# The Popular Culture Native American Context of *Little House on the Prairie*

Jefferson Peters*

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## 1. *Little House* out of Context

In *Little House on the Prairie* (1935) Laura Ingalls Wilder presents a complex view of Native Americans. In the novel the Ingalls, including Pa, Ma, Mary, Baby Carrie, their dog, and five-year-old Laura, move west

* Professor, Faculty of Humanities, Fukuoka University

from Wisconsin to the prairie of Kansas Indian Territory, the home of the Osage tribe. There in the 1860s the family tries to make a home, building a house, barn, garden, and farm, as well as relationships with their white and Native neighbors. As I demonstrate in "The Native American Other in *Little House on the Prairie*" (2008), from the start of their journey when Pa tells Laura that she can see a papoose in Indian Country, Wilder weaves into her novel various encounters with and views of Native Americans. Nearly nude Osage men visit the little house to eat cornbread and take tobacco (137-140); Pa escorts Laura and Mary to an abandoned Osage camp and teaches them how Indians cook and eat (173-78); a noble Indian (Soldat du Chêne) visits the house and partakes of food and tobacco with Pa (227-29); Ma expresses her dislike of Indians everywhere "underfoot" (229); a pair of "dirty" Indians almost take all of Pa's furs (232-34); Pa plays and Ma sings a song about an Indian maid (234-36); Pa and an Osage man communicate about a panther via sign language (262); the Ingalls' neighbors express the mainstream "the only good Indian is a dead Indian" prejudice (284); Pa convinces his neighbors not to build a provocative stockade (288-89); and after a terrifying debate Soldat du Chêne persuades various tribes not to attack the settlers in the area (290-301). The climax of the novel, when the Osage, leaving their land, ride en masse past the little house and Laura finally sees an Indian baby, makes eye contact with it, desires it, and loses it as it vanishes with the other Indians over the western horizon, is controversial. Some scholars see it as a perverse objectifying of the Indian other and a false aestheticizing of Indian Removal (Smulders), while others see it as a moving and honest elegy for a lost chance at inter-cultural communication (Romines). However the climax is read, it is

clear that for the only time in the novel Laura loses all of her self control when overcome by her impossible desires and that after watching the Indians leave, she and her family feel sad and empty. Even Ma feels "let down" and for the only time in the novel is unable to prepare dinner or to do any work (311).

As Sharon Smulders points out in "'The Only Good Indian': History, Race, and Representation in Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie*" (2002-03), Wilder's novel employs stereotypes of Native Americans: the "bad" Indian who "steals" from white people, the "noble" Indian who is silent and regal, the "good" Indian who facilitates white possession of his land, and the "vanished" Indian who conveniently departs from the world of white civilization. As I argue elsewhere ("Native American"), however, by presenting a constellation of stereotypes rather than following one, by sometimes subverting the stereotypes, and by providing some well-researched details of Osage culture, Wilder's novel complicates its stereotypes almost to the point of transcending them. Although Pa ultimately feels and acts like a proud pioneer who believes he has the right to settle on Indian land, he does not hate them and to some extent is able to understand their cultures (how they hunt and cook and live) and even to express their point of view (why they are resentful at having to make way for white people). And Laura often assumes the Native American point of view and asks difficult questions like why the Osage have to move from their own land, questions that disturb Pa and Ma and stimulate the reader to think about the relationships between Native Americans and white Americans in the era of westward expansion (236-37).

Smulders asserts that Wilder wrote her novel "at odds with a growing

awareness of and appreciation for native cultures in Depression-era America," for "In 1934, the year before *Little House on the Prairie* appeared, the Indian Reorganization Act, also known as the Indian New Deal, became law, encouraging the restoration and protection, albeit in a flawed fashion, of tribal practices and resources" (202). To support this claim, however, she only briefly mentions two long out of print books for adults by the Osage John Joseph Mathews as examples of more complex and positive treatments of Native Americans contemporary with *Little House on the Prairie*. In *Constructing the Little House: Gender, Culture, and Laura Ingalls Wilder* (1997), Ann Romines mentions the "growing awareness of and appreciation for native cultures" in America in 1935 to explain how what Wilder called her "Indian juvenile" "may have seemed a promising commodity even in a Depression book market" (64) and argues that *Little House on the Prairie* "attempted a more complex cultural study than much of the other available children's literature" (64), but although she demonstrates the complexity of the novel's treatment of Native Americans, she does not discuss any children's books. Both scholars, then, accurately point out the increasing interest in Native American subjects in the USA of the 1930s, but although for Smulders *Little House on the Prairie* ignores that interest while for Romines the novel fulfills it, neither scholar supports her argument by discussing other works of children's literature contemporary with Wilder's novel. Because I detail the complexity of Wilder's depiction of Indians elsewhere ("Native American"), the purpose of the present paper is to delineate the popular culture context of *Little House on the Prairie* regarding Native Americans. I will focus on children's novels that were published within ten years on either side of *Little House on the Prairie* and

that won the Newbery Medal award given by the Association of Library Service to Children (ALSC) to the best American children's book of the year. Since its inception in 1922, the Newbery Medal has been the official arbiter of mainstream taste in books for children in America. Winning the Medal assures that librarians, teachers, and parents will introduce a book to their children and that it will stay in print (only four of the eighty-seven winners are out of print today). In order to broaden the contextual focus, I will also discuss John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939), a classic Western movie which, although not primarily for children, is a useful guide to mainstream American views of Indians in the early twentieth century, as well as survey recent trends in children's literature regarding Native Americans. By establishing the relevant popular culture context, I hope to disprove Smulders' claim that *Little House on the Prairie* departs from the Depression-era interest in Native Americans and to prove Romines' claim that the novel follows it more than most children's books of that time.

## 2. Negative Views of Native Americans

Unsurprisingly, when *Little House on the Prairie* was published the most common type of popular culture narrative featured Native Americans stereotypically and negatively, like the Newbery Medal-winning *Smoky the Cowhorse* (1926) by Will James. James' novel details the different stages in the life of a horse named Smoky from his point of view: his birth and curious colt-hood fascinated by his new world; his loving training by the white cowboy Clint and his work as an expert roundup cowhorse for the Rocking R ranch; his theft from the ranch and his exploitation in a traveling rodeo as "Cougar," the smartest, meanest, and most dangerous

bucking bronco; his loss of competitive strength and heart leading to his time as a quiet, over-worked rental riding horse named Cloudy; his near death as an abused cart horse; and finally his rescue by Clint, who takes him to his own ranch, where the horse lives out his healthy long last years as mentor and playmate to young colts. According to the realistic illustrations he drew for his novel and to the many details he writes about how cowhorses are born, trained, work, play, and retire, James, a former horse wrangler, cowboy, and rancher, knows horses. He also wrote squarely in the racist mainstream of the early twentieth century. The most villainous figure in the novel, the anonymous man who steals Smoky from his idyllic life as a cowhorse and sets him on his hate-filled self-destructive path, is referred to as "the half-breed" or "the breed" (227):

> All of him, from the toe of his gunny sack covered boots to the dark face which showed under the wore out black hat, pointed out as the man being a half-breed of Mexican and other blood that's darker, and noticing the cheap, wore out saddle, the ragged saddle-blanket on a horse that should of had some chance to feed instead of being tied up, showed that he was a half-breed from the *bad* side, not caring, and with no pride. (208)

Because a half-breed is "especially the offspring of a Caucasian and an American Indian" (*American* 594), we may assume that the Indian blood, "darker" than white blood and flowing in the people who are "*bad* . . . not caring, and with no pride," is what makes the man an abusive villain. James implies that people with different skin color have different colored blood and that "dark" blood is morally inferior to "white." Smoky's "hate was plainest for the face that showed dark" (242), as if white people like Clint are

not cruel to animals, whereas Indians are, from pure meanness of spirit signified by their "darker" bad blood. After enduring much abuse from the "breed," Smoky kills him in an act of justified manslaughter. James writes no redeeming qualities in his nameless villain, nothing that would engage the sympathies of his child reader. The Native American tribe in question is unspecified, it being enough for James to imply that "*bad*" Indian blood causes the man to mistreat Smoky.

