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Claims to Native Identity in Children's Literature

Debbie Reese

Children's books. Most parents—including many of you reading this essay—have them on your bookshelves and carry warm feelings about having read them in your childhood. Those books and their authors shape what readers know. When those books are created by people who say they are Native, readers assume the content is authoritative, but is it? In my experience, most scholars in American Indian studies pay little attention to the books children are asked to read. If that is you, please pause and remember that the students you teach in your undergraduate or graduate courses enter your classrooms carrying information they “learned” from children's books. They are in your course to learn from your expertise and unlearn what they may have acquired from children's books. You probably assign books and articles by preeminent Native scholars. Your students will likely leave your classroom with knowledge that helps them recognize stereotypes of Native peoples, biased presentation of Native cultures, and the importance of interrogating claims to Native identity.

In October 2008, I was invited to Michigan State University's American Indian Identity Conference, where the conference theme was Neocolonial Inscription and Performance of American Indian Identity in American Higher Education. It was a two-day conference where panelists were asked to address issues such as tribal sovereignty, faculty hiring, and university practices on self-identification. I was asked to sit on the Arts & Humanities Panel, titled “Representations in Art, Literature & Cultural Production.” My paper was about writers who misrepresented their identity within the children's book industry. This commentary essay expands on that paper.

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PRETENDIANS AND WANNABES IN THE UNITED STATES

Terms like *pretendian* and *wannabe* are used to describe people who appropriate a Native identity. Several individuals who claim and perform a Native identity—telling of a family story of their Native heritage, or that they were adopted by a Native individual, or that they received a Native name from a Native person—have written books for children and teens. Some of the books received or were considered for major awards. Literary analysis of their books reveals a heavy reliance on stereotypical ideas and a lack of understanding or regard for the integrity of traditional stories that originate with specific Native nations. Their use of stereotypes or their misuse of traditional Native stories undermines Native peoples and our status as sovereign nations.

In 1977, Lippincott published *Anpao: An American Indian Odyssey*. Written by Jamake Highwater, a man who said he was Blackfeet and Cherokee, Anpao's odyssey is narrated by a "holy man" named Wasicong who uses stories from a wide range of Native peoples to craft what Highwater presents as an "American Indian" story. It won the American Library Association's (ALA) Newbery Honor Award. Presumably, the ALA committees did not recognize that collapsing distinct stories into a singular "American Indian" existence contributed to the stereotypical idea that Native peoples are a monolith. Highwater went on to write several other books for young adults that were named to ALA's "Best Books" lists. Books for the adult market fared well and Highwater went on television shows. He was exposed as a fraud in 1984 by Hank Adams in *Akwesasne Notes*¹ and by columnist Jack Anderson who wrote "A Fabricated Indian" for the *Washington Post*. His actual name, as shown on his birth certificate, was Jack Marks.²

During this same period, picture books about Native people written and illustrated by Paul Goble, a British man, gained traction. In 1977, Goble moved to the United States. In 1979 his picture book for children, *The Girl Who Loved Wild Horses*, won ALA's Caldecott Medal. Though it is described as a Native American folktale, it is not a Native story. It is Goble's own creation. The main character is, to use Robert Berkhofer's phrase, a white man's Indian.³ As a child, Goble loved Indians. As an adult, he wrote about wearing a fringed shirt, leggings, and a feathered war bonnet that his mother made for him to wear around his suburban neighborhood in England.⁴ In 1959, a twenty-five-year-old Goble made his first trip from England to the United States. He went to American Indian Days in Sheridan, Wyoming, where he slept in a tipi next to one where Alba Shawaway, a Yakama man, was staying. According to Gregory Bryan, Goble's biographer, the two men became friendly. Bryan writes that while at American Indian Days, Shawaway adopted Goble and gave him a name "In-chee yow-ail-look-sha-why-ama" (Great Rising Eagle). During that same trip, Bryan continues, Goble became friendly with a Lakota man, Edgar Red Cloud, who also adopted him and gave him a Lakota name: "Wakinyan Chikala" (Little Thunder).

Given his childhood love of things Indian, I imagine Goble felt rather pleased to have these names and an adopted status. Bryan writes that Goble never used the Yakama or the Lakota name to identify himself as Native.⁵ But he was quite willing to write as if he were Iktomi, a teaching figure in Lakota stories that sometimes uses

humor to impart lessons to Lakota children. In the prefaces to his Iktomi books, Goble has Iktomi speak in a way that mocks critics who said that white people (like Goble) should not be telling Native stories. These impersonations begin on the pages that come before the title page. In *Iktomi and the Berries* (1989), Goble wrote, “I don’t like it—that white guy, Paul Goble, is telling stories about me again.”⁶ In *Iktomi and the Buzzard* (1994), Goble wrote at length:

“Hi, kids! I’m IKTOMI—and proud of it! Don’t read this book. That white guy, Paul Goble, is stealing my stories and making money off of them. This book is ethnically insensitive material about me; its racial epithets just bring me into contempt, ridicule, and disrepute. Hey! You’re G-R-E-A-T kids! I’ve got my rights. I don’t have to put up with his derogatory, disreputable, disparaging and denigrating slurs, and offensive designations. I’m being victimized. I have always been here on this Turtle Continent, and I’ll be the last here, long after all white people have been forgotten. I’m no racist, but I’m excited just thinking about it! I’m nobody’s football or baseball mascot! I was the first enrolled member of the Great Lakota Sioux Nation, born in Nihil, South Dakota, and etc. and etc. and etc.”⁷

In *Iktomi and the Coyote* (1998), he wrote “Hi kids! I’M IKTOMI! That white guy, Paul Goble, is telling my stories again. Only Native Americans can tell Native American stories. So, let’s not have anything to do with them. Huh? You’re cool kids! You’re GREAT!!”⁸

In 1998, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn criticized Goble for what he was doing, writing that his interpretation of Lakota/Dakota spirituality is “at the very least, arrogant.”⁹ Her critique may be why, after *Iktomi Loses His Eyes* (1999), Goble quit writing Iktomi stories but went on to write eight more books about Native people. Was it due, in part, to editors’ perceptions that his adoption meant that he was Native and, therefore, had standing to tell Native stories? What does a claim to being adopted by a Native person mean? As I write this essay in September of 2019, to give one example, Native people are expressing frustration with Johnny Depp’s commercial for Dior. In 2012, Depp was adopted by LaDonna Harris and subsequently made an honorary member of the Comanche Nation.¹⁰ It is likely that Dior’s leadership felt that his honorary membership in the Comanche Nation made it acceptable for them to cast Depp as a Native person in their Sauvage perfume campaign, launched in September 2019. In the Dior commercial, three individuals are depicted as Native—Depp, Canku One Star (Rosebud Sioux), and Tanaya Beatty (Da’naxda’xw descent)—but Depp is the only one who speaks, saying “We are the land.” Reactions to the campaign were covered extensively by newspapers in the United States and the United Kingdom.¹¹

Another writer who was adopted and in the news recently is John Smelcer, who claims to be Ahtna (an Alaska Native Athabaskan people) by birth. In 2016, *The Kenyon Review* removed some of his poems from its website in response to concerns the editor received about the stereotypical quality of Smelcer’s work. Terese Mailhot wrote about the poems and Smelcer in *Indian Country Today* on June 18 of that year, concluding her essay, “I resent people with dubious stories, who benefit from white

privilege and refuse to be accountable to hardworking Natives who have to struggle against oppression and stigma every day.”¹² In 2017, when Smelcer’s young adult novel about boarding schools, *Stealing Indians*, was shortlisted for a PEN Literary Award, several articles were published about Smelcer, including one by Rich Smith, a reporter at Seattle’s *The Stranger*. In “Meet John Smelcer, Native American Literature’s ‘Living Con Job,’” Smith quotes from a 1994 *Anchorage Daily News* story that stated Smelcer was “the adopted son of an Indian.” He also quotes Charlie Smelcer, the Ahtna man who adopted Smelcer, as saying “He’s a blond, blue-eyed Caucasian.”¹³ When concerns over Smelcer surfaced, PEN removed his book from consideration for its award. Like the poems that were removed from *The Kenyon* website, his books for young adults are rife with stereotypes.

