

Teaching about Aboriginal Canada through Picture Books

Marilynne V. Black



All children need to see themselves reflected in the books they read. Through reading, they make connections and relate to characters, places, and events. As Susan Shipton states, “Like food and shelter, every child has a right to high-quality books, books that both act as mirrors to reflect their lives and act as a window into other people’s lives.”¹ In this way, children develop a strong sense of self as individuals, as members of a family, as members of an ethnic group, and as citizens of a country. In addition, cultural pluralism, “where the importance of accepting different races, ethnicities, languages and cultures is well recognized” affirms that children need to have their own ethnicity honored and that of others explored.² Only by learning about others can we relate to them and realize that we are more alike than we are different. Furthermore, we may find that stereotyping and prejudice diminish while tolerance and cultural understanding flourish.

How can teachers help their students become, not only self aware, but aware of others? Bainbridge and Malicky advocate integration of language arts and social studies using children’s literature.³ In British Columbia, for instance, social studies in most of the elementary grades do not have prescribed textbooks, and therefore, trade books become a valuable resource. Picture books, in particular, are extremely useful tools as they both tell stories and provide visual information at the same time. Any book that focuses on cultural aspects of a particular group is helpful. We read about a people’s beliefs and customs and see how they dress, live, travel, eat, and play.⁴ Understanding

culture, in all its facets, ultimately leads to global understanding and empathy. The book *Cultural Connections*, by Ron Jobe, former president of the International Board on Books for Young People, clearly delineates how teachers can access cultures through books by studying both visual cultural markers, such as those mentioned above, and language markers, such as names, expressions, dialogue patterns, and story types.⁵

Illustrations not only help inform readers, they also foster a sense of place through their depictions of landscape, including flora and fauna. In addition, they often help us see the interaction between people, landscape, and

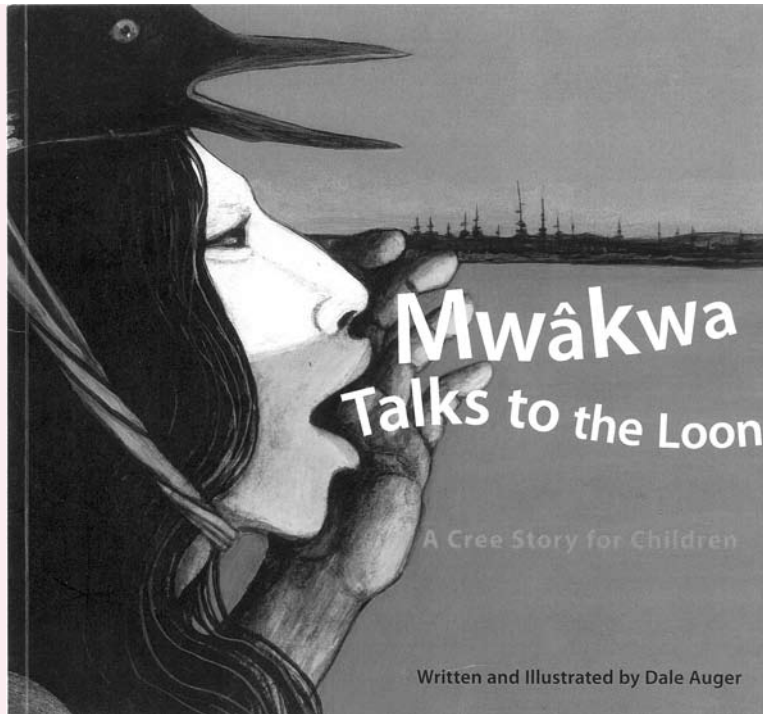
climate. In *Mwakwa Talks to the Loon*, for instance, illustrations depict a Canadian Native hunter paddling a canoe; clothing styles among Canadian Natives that include beads and head-dresses; Canadian Native homes—structures made seemingly of birch bark; the presence of fish (and fish drying racks), geese, and moose; as well as a display of the Northern Lights.⁶

Ann Swanson aptly quotes Louis Reil (1844-1885), a Canadian politician and Métis leader (Métis are mixed race descendants of Europeans and Natives) who founded the province of Manitoba, and led two rebellions against the Canadian government. Convicted of treason and hung, he is today considered by many to be a folk hero. Reil stated, “Our people will sleep for a hundred years and when they awaken it will be the artists that give them back their spirit.”⁷ Nowhere is this statement more accurate than for many First Nations groups.⁸ Norval Morrisseau was one of the first recognized Canadian Native artists who reached world acclaim. In British Columbia, Mungo Martin and Bill Reid, are two of the better-known artists (both carvers), who brought their tribal cultures



left: *Ancient Thunder*.
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to prominence. Today, such Native artists as George Littlechild and Leo Yerxa bring their artistry to vibrant children's picture books while Richard Van Camp and David Bouchard write evocatively from a Native perspective.

The aboriginal people of North America are extremely diverse and their cultures very rich. In Canada, as in other parts of North America, Native people adapted well to their environments. These locales include the harsh and barren Arctic, the lush Pacific Northwest coast rainforest, and the open central prairies. Their artistic expressions have always been linked to the natural resources available: cedar masks and totems, soapstone sculptures, and reed baskets. Artists often incorporate traditional symbols and designs in their paintings, while at the same time seeking to explore new mediums.

Language, Legends, and Myths

Tribal designations exist across international borders; as a result what applies to Canada also applies to parts of the United States. Therefore, a number of the books mentioned in this article are actually U.S. publications. Paul Goble is

one of many American authors who has written and illustrated Native legends (such as *The Legend of the White Buffalo Woman*).⁹ Kathy-jo Wargin's *The Legend of the Lady's Slipper* and *The Legend of the Loon* are two other examples.¹⁰ Today, Native languages are taught in some schools with significant Native populations; additionally, Native languages are increasingly incorporated into texts of trade books. Bouchard's *Nokum is My Teacher* displays English on one side of the page and Cree on the other side. Other books, such as *Mwakwa Talks to the Loon*, sprinkle Native words throughout the text without compromising the meaning or flow.¹¹

Legends and myths are a revealing way to explore culture. In the case of First Nations peoples, there is an abundance of quality literature available. E. Pauline Johnson (1861-1913), a Canadian poet and author, was the daughter of a Mohawk chief and a British mother. Her stories are considered classics of Native and Canadian children's literature.¹² She is probably best known in British Columbia for her *Legends of Vancouver*.¹³ The tale *The Lost Island* from that collection was recently published in 2004 in picture

book format.¹⁴ In the book, illustrations include Native masks and designs, and ceremonial robes worn by the Coast Salish. Other visual cultural markers include totems and longhouse facades.

Native creation tales are wonderfully varied, easy to locate, and offer great opportunities to make comparisons and contrasts. A Mohawk tale recounts that the world was covered with water until a muskrat brought mud from the bottom of a lake to form the first land, while a Blackfoot version states it was an old woman toad. Several other tribes have similar stories. The Haida believe that the first people came from a giant clamshell. It is especially interesting to compare and contrast similar stories from around the world with those closer to home. Such stories can be categorized in the following sub-groups:

- Beginning of the universe
- Beginning of the Earth
- Beginning of people
- Explanations of natural phenomena (e.g., thunder)
- Animals and their characteristics
- Plants and their characteristics
- Discovery of fire

William Toyé's *The Fire Stealer* can be contrasted with Jonathan London's *Fire Race: A Karuk Coyote Tale about How Fire Came to the People* as they both deal with the discovery of fire.¹⁵ Wargin's *The Legend of the Lady's Slipper* is one of many stories dealing with the creation of plants.¹⁶ Other stories, such as Susan H. Shetterly's *Raven's Light*, explain how the sun or moon were created.¹⁷ *Maple Moon* tells of the possible discovery of maple syrup by a Mississaugan boy.¹⁸ *The Legend of the Loon* could well be used in conjunction with William Toyé's *The Loon's Necklace* and *Mwakwa Talks to the Loon*.¹⁹