Whereas *Smoky the Cowhorse* occurs after the "West was won" and Indians "pacified," so that the worst conflict in the novel occurs between the "half-breed" and the horse, in Walter D. Edmonds' Newbery Medal-winning novel *The Matchlock Gun* (1941) Indians attack Dutch colonists in the Hudson Valley (in today's New York State) during the French and Indian War (1754-63). The story concerns ten-year-old Edward Van Alstyne's efforts to protect his mother Gertrude and little sister Trudy from Indian attack while his father Teunis is away on a militia patrol. In the opening of the story, Teunis teases Gertrude about her "nonsensical, old-fashioned" (5) family heirloom, a matchlock gun which, being too heavy and long, hangs ever unused over the fireplace, "asking whether she had brought the gun with her [from Europe] to kill Indians" (2). Teunis condescendingly views both his wife and her gun as unfit to kill Indians. But not long after he leaves, a raiding party approaches the family farm, and Gertrude plans a trap for the Indians with herself as bait, and in the harrowing climax she runs to the house pursued by five Indians, one of whom throws a tomahawk that strikes her shoulder just as she is signaling Edward to fire the gun, which he accomplishes with devastating effect. A hail of bullets, nails, pebbles, and brass buttons sprays out from the bell-shaped mouth of the

gun and instantly kills three of the Indians, cripples a fourth (who is later killed by the militia), and scares off the fifth. At the end of the story, Teunis and the other militiamen applaud Edward: "You've killed more than all the rest of us put together!" (62) Edmonds elaborates on the different European origins of Edward's mother, a "dark, brown-eyed" Palatine from Holland (2) and father, a "lusty and thick-set ... true Dutchman" (2), and their resulting different body and character types, but his Indians are identified only as Indians or "French Indians." Although *The Matchlock Gun* occurs during a war in which the French and their Native American allies were fighting the British and their Native American allies, with Dutch colonists caught in the middle, Edmonds' novel gives the impression that only the French were using Indians. There are no explanations for why the Indians are siding with the French against the colonists, no narration from their point of view. Edmonds writes no distinctive descriptions of the Native Americans' clothes or accessories or comportments, and names or individualizes none of them, and the illustrations by Paul Lantz show generic Indians with fringed leggings, loincloths, bare chests, feathers, roached ("Mohican") hair styles, and tomahawks. When the raiding party approaches Edward's house, the Indians are inhuman: "They hardly looked like men, the way they moved. They were trotting, stooped over, first one and then another coming up, like dogs sifting up to the sent of food" (48), the "food" being Edward, Gertrude, and Trudy. Native American women and children are absent from the story, perhaps to avoid any identification between white child readers and the enemies of their ancestors. Nothing in Edmonds' novel encourages the reader to sympathize with the Indians, though an imaginative child may wonder how it would

feel to have bullets and nails penetrate his or her body. The character closest to the age of Laura is Edward's little sister, Trudy, who, unlike Laura, has no desire to see Indian babies or to be an Indian. The only interest she shows in Indians is to mock their clothes, singing, "The Indians don't wear breeches. Oh the Indians don't wear breeches" (27) until she is hushed.

*Stagecoach*, directed by John Ford, depicts Native Americans as villainously and one-dimensionally as do *Smoky the Cowhorse* and *The Matchlock Gun* and, as in the latter novel, sets them in the role of savage threats to white civilization. Possessed of excellent writing, acting, music, editing, cinematography, and directing, the film was nominated for seven Academy Awards and won two and is "One of the great American films, and a landmark in the maturing of the Western, balancing character study . . . and peerless action" (Maltin 1259). *Stagecoach* is the quintessential Western movie of its era; in Ira Konigsberg's *The Complete Film Dictionary* (1987) a still from *Stagecoach* is the only illustration for the Western genre. The film and its genre expressed and shaped mainstream American views of Native Americans. As Konigsberg writes,

> The Western, more than any other film genre and more than any other creative form, has both embodied America's cultural history and helped shape the nation's image of itself. The Western has consistently created a world of expansiveness and expectation, where the vast, untamed landscape is indicative of the independence and potentiality of its inhabitants. Although such a location is far from the stifling reality and social restrictions of the civilized East, the people who live there—and struggle against the

> wildness of the terrain, its indigenous inhabitants, and the outlaws with their rampant individualism—have created a code of personal ethics that affirm their own dignity and independence without denying their responsibility to others. (407)

From 1939 throughout the twentieth century American boys like my friends and me watched *Stagecoach* and other movies like it and acted out scenes from them in our Cowboys and Indians play and dreamed of being heroic cowboys fighting evil "Injuns." With his appearance in *Stagecoach* as the Ringo Kid, "the archetypal Western hero—young, brave, fast with his gun, gentle with women, democrat with a small d" (Roberts and Olson 149), John Wayne began his rise to become "one of the biggest box-office attractions the screen has ever known," stepping into his role as the iconic cowboy and American hero of "mythical proportions," the symbol of the Western genre and the appropriate relations between whites and Native Americans played out within it for much of the twentieth century (Katz 1436). In 1979 the Orange County Airport in Southern California was renamed "the John Wayne Airport," and since 1982 a nine-foot (2.7 meter) tall bronze statue of the Duke in his cowboy role has swaggered through the arrivals terminal with his hand poised above his pistol. (Ironically, the statue was cast by the Hoka-Hey Fine Arts Foundry of Texas, "hoka hey" being the Lakota war cry co-opted by white culture for manly enterprises like the Hoka Hey Challenge motorcycle competition.)

In the movie a varied group of white Americans travel in a cramped stagecoach through the mountainous desert from Tonto in Arizona Territory to Lordsburg in New Mexico Territory, imperiled by the dreaded Apache chief Geronimo and his warriors, who have just "jumped the

reservation." Each character has reasons for being on the stagecoach: the alcoholic doctor Josiah Boone and good-hearted prostitute Dallas have been banished, the overbearing banker Henry Gatewood has embezzled, the pregnant "lady" Lucy Mallory yearns to reunite with her officer husband, the chivalrous gambler Hatfield must guard her, the milquetoast liquor salesman Samuel Peacock is on a business trip, the heroic cowboy the Ringo Kid is out for revenge on Luke Plummer, the man who killed his brother and caused him to be sent to prison, and the honest Marshall Curly Wilcox is escorting Ringo back to prison. Two violent climaxes dominate the movie. In the first mounted Apaches pursue the stagecoach across the desert at high speed, trying to kill all the passengers, while the Ringo Kid, aided by Doctor Boone, Hatfield, and Curly, holds off the Indians until the US Cavalry comes to the rescue and sends them packing. In the second Ringo makes his own justice during a street fight in Lordsburg, killing Luke Plummer and his two right hand men. Although the camera shows Ringo and companions kill sixteen Indians, the hero's killing of the three white men tactfully occurs off-screen, the implication being that killing Apaches is more palatable and exciting than killing bad white men.

The Apaches in *Stagecoach* resemble the Indians in most movies, TV shows, books, and comic books of the twentieth century until the Civil Rights era of the 1950s and 60s. The white characters in the film refer to the Apaches as "rattlesnakes," "butchers," and "savages" who "go on the warpath to massacre" whites. Their raison d'être is to attack white civilization: telegraph wires, ranches, ferries, stagecoaches, and people, especially women. Their theme music, played to signal their lurking presence, is typical threatening Hollywood "Indian" music, with simulated

tribal war song orchestration. When Hatfield believes that the pursuing Apaches will capture the stagecoach, he tries to shoot the officer's wife, an "angel," before she can suffer the fate worse than death that the Apaches will inflict on her. The only Indian named in the film is the infamous Apache leader Geronimo, who is never profiled or developed or given camera shots to clearly establish his identity. We learn nothing about Apache culture or individual personalities or reasons for leaving their reservation. Moreover, the Apaches in the film are played by Navajo men, the real life former enemies of the Apaches, or by white stunt men like Yakima Canutt. No Apache children appear in the film, and the only "Apache" filmed close up, the Mexican inn owner's wife Yakima, is a typical sultry Hollywood female Indian (played by Elvira Rios, a Hispanic actress). When she absconds with the spare horses, the Mexican inn owner cares more about losing them than his wife. Nothing from real life complicates the film's portrayal of Apaches as evil demons. According to Frederick E. Hoxie's *Encyclopedia of North American Indians* (1996), Apaches lived in mother-based clans on farms, and their most important social event was the ceremony held the first summer after a girl's first menstruation. Several times in the 1870s and 1880s Geronimo (1829-1909) led small bands of his people (men, women, and children) off their reservation searching for a place where they could live freely, and each time the US military hunted, attacked, and returned them to the reservation. Although some Apaches killed white settlers, from the 1850s to 1886, white citizens of Arizona and US soldiers killed far more Apaches. "A series of incidents in which Americans pretended friendship but killed or poisoned Apaches ensued, and this treachery eventually ignited the Apache wars, which lasted from the

1850s until 1886" (Hoxie 29). Despite the Apaches being confined to "barren, hot, disease ridden" (Axelrod 241) reservations that "became giant concentration camps" where "Food supplies were inadequate, and the army exercised total control" (Hoxie 29), the US military did not prevent white Arizonans from "killing from 86 to 150 Indians, mostly women and children" and selling twenty-nine children into slavery (Axelrod 240). Geronimo, whose real name was Goyathlay, died a prisoner of war in Florida.

An argument could be made for *Little House on the Prairie* belonging to the Western genre, for, although it lacks the action-violence of typical Westerns, it concerns the move into the uncivilized west, "a world of expansiveness and expectation . . . independence and potentiality" by Laura and her family and their attempt to live with "independence without denying their responsibility to others" as they "struggle against the wildness of the terrain" and "its indigenous inhabitants." In the "Texas Longhorns" chapter, in fact, cowboys driving a great heard of cattle north pass the little house and Pa works with them for two days, Laura lying awake at night listening to the cowboys sing "high, lonely, wailing songs, almost like the howling of wolves" (165) and running around in the day waving her sunbonnet and yelling "Hi! Yi-yi-yi!" and wishing "she could be a cowboy" (167). Wilder's novel, however, confines the "only good Indian is a dead Indian" ideology to the Ingalls' neighbors, and unlike in *Stagecoach* cowboys are only men who work with cattle, not Indian-killing heroes, and unlike the Ringo Kid Laura imagines the Native American point of view, enjoys learning about their daily life, likes their clothes and artifacts, wants to be an Indian, makes intense eye contact with one, and feels loss

when they leave.

*Smoky, The Matchlock Gun*, and *Stagecoach*—in which Native Americans are vile "half-breeds" or "savage dogs" or treacherous "rattlesnakes" deserving of righteous extermination—belong more to the male-oriented action sub-genre of historical fiction, whereas *Little House on the Prairie* belongs more to the female-oriented family sub-genre, so the presence or absence of violence and even of negative stereotypes of Native Americans may seem to derive from the different genres of the three works. In this context it is instructive to consider *Hitty: Her First Hundred Years* (1929) by Rachel Field, a Newbery Medal-winning novel for girls. The titular character is an ash-wood doll who tells the story of her life belonging to various girls in various places and eras in US history. She begins when, in the early nineteenth century, she is made by a peddler and given to Phoebe, a girl living with her Puritan descent family in New England, and recounts whaling in the south seas, surviving as an idol among island cannibals, belonging to the unpleasant daughter of missionaries in India, living through the Civil War, showing off as a doll of high fashion in a rich household in NYC, serving as an artist's model, learning to be poor with the daughter of black plantation workers, and finally living quietly as the favorite item in an old woman's antique shop. Early in the novel, Phoebe takes Hitty with her into the woods with the family chore boy Andy, who has heard that there are "Injuns round again ... Passamaquoddies" (21). Apparently they have approached the white settlement to sell baskets, though Andy believes they cannot be trusted and tells Phoebe, "We'd better watch out in case we see any" (21). Despite the hot day, Phoebe shivers: "I'm scared of Injuns" (21). When Phoebe and Andy sight some, they are both so

frightened that they run away home, leaving Hitty alone in the woods. Hitty is terrified, too, when she hears "voices muttering behind me strange words I could not understand" (23), but "They were only some five or six squaws in moccasins, beads, and blankets, who had come after raspberries" (23). Hitty observes them:

> I watched them filling their woven baskets and thought they looked fat and kind, though rather brown and somewhat untidy as to hair. One of them had a papoose slung on her back, and its little bright eyes looked out from under her blanket like a woodchuck peering out of its hole. It was almost sunset when they padded off through the trees again with their full baskets. (23)

Field is showing that "Injuns" are not only fearsome warriors bent on massacring white people: the women, gathering berries in a female group, look "kind," and one has a baby with bright eyes reminiscent of the one Laura sees in the climax of Wilder's novel. And they are identified as Passamaquoddies, a step away from the universal Indian of much American children's literature. On the other hand, their details are generic (woven baskets, moccasins, beads, blankets) and not wholly pleasant (dark skin and unkempt hair) and bestial (the baby is like a woodchuck, while the "squaws" pad like quadrupeds). Hitty, like Laura, sees the bright eyes of a papoose, but unlike Laura she is not moved by them nor exchanges deep eye contact. Instead of longing to be a Passamaquoddy or to belong to one of their girls, Hitty pines for Phoebe. The Indians fail to see her, and instead crows, more observant than the Indians, carry her away to her next adventure. Field's stereotypical Native Americans are related to those in *Smoky the Cowhorse, The Matchlock Gun,* and *Stagecoach,* minus their violence.

## 3. Mixed Views of Native Americans

Not all the popular culture narratives contemporary with *Little House on the Prairie* are as stereotypical and negative in their treatment of Native Americans as those in the above four works. James Daugherty's *Daniel Boone* (1939), another Newbery Medal winner, appears to belong to that set, but actually hints at a greater complexity. Because I argue that in detail elsewhere ("James Daugherty's"), I will here give but a brief overview of the book's depiction of Native Americans. Daugherty's book covers the life of the iconic American frontier hero, Daniel Boone (1734-1820), from his youth with his family in Pennsylvania, through his mature years as a married man and father who seems to prefer a life of adventure to a settled farm life with his family, participating in the French Indian War, exploring the Kentucky Territory and leading settlers into it, to his old age as a noble patriarch who has been dispossessed of his Kentucky land by eastern entrepreneurs. Throughout the biography, Daugherty focuses on conflict with Native Americans, "savages" who seem to exist solely to attack plucky white frontiersmen and settlers like Boone. Sixteen of Daugherty's forty-four illustrations show white-Indian violence, with the aggressor Indians represented by muscular, half-naked, snarling male warriors attempting to brain, scalp, or shoot Boone or his daughter or fellow colonists. Boone, who becomes "famous all through the mountains for his cool courage and skill as an Indian fighter" (38), calmly tells his family about "burning towns and destroying whole tribes" of "red varmints" (24). Daugherty puts the responsibility for the frontier bursting into "violence and murder" and war with the Indians (38), "fearsome images of violent death that haunted the dreams of every border family" (22), and equates

them with "the hosts of darkness" when Boone helps Boonesborough hold out for nine days during a siege by treacherous "redskins" in the climax of the biography (59-66). Throughout his book, Daugherty almost never shows Native Americans and white people living in peace. His version of a famous episode in Boone's life when the hero is captured and adopted by Shawnees and lives for some time with the tribe misleadingly has Boone constantly planning to escape his "imprisonment" without caring anything for his Indian family or community. Daugherty justifies the few examples of white violence to Native Americans in his book by juxtaposing them with the many atrocities of the "savages." Like *The Matchlock Gun, Daniel Boone* does not explain that Indians attacked settlers and forts to try to defend their land against white invasion or because they were co-opted to fight for France or England or their colonies. Daugherty also remains silent about the many treaties that the colonies and USA broke or signed with the wrong tribes or chiefs. While *Little House on the Prairie* describes Osage women cooking rabbits and Osage men wearing skunk pelt loincloths and speaking French and free Osage children riding horses, *Daniel Boone* gives almost no specific details about the Cherokee or Shawnee cultures or people with whom Boone mostly dealt, gives almost nothing that would encourage a child reader to sympathize with the Native Americans.

