

**Online Resource: Toolkit for Keeping Children's Classic Literature Featuring
Indigenous Stereotypes in Public Library Collections**

University of Alberta

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Should Classic Children's Books Featuring Indigenous Stereotypes Remain in Children Collections?

TRIGGER WARNING This article or pages it links to, contains information about Indigenous stereotypes, images and language which may be triggering.

Often, many classic children's books feature inaccurate Indigenous Stereotypes. But is the answer purging them from the children's collection in public libraries? These classics are often beloved books enjoyed and shared generation to generation. This means they will be asked for by the public. To knowingly purge these items from the collection could be seen as a form of censorship. As information professionals in public libraries, we want to ensure that freedom to read is upheld. The American Library Association states,

We realize that the application of these propositions may mean the dissemination of ideas and manners of expression that are repugnant to many persons. We do not state these propositions in the comfortable belief that what people read is unimportant. We believe rather that what people read is deeply important; that ideas can be dangerous; but that the suppression of ideas is fatal to a democratic society. Freedom itself is a dangerous way of life, but it is ours. (American Library Association, 1953).

This means that public libraries have the responsibility to offer these children's classics, but that they also have the challenge to educate their readers about the inaccurate stereotypes featured within the texts.

How Are Indigenous Stereotypes in Children's Classics Harmful?

Do children's classics really harm children? In short, yes. The inaccurate stereotypes harm by:

- Perpetuating inaccurate stereotypes
- Being blatantly racist
- Normalizing stereotypes and racist language
- Devaluing how Indigenous children and youth see themselves
- Determining how Indigenous voices are heard

Studies have shown that racial biases start to develop by the age of 3 (Baron & Banaji, 2006). By continuing to present children with these stereotypes and not talking about them, the cycle of normalizing inaccurate ideas, images and terms is perpetuated. In addition to the harm of stereotypes to all readers, even more troubling is the harm to Indigenous children who may find these books on the shelf of their local library. Rudine Sims Bishop warns about the harm to children when "the images they see [of themselves] are distorted, negative [or] laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society in which they are a part," (1990, para. 4). Indigenous professor, Wanda Muse Isaacs recounts her memory of reading *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* when she was a child. She states, "Injun Joe makes appearances ever so often and he's the ultimate bad, the ultimate evil and murderer...Mark Twain as much as I love Mark Twain [he] criminalized and dehumanized this man. It was difficult to read this book" (Dodge, 2019, para. 16). She goes on to say, "Am I supposed to see myself in this? There's no one that I know, nobody in my family that was like that." (Dodge, 2019, para. 22). For Indigenous children who are trying to find themselves mirrored in a book, this can be incredibly distressing.

The silence of Indigenous characters, in particular, women, has also been identified as a harmful stereotype. Quigley urges readers to think about what is being communicated by Indigenous characters who do not speak. This further represents an inaccurate Indigenous view for non-Indigenous children. More importantly, it is showing Indigenous children that their voices are not important (Quigley, 2016). Debbie Reese is an avid supporter and reviewer of Indigenous written books and books written about Indigenous Peoples. She believes books that contain inappropriate stereotypes are harmful because they remind Indigenous people of how others see them and affect how they see themselves (American Indians in Children's Literature, 2009).

What can libraries do with these books?

Education is key. Libraries have the challenge of educating their community about the inaccuracies and providing resources to parents to educate their children. How libraries choose to display, integrate, program around these books is up to them based on the community they serve. Working in a public library, you know your users best. Plan around what makes sense for them. The following sections offer suggestions for how public libraries could create displays or programs.

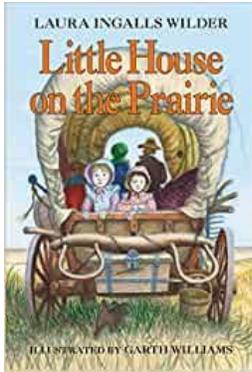
Check out these public libraries who have helpful education programs in place

[Nashville Public Library](#)

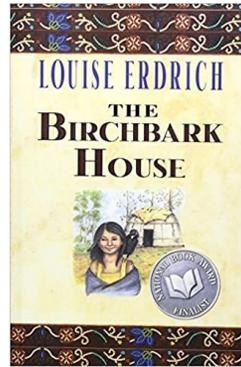
[San Francisco Public Library](#)

