

## **Indigenous Representation in Children's Literature**

Madison Kavanaugh

Elementary Education, Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College

EDU 3102-20: Literacy Strategies for K-6 Teachers

Dawn Quigley

December 1, 2025

**Abstract**

This essay will dive into four different books, How Chipmunk Got His Stripes by Joseph and James Bruchac, Sees Behind Trees by Michael Dorris, A Coyote Solstice Tale by Thomas King, and How I Became a Ghost by Tim Tingle. I will expand on why it is important for representation to begin in children's literature.

*Key Words: Representation, Critical Literacy, Indigenous Perspectives*

Critical literacy is essential to selecting children's literature to have in the classroom. When students feel they are represented in their stories, they are more likely to participate, feel confident, and feel safe. Finding literature that does this authentically can help students practice critical literacy. It is known that Indigenous peoples have been misrepresented or stereotyped in schools, causing students to feel misrepresented. The theme Indigenous representation in Children's Literature explores why authentic and respectful portrayals are important in classroom texts. Embedding indigenous authored books into the curriculum is essential to creating culturally responsive teaching practices and creates a space where students learn and feel respected.

I took the course ENGL 220-20: American Indian Children's Literature in the spring of 2025 and we read many books that stood out to me. I chose my four books to analyze from that class. I chose *How Chipmunk Got His Stripes* by Joseph and James Bruchac, *Sees Behind Trees* by Micheal Dorris, *A Coyote Solstice Tale* by Thomas King, and *How I Became a Ghost* by Tim Tingle. I chose these four books because they represent diverse Indigenous nations, genres, and cultural contexts, which allows space for critical literacy and authentic representation.

Critical literacy challenges students to analyze texts by answering questions such as, who is the center of the story, are there any voices missing, what cultural values are shown, and does this text challenge or reinforce stereotypes? When students read Indigenous authored books, they will come across stories that offer more careful representations of history. Which is a parallel with the "Heroes and Holidays" article of why schools cannot rely on this approach when their goal is equity. When only scratching the surface, this does not break stereotypes, or reflect

diversity. That is why embedding Indigenous perspectives in the curriculum is so important to ensure their voices are strong, and ongoing.

Comparatively, Gorski's framework for multicultural curriculum transformation shows inclusion is thoughtfully changing the curriculum to embed diverse perspectives, bring up inequities, and push student engagement. When diverse texts are incorporated into the classroom, all students are able to learn and explore history, culture, and Indigenous perspectives. I chose these four books because they reflect critical literacy in ways that are meaningful. Dorris's novel presents a protagonist with depth, emotion, and cultural responsibility, