins, Marilisa Jimenez, and Sonia Rodriguez are doing, every day. I learn from and am inspired by all of them.

So much of what we stand for is under attack by powerful forces. Some days it feels hopeless. Many days, we are afraid. And we should be. The threats Jedi receive are serious. But here we are, gathered in this room, this evening. We are here because our parents, grandparents, and our great-great-greats fought for their children and grandchildren and great great grandchildren. They fought for the rights of our people to exist, to tell the stories we choose to tell, the way we want to tell them. We're doing that, now. We're doing what they did: fighting for our children, our grandchildren, our great-great grandchildren. We are all resisting Whiteness.

I'm glad that Cynthia Leitich Smith kept writing her books. I think she's done more to help Native writers of children's and young adult literature than any other Native writer out there. Through their stories and words, Native writers are resisting Whiteness and they are providing Native children with mirrors. Though *Jingle Dancer* will always hold a special place in my heart, I think Cynthia's *Hearts Unbroken* is her most significant work. I love that one of her characters hands a copy of Eric Gansworth's *If I Ever Get Out of Here* to another character! In my mind I can see Alexis, one of the OfGlades teens, handing *Hearts Unbroken* to a Native kid in the library she's working in, right now. There's more to say about *Hearts Unbroken*. In it Cynthia deftly addresses midguided claims to Cherokee identity and mockery of Native names, the racist editorials written by L. Frank Baum, and the ever present question many of us wrestle with: what do you do when you find out that a favorite author is racist? Or if you find out that a favorite author has been sexually harassing someone?

In 1986, Walter Dean Myers, an African American author, used *The New York Times* to call out stereotypical, racist, and biased depictions of African Americans. He wrote that the images of Dinah, the black maid in the Bobbsey Twins, Friday in *Robinson Crusoe*, and Eradicate in *Tom Swift* were harming black children and white children, too. He reflected on the 1960s and his hope then, that change was coming. He saw more books coming out in the 1970s, and said that he thought they were revolutionizing the book publishing industry. Then, in 2014, Myers had another item in *The New York Times*. It's title: "Where Are the People of Color in Children's Literature." It was a painful note on how much had not changed. He died a few months later, before the highly visible conversations on Twitter started taking place.

On April 4, Vicky Smith, children's book editor at *Kirkus*, published a column titled "Diversity Jedi." In it, she said that she thinks the changes we've seen in the last few years in children's literature are due to the sustained work of Diversity Jedi on social media. If Vicky is right, we are carrying on the work that Walter Dean Myers did. If you're on Twitter, look for the hashtag. Retweet us. Help us. Let's all revolutionize the book publishing industry.

Thank you. &

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