Daugherty, however, writes and illustrates a brief though remarkable scene in *Daniel Boone* providing the Native American point of view on their tragic history as victims of white aggression, invasion, and displacement that separates his book from the narratives discussed above. In an impressive passage nearly half-way through the book, Daugherty writes interesting details about Native American clothes: "white buffalo robes ...

claw necklaces and wampum and copper armlets . . . war axes, turkey-feather fans, hatchet pipes" (39). More importantly, the Indians here are defiant against "treacherous pale faces," (39), white people's color and ethics being presented negatively relative to Indians' for the only time in the book. Though he holds to the morally comfortable mainstream white view of Indians as "doomed" to lose their lands to more advanced white technology and greater white population, he includes an excerpt from "Reply to a Missionary Agent," a famous speech by the Seneca chief Red Jacket. Red Jacket expresses the Native American point of view, saying that in return for "corn and meat" and agreements to share land with their white "brothers," the Indians were given deadly "poison" (alcohol), were hired to fight other Indians, and were dispossessed of their land until "we have scarcely a place left to spread our blankets" (40). Taking Red Jacket's "Missionary Agent" as a cue, in his illustration Daugherty draws white hands offering a warrior a bottle and a Bible as a rifle shoots him in the back, while before him his wife holds his dying son. The union of alcohol, Christianity, and violence is striking. In the resolution of *Daniel Boone*, the aging hero goes hunting with an Indian, compares himself to Indians in being dispossessed of his Kentucky land, and is teasingly said to be an Indian by his grandchildren. Granted that such moments, like the passage with Red Jacket, are brief and outweighed by the dominant conflict between productive white settlers and destructive red savages, it is impossible to imagine even such limited identifications with Native Americans or attempts to portray from their point of view the dark underbelly of the heroic myths of white westward expansion in works like *Smoky the Cowhorse, The Matchlock Gun, Stagecoach,* or *Hitty: Her First*

*Hundred Years.*

Compared to *Daniel Boone* Carol Ryrie Brink's *Caddie Woodlawn* (1935) treats Native Americans in a mixed but more sympathetic manner. Whereas Wilder's novel did not win the Newbery Medal, *Caddie Woodlawn,* like the other books discussed above, did, which means that the ALSC judged it to be superior to *Little House on the Prairie.* For that reason, and because it was published in the same year as Wilder's novel and also recounts one year in the life of a pioneer girl and her family in the 1860s and their views of Indians, *Caddie Woodlawn* seems helpful to compare with *Little House on the Prairie.* Caddie Woodlawn, like Laura, is a sensitive, brave, and imaginative tomboy closer to her open-minded father than to her conservative mother. Caddie's father, like Laura's Pa, is well-disposed towards the neighboring Indians and is pleased that his wife feeds them when they visit the house. He has even upgraded their rifles from outmoded flintlocks to contemporary spring action triggers. Like Laura's Ma, Caddie's mother dislikes Indians, "frightful savages," and wishes that they would not come around to "eat us out of house and home" (7) and that her daughter would be less interested in them. As in Wilder's novel, in Brink's the Indians represent a wilder and freer way of life that appeals to the girl protagonist as part of her desire to escape becoming a "lady" in the mold of her mother. It seems at first glance, then, that *Caddie Woodlawn* is as complex and positive as *Little House on the Prairie* in its depiction of Native Americans.

The novel opens with Caddie and her two brothers preparing to cross a river to reach the island of the local Indians, when Caddie's younger brother asks, "Do you think the Indians around here would ever get mad

and massacre folks like they did up north?" to which her older brother replies, "No, sir ... not these Indians" (2). Caddie adds, "Not Indian John," because he, a "good Indian," is a special acquaintance of hers. The older brother closes the topic: "the fellows who spread those masacree [sic] stories are just big-mouthed scared-cats who don't know Indians" (3). Through Caddie and her brothers Brink asks fearful questions that her child readers may have and answers them reassuringly with the idea that not all Indians are the same and that the ones near Caddie's family are peaceful. Once across the river, the trio is invited by Indian John to watch his people make a canoe: "They fastened the pliable sheaths of birch bark into place on the light framework, first sewing them together with buckskin thongs, then cementing them with the hot pitch" (10). In providing authentic seeming details of daily Indian life, the scene is reminiscent of that in *Little House on the Prairie* when Pa takes Mary and Laura to visit an abandoned Indian camp and teaches his daughters how Indians cook and eat, although here Caddie and her brothers visit an inhabited camp on their own. The children raptly watch the canoe being made until the sun is swinging low, and they depart for home, leaving the Indians marveling at the white children with red and gold hair. After furiously gathering hazelnuts, Caddie bursts into her home scratched, sweaty, and late, surprising the family's dinner guest, the local minister, who asks, "When are you going to begin making a young lady out of this wild Indian, Mrs. Woodlawn?" (14)

About halfway through the novel, rumors of an Indian uprising catch fire, fueled by the recent "Minnesota Massacre" (also mentioned in *Little House on the Prairie*).

In those days the word massacre filled the white settlers with

> terror. Only two years before, the Indians of Minnesota had killed a thousand white people, burning their houses and destroying their crops. The town of New Ulm had been almost entirely destroyed.... and only a breath of rumor was needed to throw the settlers of Wisconsin into a panic of apprehension. (119)

It lies beyond the scope of this paper to give an account of the Minnesota Massacre (or Santee Sioux Uprising) of 1862, which occurred shortly before Wilder and Brink's novels take place, but suffice it to say that for a long time the Dakota Indians were sorely provoked before violence broke out and that their losses in lives and property were far greater than those of the white settlers (Axelrod 190-95). Brink presents the incident from the white rather than Native American point of view and does not distinguish between the Dakota tribe involved and the tribe living near the Woodlawns. Caddie's father, who says, "I trust our Indians" (121), fails at first to calm his fellow settlers, who plan a preemptive strike on Indian John's peaceful people, one man saying, "Before they come for us, let us strike hard. I know where John and his Indians are camped up the river. Let's wipe them out. The country would be better without them, and then we could sleep peacefully in our beds at night" (125). Caddie slips away in the night to warn Indian John, who then takes her back home, where her father has finally convinced the other men not to attack the Indians, and he and John promise peace, standing silent together, "their hands clasped in the clasp of friendship, their heads held high like two proud chieftains" (142). Caddie's father, then, like Laura's Pa, manages to prevent a violent cataclysm with the help of Indians who choose to live peacefully. Nevertheless, the "massacree scare" leaves many white settlers with "a deeper fear and hatred

of the Indians than they had ever felt before" (145). With remarkable accuracy Caddie's mother says: "Goodness knows, the massacre was only in their [the white settlers'] own minds" (158). Partly because of the increasing ill will of the settlers and partly because the season is changing from winter to spring, John and his people leave for the west: "The old women made bundles of their furs and blankets and cooking pots and put them on pole and buckskin litters. The ponies pranced, the dogs barked. The Indian men refitted bowstrings, polished knives and guns, and prepared the canoes for a long portage over the ice" (145). In three sentences Brink objectively describes the Indians' departure, whereas Wilder writes an entire chapter from Laura's impassioned point of view for the Osage's vanishing.