Offer read-alikes

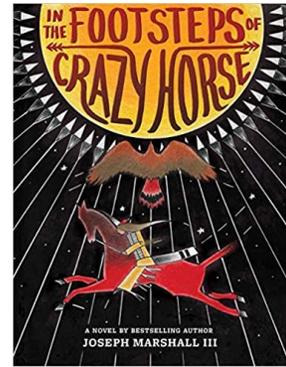
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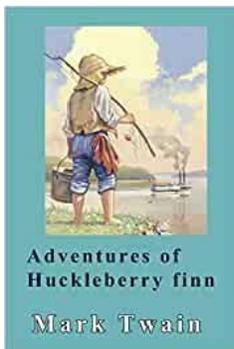
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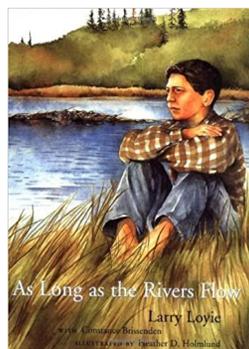
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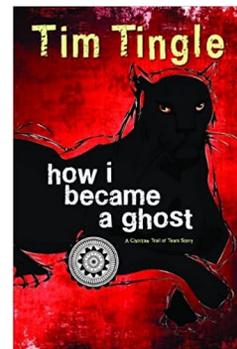
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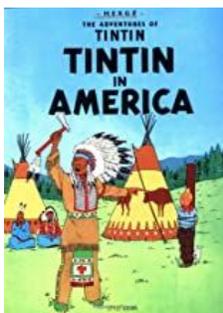
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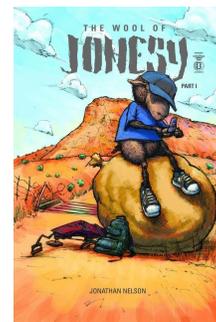
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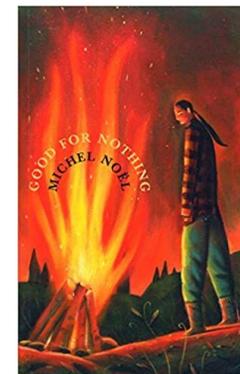
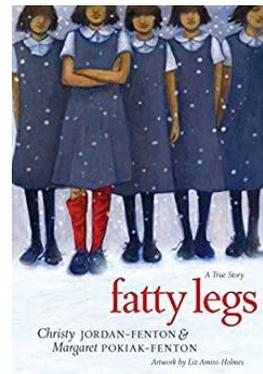
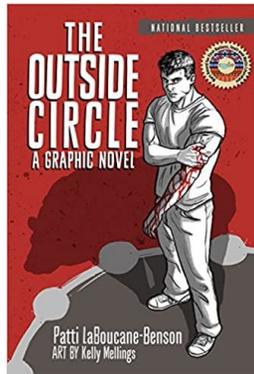
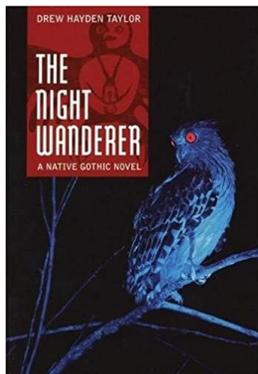
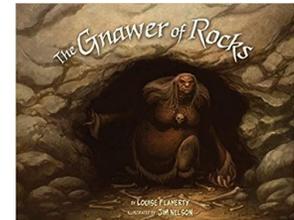
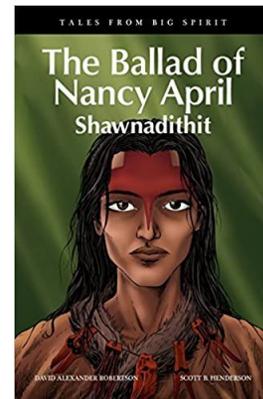
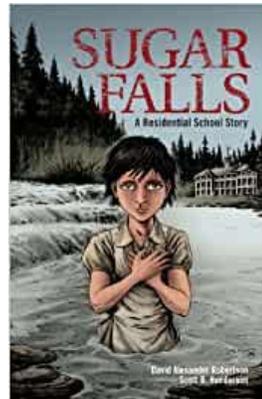
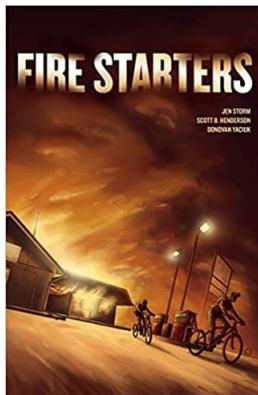
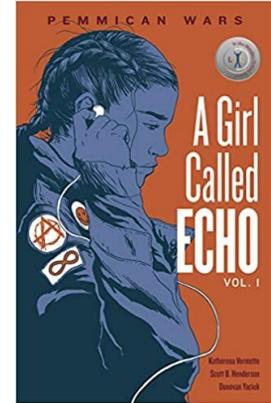
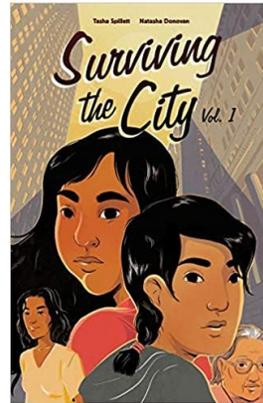
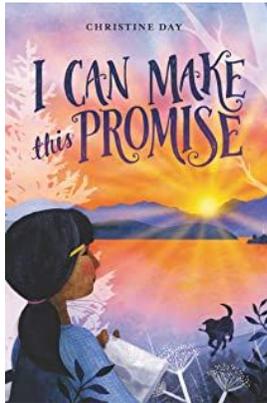