Stereotypes run throughout Sharon Creech’s *Walk Two Moons*, a book that won ALA’s Newbery Medal in 1995. The character in *Walk Two Moons* is a girl named Sal (short for Salamanca), whose family believes that her great-grandmother’s tribe was Seneca. On her journey of self-discovery, Sal smokes a peace pipe and makes critiques from what is her growing sense of Native identity. Sal’s critiques are well-intentioned, but demonstrate a superficial understanding of Native concerns over stereotyping. In the speech she gave to accept the medal, Creech wrote that:

My cousins maintain that one of our ancestors was an American Indian. As a child, I loved that notion, and often exaggerated it by telling people that I was a full-blooded Indian. I inhaled Indian myths and among my favorites were those involving reincarnation. How magnificent and mysterious to be Estsanatlehi, the “woman who never dies. She grows from baby to mother to old woman and then turns into a baby again, and on and on she goes, living a thousand, thousand lives.” I wanted to be that Navajo woman. I wanted to live a thousand, thousand lives. I crept through the woods near our house, reenacting these myths, and wishing, wishing, for a pair of soft leather moccasins. (I admit—but without apology—that my view of American Indians was a romantic one.)¹⁴

In her speech, Creech did not push back on what her cousins had said about their ancestor. It has led people to think that Creech is a Native American. This is likely affirmed by what she said later in her speech:

I don’t see Salamanca as a Native American; I see her as an American, who, like me, has inherited several cultures, and who tries to sort out who she is by embracing the mystery of one strand of that heritage.¹⁵

Like Creech, countless Americans believe they have a Native ancestor. Which tribal nation the ancestor was from is of no significance to those who embrace romanticized family stories. What they do with that story, however, has dire consequences. The individuals I’ve discussed so far have received awards and recognition for their books. The awards ensure that schoolteachers across the country will assign their books and libraries will buy at least one copy. These authors, in short, have tremendous impact on children—and the adults those children become.

Individuals who claim to be Native, and whose books and writings evolve into movies or performance venues, also shape views of Native peoples. In 1976, a man who wrote under the pen name “Forrest Carter” wrote *The Education of Little Tree: A True Story* posing as a Cherokee man. His editor at Delacorte believed that *The Education of Little Tree* was an autobiographical story of the author’s life with his Eastern Cherokee grandparents during the 1930s. Carter’s real name was Asa Carter. He was a white supremacist, a Klansman, and a speech writer for George Wallace.

Carter’s ruse was quite elaborate. *Texas Monthly* reports that his pretense included performing Indian war dances and chanting in what he said was Cherokee.¹⁶ Before writing *The Education of Little Tree*, Carter wrote *Gone to Texas*. It sold well enough that Barbara Walters invited him to appear on the *Today* show in 1975. People who knew him from his days with the KKK and the George Wallace campaign saw that segment of the show and recognized him. Wayne Greenhaw, an Alabama newspaperman, subsequently wrote an article, “Is Forrest Carter Really Asa Carter?” It came out in *The New York Times* on August 26, 1976.¹⁷ Given the profile in the *Times*, some thought it reasonable that the book would fade away. But when the University of New Mexico republished Carter’s novel in 1986 with the subtitle “A True Story by Forrest Carter” and a foreword by Rennard Strickland, an Osage professor of law, its sales took off. On October 4, 1991, the *New York Times* published another item debunking Carter’s identity, titled “The Transformation of a Klansman.”¹⁸ After that, UNM Press dropped the “true story” subtitle and reclassified the book as fiction. It continued to sell well and in 1997 was made into a movie.