In addition to portraying Indians sympathetically, *Caddie Woodlawn* patronizes them. When Caddie's brothers go out with the hired men to kill a flock of passenger pigeons, "Something of sadness filled [Caddie's] young heart, as if she knew that they were a doomed race. The pigeons, like the Indians, were fighting a losing battle with the white man" (30). The passage sympathizes with the Native American plight but also expresses the comfortable melancholy over the "inevitable" doom of the Native Americans of *Daniel Boone*. Elsewhere, Brink describes Indians "grunting and grinning" while making canoes (9) and eating crudely, Caddie shaking her head in annoyance when the "squaws" feel her red hair with "curious fingers" (10), and Caddie's brother reacting indignantly when her mother hypothetically says, "If your father had married an Indian," interrupting, "Father marry an Indian? ... He never would!" (158) Such moments, coming from a variety of characters, including Caddie, reflect the implied author's lack of respect for Native Americans. Tellingly, whereas black Indian eyes

and hair fascinate Laura, Caddie pays no attention to them, and on the contrary her red hair mesmerizes the Indians. Wilder maintains more dignity and respect for her Osage than Brink does for her Indians. Brink does write a moving scene in which Indian John says good-bye to Caddie in her house, giving Caddie his injured dog that he cannot take with him on his people's journey west and the scalp belt that he had inherited from his father, but after John leaves Brink quickly changes the mood to comedy when Caddie's mother complains about the smell of his buckskin and Caddie uses his precious scalp belt as a gory object for show, lying that it belongs to "Chief Bloody Tomahawk" and charging other children money to view it. Brink's condescension to Native Americans continues when Caddie decides to spend a silver dollar she has been saving to cheer up some children after their white father has forced their Indian mother to leave. Caddie buys them candy and spinning tops, a warm-hearted gesture, but she also buys "the three little half-breeds" (161) handkerchiefs and combs so that they may have neat hair and clean noses. That the children become so happy over the gifts demeans their sorrow at losing their mother. The red of the handkerchiefs is "like music to their half-savage eyes" (163), and they caper about and wave them in the air until Caddie says, "Now you can go home," gives "each of them a friendly pat," and says, "and mind you remember to have clean noses and tidy hair on Monday when you come to school" (164). Caddie's "civilizing" of the "savage" is the most disappointing scene in the novel.

Although Indians play a significant role in *Caddie Woodlawn,* they remain generic Indians rather than become identifiable as, say, Ojibwa, good Indians remove themselves from where white people have settled, and

they are not central to Caddie's development and Brink's plot. Indeed, after the mid-way point of the novel, its Native American story strand is dropped. Whereas the climax to Wilder's novel occurs when Laura and her family watch the Osage ride away and feel depressed afterwards, the climax to Brink's story happens when Caddie and her family individually vote to stay on their frontier farm as free Americans rather than move to England to become aristocratic land owners. After Caddie is punished by her mother for bullying her ladylike cousin, she imagines running away to live in the forest by herself or with Indians, until her father tells her that it is just as important to be a lady as to be a man, because a lady must be honest, wise, understanding, and kind and must teach those qualities to rough boys and men while they are "cutting trees or building mills or damning rivers" or "build[ing] bridges and carv[ing] roads through the wilderness" (244). An American lady must support men as they settle the west, which necessitates the removal of Indians, as Brink has earlier shown. The novel ends with Caddie facing west without thinking of Indians, "for Caddie Woodlawn was a pioneer and an American" (275), and to praise the pioneer spirit Brink has abandoned her protagonist's sympathy for "doomed" Indians. Throughout *Little House on the Prairie* Laura questions her parents' pioneer project, but Caddie never questions hers.

## 4. Positive Views of Native Americans

In *Shadows of the Indian: Stereotypes in American Culture* (1986) Raymond William Stedman describes how before the 1960s and 70s most novelists and filmmakers who portrayed Native Americans focused on "frontier strife, with Indians and whites seemingly incapable of coexistence.

. . . Attracted, no doubt, by the possibilities for an exciting climax that lay in bloody confrontation or grisly retribution" (182). He argues, however, that some authors of children's literature departed from the violent mainstream by "show[ing] a willingness to undertake quiet studies of Indian or Indian-White existence" (182), and in this group Stedman places the Newbery Medal-winning *Waterless Mountain* (1931) by Laura Adams Armer. The fascinating, detailed, and positive depiction of Native Americans in *Waterless Mountain,* published four years before *Little House on the Prairie* and *Caddie Woodlawn,* reveals their limitations. Armer was a painter, photographer, and amateur spiritual ethnologist who lived among the Navajo on their reservation, where learning their language and culture transformed her and motivated her to begin writing books for children about them at fifty-seven: "The lifestyle and folkore of the Navajo people made her feel as though she had finally found the promised land" (Bostrom 35). The Navajo accepted Armer and even permitted her to observe and to record their sacred and secret sand paintings (Bostrom 36). Her novel is full of the joy and beauty in life and the world as seen through the eyes of Younger Brother as he matures from a cheerful little Navajo boy to a young man ready to become a medicine man, farmer, and husband. With respect and love, Armer vividly portrays the Navajo way of life and way of thinking and being. Even when she shows the aspects of Navajo life that could be deemed "primitive" or "ignorant," such as Younger Brother's belief that animals like Pack Rat are guiding and teaching him, or his belief that the newsreel image of a deceased man is his ghost, Armer avoids any hint of condescension. Rather, she convincingly draws us into Younger Brother's mind and vision, so that we react as he does to the new

technology of the "Pelicanos" (white people) and to the signs that he reads in animal and plant life. As the novel relates early twentieth-century Navajo life—food (mutton, pinion nuts, corn, squash, and peaches), hair care (yucca shampoo and grass stem brushes), clothes (crushed velvet jackets and long dresses or leggings and beautiful accessories), homes (log and earth hogans), work (women making rugs and blankets, men silver and turquoise goods, and both men and women farming and raising horses, goats, sheep, and cattle), weddings (rituals, songs, dances, and feasts), child-raising (avoiding children's true names to save their power), and legends (about, for example, how Coyote put stars in the sky)—it fills us with admiration for the Navajo way of life and inspires us to live in the world in beauty.

The first chapter of *Waterless Mountain* introduces the joyful and mystical nature of Younger Brother. Eight years old, he has been given the responsibility of watching his mother's sheep while they graze on Waterless Mountain. That night he dreams of when he saw a Yay, or holy being, during his recent initiation ceremony with other Navajo boys and girls. Though the Yay was "really" a Navajo man wearing white body paint, a deerskin mask, and a fox skin, Younger Brother's belief transforms him into a true Yay. In his dream, he

> had never felt like that before. It seemed as if the whole world were whirling light and warmth. He could feel life gliding over him in warm waves.
>
> He laughed without making any noise. He could smell fresh green things growing, though there was nothing but dry sage-brush about him. He could hear the song of the mockingbird and

> of Doli the bluebird. He could hear the notes tumbling and pouring over one another, though there was not a bird around. He could see colors shimmering about the white body of the Yay. He even felt as if his feet left the ground and he were lifted up into the air. (4)

After that dream, wonderful things happen to Younger Brother as he comes to feel more and more awake in and connected to the world, being a child of the wind, the clouds, and the rainbow, and receives a tail feather from an eagle and hides it with his other secret treasures like four pieces of colored petrified wood, each symbolizing one of the four directions, and watches a bumble bee, chanting, "Your feet are pollen, your hands are pollen, your body is pollen, your mind is pollen, your voice is pollen" (21). When he sees "dancing" deer, he sings about it to Uncle, his medicine man mentor, which earns him a new sacred name, Little Singer, and makes him realize that "everything in the world sang" (43), birds, locusts, coyotes, trees, mountains, and clouds, and that everything is dancing "to the silent music that filled all the air.... To be alive meant to sing and dance" (43-44).

At twelve Younger Brother is inspired to journey to the western sea where long ago Turquoise Woman (a divine ancestor of the Navajo) went to live, and, despite his mother saying that he is too young, he embarks on the quest with his pony. On the way west he helps a white boy whose car has run out of gas and who has become lost in a dust storm, and despite not speaking each other's languages, for a while the two travel together. Younger Brother visits his widowed aunt in her home that she calls "Beautiful under the Cottonwoods" when she is marrying a young and incredibly handsome man. They are happy together, but a terrible flood destroys his aunt's house and crops and animals and drowns her new

husband. His death leaves Younger Brother with a sad conundrum: why did the man have to die? But soon he realizes that the mysteries of life are incomprehensible and that he can only live without "heaping too many goods," traveling "the trail of beauty" and opening his senses to the song and dance of everything in the world (122). Younger Brother fulfills his quest by reaching the western sea and finding the turquoise house of the Turquoise Woman, giving her some pollen and some of his secret treasures, asking her to "Restore all in beauty for my people" (133), and filling a pot with sea water to take to Uncle for his ceremonies.