Try...



Offer Indigenous Voice Book Displays

Try to choose books that feature diverse story lines, not just ones that feature residential schools. While these books are incredibly important, they are not the only important part of these diverse and wonderful cultures.



Let's Talk About It Kits

*Note: These kits are focused on Indigenous stereotypes and education.

What these kits are not

The intent and use of these kits is not to shame readers for enjoying these books. Many of these books have been lovingly passed down generation to generation as a way to share and bond. This should not be ignored or judged.

What these kits are

These kits are a form of education. They educate parents and caregivers about the stereotypes in these books, while also being a resource for how to talk about race and racism with their children.

For children, the kits not only encourage them to think about voice but also provide them with an accurate version of Indigenous cultures in the form of an Indigenous voice book.

These kits also offer a way for libraries to remove these books from the shelves without removing them from the collection. This ensures that children, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, will not stumble upon them without context being given. Additionally, this frees up shelf space for more Indigenous voice books.

Finally, these kits offer the opportunity for conversation, to help de-normalize harmful stereotypes in a safe and nurturing space.

Example of a Let's Talk About it Kit

TRIGGER WARNING This kit contains information about Indigenous stereotypes, images and language which may be triggering.

Each kit will include a copy of the problematic classic, a read-alike written by an Indigenous author, a discussion guide for parents, tips on how to talk to your child about race and racism, online resources, and *Speaking Our Truth*. Suggested packaging includes backpacks, cloth bags, or plastic containers.

If making your own kits for your library, it is highly suggested to partner with Indigenous community members or enlist a sensitivity reader, to ensure the content you are including is appropriate and non-triggering.

Let's Talk About It Kit: *Little House on the Prairie*

- *Little House on the Prairie* by Laura Ingalls Wilder
- *The Birchbark House* by Louise Erdrich
- *Speaking Our Truth* by Monique Gray Smith
- Discussion Guide (Appendix A)
- Tips For How to Talk to Your Child About Race and Racism (Appendix B)
- Additional Resources (Appendix C)

Appendix A

Discussion Questions For *Little House on the Prairie*

The questions in this guide are only a suggestion. Feel encouraged to talk about questions that arise during or after reading together. You may choose to ask questions as you go through the book or you may choose to wait until after you have finished reading. You know your child best and what will work best for them. Find additional information in the Tips for Talking to Your Child About Race and Racism section.

Each question will have some additional information or talking points to help you facilitate a meaningful discussion with your child.

1. Who is telling the story? Who is the main character? Who is the author?

Voice is very important in relaying accurate information. Who tells a story matters to the integrity of the cultural/racial/sexual background of the characters. Is the author of the same cultural/racial/sexual background as the characters? If not, encourage your child to think about what that could mean for the information they are reading. Compare their answers for *Little House on the Prairie* to the book *The Birchbark House*.

In *Little House on the Prairie*, the author is a white woman. Her descriptions of the main character based on herself, Laura, would be very accurate. However, her descriptions of the Indigenous People show where her knowledge is flawed. This culture is shown in stereotypical ways that are not at all accurate.

The Birchbark House is written by an Indigenous author and features Indigenous characters. How does this change the story?