Year after year, *The Education of Little Tree* appears on high school reading lists across the United States, no doubt helped by the encouragement teachers get from esteemed professors like Henry Louis Gates, who defended the book, and from well-regarded radio programs. In 2014, *This American Life* and *Radio Diaries* featured *The Education of Little Tree*. While both were careful to include facts about who Carter really was, they still end on a note that the book has merit and should be read. The April 26, 2019 issue of *Minnesota English Journal* (the journal of the Minnesota Council of Teachers of English) included an article in which the author, Chris Drew, insists that Carter’s book be taught in the classroom, even though he cites concerns put forth by Daniel Heath Justice and Shari Huhndorf, two leading scholars in Native studies.¹⁹ Cherokee scholar Justice pointed out that Carter’s Cherokee words are not, in fact, Cherokee.²⁰ In her study of Carter and his book, Huhndorf characterized the book as Carter’s stereotypical vision of Native life and posits that the book is his instruction manual on how to go Native.²¹ Cherokees, he tells us, don’t cry, and clad in their moccasins, they know how to walk quietly. These are what some call positive stereotypes. Whether negative or positive, the impact of stereotypical imagery has been shown to depress the self-esteem of Native children.²² Given the impact that stereotypes can have on Native children, it is troubling to see professors and influential radio programs defend and recommend Carter’s book for use with children.

In the 1950s, Don Morse Smith began his decades-long pretense as a Cherokee man who called himself Chief Lelooska. He also created and sold art similar to that created by Indigenous peoples of the Northwest Coast.²³ Smith enacted storytelling

from Northwest Coast Nations and, eventually, he and his family performed dances for the public and school groups in what they called the Lelooska Museum in Washington. He wrote two books for children in the 1990s and shaped the way at least one author, Rosanne Parry, thinks about Native people. In the author's note for her book published in 2013, she cites the "magical" impact that Lelooska's performances had on her when she was a fifth grader. Parry does not claim to be Native, but felt no compunction about creating Native characters and making up petroglyphs and a Native story to go with those petroglyphs in her own book for young readers. For five years she felt qualified to offer a writing workshop titled "Research and Empathy: Writing across Cultures," in which she encouraged all writers to "include characters from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds."²⁴ Smith's actions, in short, shaped Parry, and Parry's actions, in turn, shape others who feel they can do as she and Smith did.

Both Carter and Smith claimed to be Cherokee. In the United States, stories of people who believe they are Cherokee abound, while in In Canada, there has been an explosion in claims to Métis identity. Two writers claiming to be Métis are David Bouchard and Joseph Boyden.

"WHEN I WAS WHITE"

On August 3, 2014, children's book author David Bouchard stated, "when I was white, I had a ten-year plan and a five-year plan and a one-year plan. Everything was laid out."²⁵ That changed in his forties when he found out that his family had hidden their Métis identity.²⁶ On his website and in public appearances, Bouchard asserts he has ancestors in several tribes, including Ojibwe and Osage, and that at night when he is sleeping, his grandmothers from those tribes speak to him. He usually plays a flute at these public events, in essence performing a Native identity.

Bouchard—like Carter and Smith—is playing on the ignorance and guilt of white people. He performs stereotypes that non-Natives do not see as stereotypical. His story about hiding Native identity works because people understand parents' desire to protect their child from harm. In those stories, people say their parents or grandparents believed the child would "do better" if they lived life as a white person. White guilt over what society and their own ancestors did to Indigenous people translates into an uncritical embrace of stories like the ones Bouchard sells, and that story can be turned into a lucrative career. Bouchard's first book for children, *The Elders Are Watching*, came out in 1990 during the time he thought he was white. Descriptions of the book identify him as a British Columbian teacher, with no mention of a Native identity. His next book came out in 1994. It and the dozens of others he has written since then identify him as Native. Though the content has a pan-Indian, stereotypical quality, his books sell well. Bouchard went from being a white man to being a white man who is determined to be recognized as Métis. In 2007, Bouchard received a letter from the Métis Nation British Columbia telling him that "MNBC cannot verify your genealogical connection to the traditional Métis homeland."²⁷ Bouchard asked for a review of the materials. The findings of that review were the same, but Bouchard continues to say that he is Métis. What he did is aptly described as "race shifting."²⁸ Problems

with his claims to Native identity are not well known. In 2013, a public school was named after him.