In the climax of the novel, thirteen-year-old Younger Brother finds his people's sacred masks (whose hiding place was lost in the nineteenth century after the US government displaced the Navajos to Fort Sumner), and to celebrate Uncle presides over a ceremony in a lodge during which Younger Brother is initiated for a second time. After four days of preparation, the ceremony begins when the people in the lodge follow a young boy and girl in eating specially prepared foods. On the morning of the sixth day, Uncle directs twelve young men, including Younger Brother, in the making of sand paintings, which lasts three days. On the ninth night, the Navajo gather to watch the dances of the Yays led by Uncle, wearing the recovered masks representing corn, vegetation, soft grain, and pollen. Witnessing it all, Younger Brother is filled with a new ambition, to grow a garden of squash, melon, and beans. The novel closes when Younger Brother participates in his first dance for young men and women.

> His heart sang a new song. It was a song of his people who had lived in the land when the Ancients dwelt in the cliffs—his people, who had hungered and fought and made songs as they

> carried on—his people, who could sing—mothers who could weave—uncles who could heal—children, who laughed—and young men and girls, who could dance in the moonlight. (211)

As all his people and all the animals and plants and things in the world are singing the same song with him, Younger Brother is becoming a man who will marry a woman as the Sun Bearer married the Turquoise Woman.

*Waterless Mountain* does not only deal in positive stereotypes of Indians and negative stereotypes of white people. For example, Younger Brother is a well-rounded, fully human boy, not only spiritual but also curious and stubborn (as when he leaves on his quest against his mother's wishes), and during his journey west two Navajo men temporarily steal his horse. In addition to mystical scenes, Armer also writes vivid details of Navajo daily life, as when she describes them eating cornmeal cakes with strawberry jam. Most importantly, the novel expresses the present existence of Navajo life and culture, whereas works like *Little House on the Prairie, Caddie Woodlawn*, and *Daniel Boone* represent the "destined" vanishing of Indians. Armer also depicts a mixed view of white people. The Navajo in her novel view them with a fatalistic acceptance of their technology, a painful remembrance of their unjust acts, and a mild superiority regarding their desire to accumulate goods and talk too much. During his quest, Younger Brother stops traveling with the white boy after he takes a pot from a sacred grave belonging to the ancient holy people who lived in the land before the Navajo; Younger Brother would never disturb such a grave, whereas the white boy is excited to show the pot to his father and to "find" more artifacts with him. Although in general the white people in *Waterless Mountain* have negative traits compared to the Navajo, one of

the most important characters is the Big Man, the white trader doing business among Younger Brother's people without cheating or looking down on them. He understands and respects Navajo language and culture and wants to help them maintain their traditional way of life and prefers spending time with them to dealing with white tourists who ask him ignorant questions like "Do the Navajo still scalp people?" The Big Man helps to make accessible to the Navajo a new water source discovered by Younger Brother on Waterless Mountain, gives Younger Brother vital medicine when he is ill, invites his mother and father to visit a city to earn money by demonstrating their weaving and silversmithing, helps him finish his quest to the sea, and even helps him retrieve the long lost sacred masks. He also corrects his sister's more typical white Christian view of the Navajo when they host a Christmas ceremony for the Navajo children and their families. When in thanks the Indians gather money to pay for his sister's daughter to visit her, the woman says to the Big Man, "Didn't I always say the spirit of Christmas would win even a savage?" and he replies, "Didn't I always say that these people travel the trail of beauty?" (66)

In *Teaching American Indian Students* (1992) in the section on "Dealing with Stereotyping in Literature" Jon Allan Reyhner cites Wilder's novel (158), while in the bibliography section of books "suitable for reading to younger students" he lists Armer's novel (270). Comparing *Waterless Mountain* to *Little House on the Prairie* may appear to support Smulders' argument about the negative representation of the Osage in Wilder's novel, which manages little in the way of Armer's vivid, detailed account of the Navajo. But really Wilder does more than stereotype the Osage, also

relating some non-generic details and overwhelming stereotypes with Laura's desires to be and to possess the Other. And *Waterless Mountain* is an extraordinary Newbery Medal book. In addition to being one of the few winners to show contemporary (living) rather than historical (vanished) Indians, it offers the most sympathetic, accurate, respectful, and affecting portrayal of Native Americans of any Newbery Medal novel, even of those written after the civil rights movement.

## 5. Recent Views of Native Americans

Influenced by the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s and the increased interest in ethnic cultures of the 60s and 70s, children's literature began presenting more positive, well-researched, and sympathetic images of Native Americans, often from their point of view, often portraying complex relationships between white people and Indians, including ones based on understanding rather than violence. An early example of such narratives is the Newbery Medal-winning *Secret of the Andes* (1952) by Ann Nolan Clark. In the novel, which takes place in the mid-twentieth century, Cusi is a thoughtful, gentle, and strong young boy living with his old mentor Chuto and their llamas high in Hidden Valley in the Andes Mountains away from civilization. Royal Incan blood flowing in his veins, Cusi is being brought up to preserve ancient Incan culture. Although he is a willing and able student and loves Chuto, Cusi is also curious about the outside world, so after passing a thirty-day examination covering geographical and historical facts, wrestling, boxing, running, and fasting, and knowledge of ancient rites and healing, he sets off to seek his heart's desire in the city of Cuzco. Clark's white people were greedy and treacherous in

the past (Spanish conquerors destroying the Incan empire) and are ignorant and prejudiced in the present (a Spanish guard at the Cuzco gate scorning Cusi and his people: "Doesn't [he] know they've been conquered for four hundred years?" (90)) In Cuzco Cusi is playfully adopted into a large Christian family enjoying a holiday in the city, until he realizes that he wants to live the rest of his life in the Hidden Valley with his true family, Chuto and their beloved llamas. Like Armer, Clark lived among the Native people about whose traditional and contemporary ways of life she wrote (Bostrom 110). Like Armer, she describes contemporary Native ways of life that are simpler, healthier, and more spiritual than the twentieth-century city life of most of her readers: food (coca leaf, parched corn, and potato *chuno*), care for llamas (herding and shearing them and talking with them), clothes (llama yarn caps, llama wool ponchos, cotton pants), crafts (grass mats and ropes and llama products), records (*quipo* memory cords), songs (praising the stars, greeting the sun, remembering their origins), and pride in the culture that they are maintaining for each new generation of Indians.

The 1950s saw two more novels featuring well-researched and sympathetic Native Americans, though in more morally ambiguous stories than Clark's. In Conrad Richter's powerful and well-researched (though non-Newbery Medal) novel for young adults set in the early eighteenth century, *The Light in the Forest* (1953), True Son is a fifteen-year-old white boy who was captured at age four by the Lenni Lenapi near the Ohio River and adopted by one of their chiefs. As the novel opens, the Indians and the colonists of Pennsylvania have signed a treaty for which both sides must return all their prisoners, so that, despite seeing himself as a Lenni Lenapi,

True Son must return to the hated white enemies of his people. Richter's Native Americans and European Americans each scorn and misunderstand the other, each sees the other as barbarous and unnatural, and each commits atrocities against the other. Richter's sympathies lie more with the Lenni Lenapi than with the colonists, for he implies that the former live with "the light in the forest," whereas the latter bind themselves with property and goods. But he does not romanticize the Native Americans, showing that they are capable of as much brutality as white people and live by equally restrictive gender roles. In which world can True Son live? The Newbery-winning *Rifles for Watie* (1957) by Harold Keith tells the story of Jefferson Davis Bussey, a sixteen-year-old Kansas farmer who joins the Union army during the Civil War and ends up living with and fighting for Colonel Watie, the leader of a band of Cherokee rebels siding with the Confederacy so as to protect the Cherokee Nation. The "civilized" Cherokee and their reason for fighting against the Union are compelling. Jefferson is surprised to find that they live in a more technologically, economically, and culturally advanced city than his own hometown and that the Native warriors are at least as humane as their Union enemies. Will he betray the Cherokee or the Union? At the end of the novel he and the Cherokee girl he loves plan to marry, the only positive Indian-white marriage among all the Newbery Medalists.