A central character in creation stories is often a trickster. The Natives of the American Southwest have Coyote, the Pacific Northwest have Raven, and the Australian aboriginals have Tiddilick, a giant frog. Some of these stories are about a great flood. For instance, *Raven Returns the Water*, from the Pacific Northwest, can be compared to Bible stories of the flood as can the Australian aboriginal tale *The Biggest Frog in Australia*; Mexican tales such as *The Tree That Rains: The Flood Myth*

of the Huichol Indians of Mexico; and South America's *Llama and the Great Flood*.²⁰

Native Perspectives

Stories about Natives and Native legends by non-indigenous people have often led to concern and debate about the appropriation of voice. However, increasingly, Native groups are writing and publishing their own stories and legends. Established in 1980, Theytus Books became the first publishing house in Canada to be owned and operated by First Nations people. Today, contemporary First Nations literature is growing rapidly in Canada. C.J. Taylor has written a number of legends both from her Mohawk heritage as well as from other Native nations. *Bones in the Basket* tells stories about the creation of the world and helps capture the richness and diversity of seven nations.²¹ *How Two Feathers Was Saved from Loneliness* is a story about the beginning of agriculture.²²

Stories from the Inuit and Métis are becoming more accessible. Michael Kusugak is a preeminent Canada Inuit author. His books *Arctic Stories*, *Baseball*

Bats for Christmas, and *Northern Lights: The Soccer Trails* depict modern Inuit children and their daily lives.²³ Several Inuit tales are told in *Arctic Adventures: Tales from the Lives of Inuit Artists*.²⁴ It includes brief biographies of the artists associated with each story and shows an example of their art.

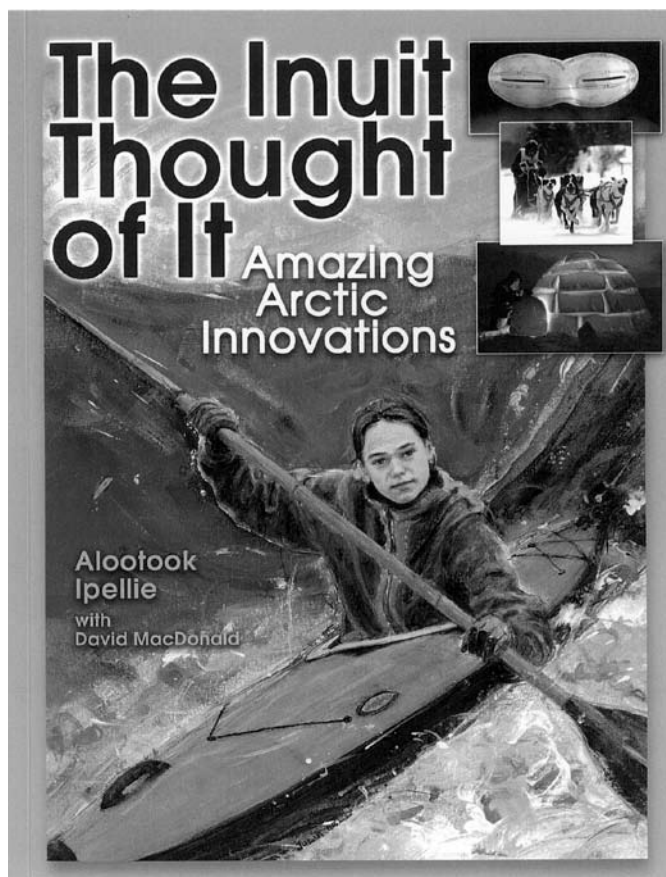
Canadian educator, writer and presenter, David Bouchard, a Métis, has written a number of books including *Qu'Appelle: Song Within My Heart* and *The Elders are Watching*.²⁵ In the latter, the emphasis is on reverence for the earth—a core belief for many Native groups. His book, *Nokum is My Teacher* depicts a young boy asking for guidance from his beloved grandmother.²⁶ An added bonus is that the book is accompanied by a CD of the story in the Cree language. It ends with drumming and chanting by Northern Cree, a Native recording group.