On December 22, 2016, Robert Jago, tweeting as that week's Indigenous guest host of the "IndigenousXca" account, tweeted a substantial thread of information about Joseph Boyden (an acclaimed adult novelist whose *Wenjack* was written for teens and whose *Three Day Road* is used by some high school teachers) that shocked Native and non-Native people who had believed Boyden's claims to Native identity. The next day, Jorge Barrera ran "Joseph Boyden's Shape-Shifting Identity" on the website of the Indigenous Peoples Television Network.²⁹ It was followed by articles in newspapers in the United States and Canada. Like Bouchard, Boyden claimed several different nations, including Nipmuc, Ojibwe, and Métis. In "The Making of Joseph Boyden" in *The Globe and Mail* on August 4, 2017, Eric Andrew-Gee reported that the identification card Boyden used was issued by the Ontario Métis Aboriginal Association (also known as the Woodland Métis Tribe), but that its membership policy does not require any proof of Indigenous ancestry. Like Bouchard, Boyden says that his family kept stories about Indigenous identity private "in order to survive in the early 1900s."³⁰ And like Bouchard, Boyden has a high profile in Canada as a spokesperson for Native issues. His books sell well and he has won literary prizes for them.

With their "hidden" heritage stories and their claims to ancestry in more than one Native nation, Bouchard and Boyden may be contributing to an explosion of claims of being Métis. Writing for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's "Unreserved," a radio program and online page for Indigenous content, Métis scholar Brenda Macdougall states that there is a misperception that Métis—written with a capital M—means "mixed" or "mixed blood." People with mixed heritage can say they are métis, but they are not of the Métis Nation. The Canadian government strategically uses this misunderstanding to disenfranchise the Métis, whom the government wrote out of existence once before, in the late 1800s. The Métis Nation was officially recognized in 1982.³¹ When anyone with mixed heritage can be assumed to be Métis, then that hard-fought recognition is at risk.

The Harm

Claims made by the people I've discussed in this essay are undermining the well-being of Native peoples and Native sovereignty across North America. All have written for children. In their books, they introduce or affirm stereotypical ideas about Native peoples. Novelist Louis Owens wrote that Jamake Highwater was successful because "he looked the part and wore fringe and leather, buckskin suits, did all the things and fit the images that the world expected."³² In word, action, and public performance, authors falsely posing as Native profit from mainstream expectations of what a Native person is supposed to be. When educators assign their works to schoolchildren, they feed a cycle of misrepresentation. Native readers who recognize those stereotypes must choose to challenge their teacher or regurgitate untruths. Non-Native readers may take those stereotypes as fact and carry them into adulthood where, through their

work, they may employ stereotypes in decision-making that may ultimately have a negative impact on everyone.

Indeed, family stories of Indigenous identity and a family member with high cheekbones were enough for Elizabeth Warren—a senator with significant political power in the United States—to behave as if she were, in fact, Cherokee and Delaware. Her effort to prove that identity led her to take a DNA test in response to a dare from Donald Trump, as if that would put an end to the challenges to her claims. As readers who follow US politics know, it did not. Though Warren subsequently issued an apology for the uncritical use of that family story, many—myself included—think it is far from sufficient. With her profile and platform, she has the ability to help people understand the harm she did in telling that story and in taking and using a DNA test as proof of a Native identity. She could read and recommend books like Kim TallBear's *Native American DNA: Tribal Belonging and the False Promise of Genetic Science* and Darryl Leroux's *Distorted Descent: White Claims to Indigenous Identity*.³³ Unfortunately, Warren's vague apology satisfied those who needed that information the most and their ignorance continues, unabated.

In his 1991 *New York Times* article about Forrest Carter, Dan T. Carter ended with a provocative question: "What does it tell us that we are so easily deceived?"³⁴ The easy answer is ignorance but the harder question is, "what are you doing to interrupt the ignorance?" The things we learn in childhood are very hard to unlearn. When they are packed as warm fuzzies in children's books, there is an emotional dimension to the knowledge that we, as adults, must recognize as stereotypical material that harms everyone.

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