From the 1960s and 70s, more books began being told wholly from Native American perspectives, like Scott O'Dell's Newbery Medal-winning historical novel *Island of the Blue Dolphins* (1960), the "true" story of Karana, the last member of the Ghalas-at tribe. Karana's first-person account of how she at first barely survived and then thrived by herself for

eighteen years on an island off the coast of Southern California is fascinating. In *Julie of the Wolves* (1972), another Newbery Medal book, Jean Craighead George tells the story of Miyax, a young Eskimo girl who runs away from home and, lost in the arctic, is saved by a family of wolves and lives among them until finding her way back to civilization. George powerfully expresses the loss of Native American traditional cultures by having Miyax finally find her beloved father only to learn that he has married a white woman, speaks English, and hunts wolves from an airplane. In Sharon Creech's moving novel *Walk Two Moons* (1994), which also won the Newbery Medal, thirteen-year-old Salamanca (Sal) Tree Hiddle goes on a road trip with her Native American grandparents to find her missing mother. Her Indian ancestry and culture give her strength to accept the truth behind her mother's disappearance.

As Stedman says in *Shadows of the Indian,* white authors wrote most of the books sympathetically treating Native American cultures and protagonists "during the long period [lasting until the 1960s and 70s] in which ethnic authorship was not the fashion" (182). In the last forty years or so, a modest ethnic industry has sprung up in American publishing, with many works being created by people of color, including Native Americans. It must be said, however, that Native Americans have written none of the Newbery Medal books about Indians. Jamake Highwater won the runner up award (the Newbery Honor) for *Anpao: An American Indian Odyssey* (1977), a quest story incorporating elements from the myths and legends of different Plains and Southwest Indian cultures, but in the 1980s he was exposed as a white man who had created a fictional Native persona to manufacture a career as an Indian intellectual (Adams). Similarly, no

Native American authors have won the Caldecott Medal, the award given each year since 1938 by the ALSC to the best American picture book, and the two books with Native American themes that have won the Caldecott, Gerald McDermott's *Arrow to the Sun: A Pueblo Indian Tale* (1974) and Paul Goble's *The Girl Who Loved Horses* (1978), are both by white men. It is nice that lovely picture books introducing compelling Native American tales like McDermott and Goble's win awards and may attract white children to Indian cultures—surely it is better than if books portraying negative Indian stereotypes and violent relationships between whites and Indians were still dominant—but it is a pity that not more than two of seventy-three Caldecott Medal books concern Native American themes and that the authors of the two are white.

Can, then, novels and picture books written by white authors express Native American perspectives accurately enough? And do they do more harm than good to current Native American cultures and authors? Such questions are being passionately asked by Native writers and educators, among them Doris Seale and Beverly Slapin, editors of *A Broken Flute: The Native Experience in Books for Children* (2005), which features essays and reviews by Indians about Indian-themed books. In the Foreword, Deborah A. Miranda explains, "Indian people in this country labor under a burden of denial and racism that is overwhelming. Our suicide statistics are the highest for any group. Our economic status is the lowest for any group. We disappear ourselves, and are disappeared by others" (2). According to Miranda, books that feature Native Americans divide into two categories, "Invisible Indians and Construction Material," the former being the Indians who are doomed to extinction or already vanished from the contemporary

world, the latter being those who serve as "building materials, to construct the façade of conquest, a place to house the Doctrine of Discovery," but "we are never human beings ... with our own honor, pride, integrity and existence who are capable of great deeds, and surviving with joy" (2-3). Doris Seale describes the current situation for Native Americans in popular culture art forms like children's literature in her Introduction to *A Broken Flute*:

> Since the 1980s, non-Native authors and illustrators of books for children have turned increasingly to Indian literatures, lives and histories as sources of material for their efforts. Publication of the results has become big business. Whether retellings, adaptations, or edited versions of stories: historical accounts, photographic essays or biographies, these works have been carefully produced, lavishly illustrated, and brought out with artfully orchestrated publicity. Several have become best sellers; some have won awards. They are nearly invariably well received, praised for their beauty and sensitivity, and frequently for their ecological messages, by reviewers who do not know enough to know that the works in question are inaccurate, inauthentic, patronizing, full of lies, and altogether a huge insult to the people out of whose lives so much money is being made.
>
> On the other hand, Native writers, unless very well-known, do not find publishers in the "mainstream." (4)

Seale explains the purpose of *A Broken Flute*: "to bring attention to some of the gifted [Native American] writers and illustrators of the past ten years or so . . . and also to evaluate as much as possible of the most

objectionable work of the non-Native writers" (4).

In delineating the problems inherent in translating a story from a Native American language like Navajo into English and in adapting an oral story into the written medium, Seale asks, "What then remains of its essential nature?" (4) She asserts that, even assuming that something of the story's essence may persist in a written English translation, "Taking something that has not been offered to you does not make it yours. That makes it stolen. Stories are never free" (5). Dovie Thomason describes attending a lecture by a white author of well-received books retelling Native American stories and asking the writer "about cultural appropriation. . . . using the current faddish market for 'multicultural' books to exploit the stories of other cultures" (7). The white author defended the practice, but for Thomason, no matter how well-researched such a story might be, no matter how much it reveals the universal human spirit, no matter how much the author would like to interest a wider audience in an ethnic culture, it is still cultural theft and hinders Native American authors from developing their own careers. In this context, it is compelling to note a recent FBI sting operation leading to "the largest prosecution [in US history] of looters of Native American artifacts" stolen from Southwest federal or Indian land, "including bowls, knives, pendants, even a turkey-feather blanket" (Riccardi). Some residents of the local communities in New Mexico and Utah believe that the FBI is persecuting people engaged in "a local pastime known as pot-hunting" that has gone on for a hundred years, while others believe that the criminals "were digging up grave sites. They were taking artifacts off Native American bodies" and destroying Native American history in the process (Riccardi). Such cultural theft has occurred

ever since the first contacts between Europeans and Native Americans, as, for example, when in the early seventeenth century the Pilgrims took "bowls, trays, dishes, and things like that" from Native graves in New England (Loewen 91).

Some white authors receive permission from tribal elders to use their traditional stories, so such cultural appropriation is not always as pernicious as ransacking sacred burial grounds, but many Native Americans believe that it threatens the existence of their cultures. In the world of American mainstream racism or ignorance or cultural appropriation, it may be vital for Indian writers, storytellers, teachers, librarians, and parents to express their Native American themes and cultures and to introduce them to their children: "we have to walk in that world, work in it, try to create beauty in it, raise our children in it, try to find our own ways in it" (Miranda 3), and "Our task now is to see that our children will be able to grow and live as whole human beings, and as Indian people" (Seale 5). The importance of that effort is powerfully revealed by another section of the preliminary material of *A Broken Flute,* "Living Stories" that relate incidents in the lives of Native American adults and children wherein they have received pain from stereotypical, negative, or false images of Indians in books, television cartoons, and school history units, and from the lack of understanding of teachers and the teasing of fellow students and the damage to self-esteem caused by such experiences. A mother tells of her daughter drawing self-portraits with blue eyes after being ostracized by white students who said she would scalp and eat them after her class read *The Courage of Sarah Noble* (1954), a young adult frontier novel by Alice Dalgliesh (10). A librarian writes of a white girl recoiling in fear from her

upon learning she is an Indian (12). A daughter describes her mother telling her that when she was young she wished she were Doris Day (15).