2. How are Indigenous People shown in *Little House on the Prairie*?

There are many ways Indigenous stereotypes are portrayed in this book. Compare these images to the characters and scenes in *The Birchbark House*. How are they different? Why are they different?

3. Was it fair or unfair that the settlers moved into “Indian territory”? Why?

Read pg. 30 and 31 of *Speaking Our Truth* for some extra information about land rights.

4. Why do you think the Ingalls family was scared while listening to the Indigenous ceremonies in the evenings?

Explore some of these videos showing different Indigenous ceremonies. Discuss what the ceremonies each mean and what they represent. Talk about the ceremonies you and your child share.

★ Dene Drum Dance

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iQcPd7Jdl84>

★ Northern Traditional - 2015 Manito Ahbee Pow Wow - PowWows.com

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=6&v=wZ7rzIfvIm8&feature=emb_title

★ Men's Chicken - 2018 Morongo Pow Wow - PowWows.com

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KczNMEeLpD0>

5. How did you feel reading about the Indigenous Peoples in *Little House on the Prairie*? How was this different from how you felt about reading about the Indigenous characters in *The Birchbark House*?

Possible topics could include:

- ★ Unfairness
- ★ How characters speak, look and act
- ★ How other characters treat them.

6. How are you the same as Omakayas? How are you different? How is Laura Ingalls the same/different from Omakayas? From you?

It is helpful to talk to your child about celebrating both the ways we are the same and the ways we are different. Follow up questions could be comparing sameness and differences between your child and their best friend.

Appendix B

Tips for Talking to Your Child About Race and Racism

- ★ Think about how comfortable you are talking about race and racism. Getting ready to talk about this topic with your child first starts with you thinking about your own feelings of fear or of being uncomfortable. If you are uncomfortable because you don't feel prepared, take a look at the Additional Resources to gain confidence.

- ★ Think about your own biases.

- ★ Don't feel like you have to know all the answers. Use this as an opportunity to search for information with your child. Look critically at sources to help them learn how to find good information.

- ★ Create a safe space to talk openly. This is more than just physical space. It is also how you react to the questions and answers your child has. Model respectful listening and responding. Instead of saying, "no, that's wrong" consider saying, "I have a different idea about that".

- ★ Remember that this is a conversation not a lecture. It is ok for answers to be short or for your child not to want to talk in the moment. It's also ok if they are giving answers that reflect stereotypes. This is what your conversation is for. Talking about stereotypes and getting your child to think about why these stereotypes are used, and how they are harmful and inaccurate is the goal.

- ★ If your child doesn't feel comfortable talking, you could try drawing pictures or role playing with puppets or dolls.

- ★ Take care of your mental health during these conversations. These topics can be difficult to think and talk about.

- ★ Be open and responsive to your child's questions. Let them know they can ask you questions about race and racism.

- ★ Discuss race and diversity in everyday life, not just when reading together. Talk about what they see in the media or at school. This becomes a regular conversation instead of a special discussion about race.

- ★ Ask them questions. What do they know about race, racism, diversity or stereotypes? Let them be the leader of the conversation.

- ★ Celebrate the celebrations and diversity of other cultures. Visit festivals, try new foods and learn about how other cultures celebrate.

- ★ Together, learn about the history of other cultures. Be careful to look at your resources carefully to ensure that the information is correct. One way to do this is by choosing books/movies/shows that are written by an author who is of the same cultural/racial/sexual background as the resource.

Appendix C

Additional Resources

Books

[*How to be an Antiracist*](#) by Imbram X. Kendi

[*White Fragility*](#) by Robin DiAngelo

[*So You Want to Talk About Race*](#) by Ijeoma Oluo

Websites

American Indians in Children's Literature

<https://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com/>

American Indians in Children's Literature: Problematic Phrases

<https://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com/p/all-you-do-is-complain.html>

Let's Talk!

<http://www.tolerance.org/sites/default/files/general/TT%20Difficult%20Conversations%20web.pdf>

National Museum of African American History and Culture: Talking about Racism

<https://nmaahc.si.edu/learn/talking-about-race/topics/race-and-racial-identity>

Talking to young children about race

<https://www.alsc.ala.org/blog/2018/05/talking-with-young-children-0-5-about-race/>

Teaching for Change

<https://www.teachingforchange.org/teaching-about-race>

UNICEF: Talking to your kids about racism

<https://www.unicef.org/parenting/talking-to-your-kids-about-racism>

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