Although not an Inuit, Maxine Trottier, a prolific Canadian author, has written *Dreamstones*. It is the story of a young boy in the days of sailing ships and Arctic exploration who wanders away from the ice-bound ship.²⁷ When he falls asleep

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

1. Brainstorm a list of favorite folktales. Have each child tell (or write) why that particular story is a favorite. Collect as many examples as possible of these picture books for a class library and read some aloud over a period of days. In addition, collect some examples from different cultures. Discuss with the children how the illustrators portrayed the cultures. For instance, Gerald McDermott's treatment of various folktales—such as in *Arrow to the Sun: A Pueblo Indian Tale*—reflects each culture beautifully.
2. Use a comparison chart to study the variations of similar folktales such as Cinderella or flood stories. Look at setting, main character, magic/good/evil person(s), problem, events, conclusion or result.
3. Identify and list on the board or chart common motifs (a recurring salient thematic element), patterns or archetypes in various folktales. Stith Thompson has written six volumes documenting thousands of motifs (*Motif-Index of Folk-Literature, 1932–37*). A simplified list might include the following: good versus evil; rags to riches (and sometimes back to rags); magical objects, spells, curses or wishes; trickery; journeys; fairy godmothers, ogres, or evil stepmothers; taboos; a person of humble origin triumphing and transformation. As the children read various folktales the list can be further developed.
4. Using common motifs, have the students write their own "folktale." Have them emulate the techniques of a well-known illustrator in a style appropriate to the story (e.g., collages similar to those created by Elizabeth Cleaver or George Littlechild).
5. Compare and contrast the modern environmental movement with beliefs held by Natives. One such topic might be to compare modern day whaling with traditional whaling techniques such as those practiced by the Nootka people (<http://ncseonline.org/nae/docs/reaveley.html>). The Nootka are principally on the northwest coast of North America. An investigation of controversies surrounding the practice of whaling is another possible topic for exploration.
6. Explore the art forms of various Native groups. Make various "artifacts" such as a paper maché Haida mask (www.spiritsofthestcoast.com/masks.asp); a Tlinglit button blanket (go to www.hud.gov, and search "button blankets"); or carve an Inuit sculpture (www.freespiritgallery.ca/materialsinuit.htm). Make drums and rattles and dramatize a Native legend.

Cover image from *The Inuit Thought of It: Amazing Arctic Innovations*, written by Alootook Ipellie with David MacDonald, published by Annick Press, 2007.



he dreams that an Inukshuk comes to life and rescues him. Another, *Storm at Batoche*, has Louis Reil as a principal character.²⁸ An author's note gives background information about Reil.

Contemporary stories depicting aboriginal children have, until recently, been harder to find. However, now a growing number of stories such as *A Boy of Tache* and *A Salmon for Simon* are filling the void.²⁹ Each of these books is illustrated by Anne Blades in her signature primitive style. *The Very Last First Time* portrays a modern Inuit girl searching for mussels on the ocean floor under the ice at low tide.³⁰ Illustrator Ian Wallace chose deep blues and purples to depict the watery undersea world. In addition, he incorporates a number of Inuit spiritual beings hidden in the formations under the ice. There are also a number of stories where Natives play a significant role. For instance, *Four Pictures By Emily Carr* tells about the life of the renowned Canadian artist, including time she spent among the peoples of

the Pacific Northwest.³¹ The illustrations are in comic book style. The Cinderella-like tale *Sarah and the People of Sand River* tells a story of Icelandic settlers in Manitoba interacting with a Native group dying of smallpox.³² A granddaughter, Sarah, is later helped by the spirit of that group. Ian Wallace's stunning illustrations bring both the Icelandic and Native cultures to life.

Literature and Historical Empathy

It is often through historical fiction that students see issues and events from the perspective of others.³³ These perspectives must include those outside "the culture of power," such as aboriginal groups, who have been historically marginalized. Discussing the injustices in history not only helps develop critical thinking, but it also helps to develop historical empathy. Linking historical fiction to what children are learning about Native Canadian culture fosters this type of empathy. Including such stories in the

classroom is today made easier by the increasing number of books that deal with controversial issues in a sensitive manner, and that are often written or illustrated by aboriginal people.