The main body of *A Broken Flute* consists of reviews of over seven hundred picture books, novels, and text books by white and Indian authors ranging from the 1900s to 2005, focusing on the accuracy or inaccuracy, benefit or harm, of their portrayals of Native American people and culture. The vast majority of works by white authors are found wanting for their negative, stereotypical, condescending, or inaccurate depictions. Dennis McAuliffe, Jr., for example, exposes the historical inaccuracies and lacunae in Wilder's novel, such as the real life white settlers' use of terrorism to kill or drive away the indigenous Osage. Unsurprisingly, the worst presentations of Indians occur in the first half of the twentieth century, when Wilder wrote her *Little House* books, but Seale and Slapin and their contributors find plenty of offensive white-authored books among the great number of Native American-themed works published in recent years. Although Sharon Creech's *Walk Two Moons* (1994), for instance, is a "poignant story" with "well drawn" characters, it "is deeply flawed by the 'Indian' material that is thrown together with no cultural or historical context and really has nothing to do with anything actually Native" (255). Even in the best cases wherein the images of Native Americans are not overtly harmful, Seale and Slapin's book is critical of white authors performing lucrative cultural appropriation of traditional stories or of giving false and harmful impressions despite the best intentions. In the picture book *Encounter* (1992), for example, the acclaimed and prolific white children's author Jane Yolen tries to tell the story of Columbus' "discovery" of the Americas from the point of view of the Taino people he and his men

first encountered, because, she says, "The 500th anniversary of Columbus's voyage was coming up" and "I felt the likelihood of any full-blooded Taino people to be still alive was not great and the story needed to be told. . . . The book was the only one in that anniversary year to speak for the Taino people in a picture book edition" (Yolen "Encounter"). Nonetheless, despite its criticism of European gold lust and cruelty, the "story-teller's imagination" of *Encounter* is essentially "European-American," saying things like Columbus "*visited* the islands" rather than invaded them, the Taino "*lost* [their] lands" rather than had them stolen, and they "*gave* [their] souls" rather than had them destroyed, and implying that the Indians partly caused their tragic fate by not believing the premonitory dream of the boy protagonist (Mendoza 197-98).

## 6. *Little House* Better than Its Peers

The closer we track the popular culture context from the 1930s to the present, the more *Little House on the Prairie* may seem out-dated in its lack of Native American perspectives and in the racist views of some of its characters. Nevertheless, even now some of its details (like Osage men wearing skunk-fur loin cloths), questions (like why Indians have to move west when white settlers come), and scenes (like Laura seeing and losing the Osage baby) remain powerful and remind us of Wilder's interest in something more than "Invisible" or "Construction Material" Indians. Reflecting the importance of the Osage to her project, Wilder's working title for *Little House on the Prairie* was "Indian Country," and she referred to it as her "Indian juvenile" (Romines 60). And yet the published title focuses on the little house (and all that it symbolizes about family, white

culture, and pioneer achievement) situated on an unmodified, neutral prairie belonging to no one. Wilder's publisher had her change the title, perhaps to suit the precedent established by the first book, *Little House in the Big Woods* (1932) (Romines 260). This title change de-emphasizes the vital Native presence in her novel, leading us to wonder why Wilder did not insist on keeping her working title or did not add "Little House" to it, as in "Little House in Indian Country." That while writing her novel Wilder saw the Indians as central but that the published title (which would strike most readers as apt) does not underscores some of the complexities in her book and in children's popular culture when it was published, the increased interest in Native American topics of the Depression era cited by Smulders (202) and Romines (64) notwithstanding. Compared to *Waterless Mountain* Wilder's book appears flawed and limited, but Armer's novel is almost unique for its time, and in the context of narratives like *Smoky the Cowhorse, The Matchlock Gun, Stagecoach, Hitty: Her First Hundred Years, Daniel Boone,* and even *Caddie Woodlawn,* Wilder's attempt to do more than rehash negative stereotypes and sensationalize violence between whites and Indians is striking. Wilder describes the Osage with some accuracy, specificity, and respect, builds towards but then avoids violent conflict, and has Laura and Pa try to express the Osage perspective, identify themselves with Indians, and reject the mainstream "the only good Indian is a dead Indian" view. Apart from *Waterless Mountain,* most of the early twentieth-century narratives prioritize the "right" of whites to settle the west, but *Little House on the Prairie* also evokes guilt and sadness for the departure of Native Americans. By writing different views for different characters and making the Indian presence and absence the core of her

novel, Wilder expresses complex and varied feelings aroused in white people by the Indian Other that rarely appear in American popular culture until the 1950s and especially the 60s and 70s.

But is it enough for *Little House on the Prairie* merely to be better than its appalling peers? Some Native Americans would like American children to stop reading Wilder's novel because its treatment of Indians is harmful or because it does not clearly mention the atrocities that white settlers perpetrated on Indians (Reese). But Wilder's novel is still incredibly popular in the United States and abroad and probably will be for the foreseeable future. And—although it may be because I am white—I am reluctant to support the boycotting of otherwise well-written books like *Little House on the Prairie* because they offend some readers. Would we then try to discourage children from reading a book like *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) because it demeans African Americans? In the current era of persistent racism and stereotyping on the one hand and of cultural appropriation and subtle condescension on the other, reading *Little House on the Prairie* would ideally be supplemented by reading works by Indian authors to give children a fuller understanding of Native American culture and American history. Native American authored books like *A Broken Flute* and websites like *American Indians in Children's Literature* provide many reviews of excellent books by Indians for children and helpful analyses of books by white authors (including classics) whose portrayals of Indians should be criticized.

All of the above is one reason why the success of the recent and ongoing series of historical novels for children by the Ojibwa writer Louise Erdrich about an Ojibwa girl named Omakayas is so pleasing. Although

the three Omakayas novels published thus far, *The Birchbark House* (1999), *The Game of Silence* (2005), and *The Porcupine Year* (2008), have not won the Newbery, they have been nominated for various awards like the National Book Award, and they are critically acclaimed and popular. Erdrich's case is special in that she first established herself as an important Native American author of novels for adults, and there are still too few Native American children's authors as popular as she, but it may be hoped that the Omakayas series will help improve the situation. Beginning when Omakayas is eight, each novel relates a year of her life in the mid-nineteenth century in the Lake Superior region as she and her family try to deal with the harmful spread of white culture. At the same time, the novels vividly show daily Ojibwa life season by season, how they cultivate, hunt, fish, trade, travel, make, story-tell, play, pray, marry, and so on, and even incorporate phrases and words of Ojibwa language. Omakayas' cheerful nature is sorely tried by her irritating little brother Pinch, her superior older sister Angeline, her fierce tomboy cousin Two Strike Girl, horrific smallpox and winter famine, and dispossession of her beloved home on the Island of the Golden-Breasted Woodpecker. Without sugar-coating the treacherous treatment of Indians by the US government, Erdrich presents Native Americans and their relationships with white people via various characters, among them Omakayas' quarter-white father, who trades and plays chess with white people and debates religious matters with the missionary, her mother, who blames white people for smallpox, her aunt-figure Old Tallow, who hates all white people, and Omakayas herself, who, despite the language and culture barrier, befriends the missionary's daughter. *The Birchbark House* expresses the Ojibwa view of pioneers like

Laura's family:

> "Chimookoman," said Fishtail, in a growling tone of indignation. The word meant "big knife," and it was used to describe the non-Indian, or white people, who were traveling in larger numbers than ever to Ojibwa land and setting down their cabins, forts, barns, gardens, pastures, fences, fur-trading posts, churches, and mission schools. (76-77)

Erdrich also demonstrates how difficult relationships between different tribes of Indians could be, as when Omakayas' family dreads traveling through the land of their Dakota enemies. Erdrich, who read the *Little House* books as a child and "love[s] their humor and warmth," is also "disturbed by Ma's racism," but rather than wanting them banned, she thinks they could be annotated to explain the historical context of the racism, and she hopes that her Omakayas books "will be perceived as an enlargement of the view encompassed in Laura's world" ("Q&A"). Indeed, they are being taught in American schools, often as supplements to the *Little House* books: "For students who are reading *Little House on the Prairie,* [*The Birchbark House*] is a great book to show what is missing or mis-represented in the popular Laura Ingalls Wilder series" (Zinn). While both series reveal different perspectives on the same period of American history, they also express similar healthy themes, including the need to make a safe home, the difficulties and rewards of close family relationships, the value of living simply, and the wonder of experiencing the world as a child.

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