Shi-Shi-Etko and *As Long As the Rivers Flow* are two stories that deal with the forced placement of Native children into residential schools—where they were often abused—from the perspective of children.³⁴ Another social issue, HIV, is handled in a positive manner by Larry Loyie in *The Gathering Tree*, about a young Native man with HIV who returns to his rural Native home to attend a gathering.³⁵ The stewardship of land and its animals is a social issue that is a central theme in many Native tales. *The Mountain Goats of Temlahem*, *Keepers of the Earth: Native Stories and Environmental Activities for Children*, and *A Man Called Raven* are just a few.³⁶

Many curricular areas, in addition to social studies, can be augmented by aboriginal stories. For instance, many art projects can develop from the study of illustrations. A number of William Toye's books have been stunningly illustrated by Elizabeth Cleaver with collages that mix block prints, torn paper, and natural items. Another of Cleaver's books, *The Enchanted Caribou*, uses silhouettes.³⁷ Award winning Leo Yerxa's *Ancient Thunder* also uses a type of collage in which the paper appears to be tanned hides.³⁸ George Littlechild's *This Land is My Land* incorporates family photos into bold and graphic pictures.³⁹ Having children try their hands at these and other styles adds a great deal to their understanding, not only of art but of culture as well. Other activities can involve listening to Native music or performing a play, such as one from Bruchac's book *Pushing Up the Sky: Seven Native American Plays for Children*.⁴⁰ Areas of the science curriculum can benefit by using a variety of stories such as those with an environmental focus.

Today's nonfiction books have changed drastically from the dry, text-laden books of 20 years ago. Now many

are more like picture books. Some, such as *The Kids Book of Aboriginal Peoples in Canada*, are longer—with, for example, 63 pages instead of the usual 36—but have the dimensions of a large picture book.⁴¹ In addition, the text is broken up with ample white space and many pictures, maps, diagrams, and sidebars. In this particular book, for instance, the uses of birch bark by the Algonquians and cedar by the peoples of the Pacific Northwest are detailed, in addition to the inclusion of short biographies of noteworthy Native people. Another title, *The Inuit Thought of It: Amazing Arctic Innovations* explains the invention of such artifacts as parkas, snow goggles, and kayaks.⁴² This book highlights Inuit words with italics and provides a clear explanation of their meanings.⁴³ The transition between traditional and modern Inuit life is explored. These inclusions do much to foster an appreciation of indigenous cultures and of how these cultures have been affected by non-Native groups.

Canadian aboriginal people—First Nations, Inuit, and Métis—have added a great deal to the fabric of Canada. Their lives are an integral part of Canadian history. It is partially through books that children can gain an understanding and appreciation of the cultures of Canada's first people and recognize their contributions. These books are highly readable, visually appealing, and wonderful adjuncts to the stories. 📖

Notes

1. Susan Shipton, "Join IBBY's Inspiring Renaissance," *Canadian Children's Book News* 31, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 2.
2. Joyce Bainbridge and Brenda Wolodko, "The 'Canadian' in Canadian Children's Literature," *Journal of Children's Literature* 27, no. 2 (2001): 55.
3. Bainbridge and Grace Malicky, *Constructing Meaning: Balancing Elementary Language Arts* (Toronto: Harcourt Canada, 2000), 10.
4. Patricia A. Richard-Amato and Marguerite Ann Snow, *The Multicultural Classroom: Readings for Content-area Teachers* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1992), 74.
5. Ron Jobe, *Cultural Connections* (Markham, ON: Pembroke Press, 1993), 24.
6. Dale Auger, *Mwakwa Talks to the Loon* (Surrey, BC: Heritage House, 2006).
7. Anna Swanson, "News Roundup: Serendipity Celebrates the Power of Story," *Canadian Children's Book News* 31, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 4.

8. The term "First Nations" refers to Canada's aboriginal people, with the exceptions of Métis and Inuit peoples.
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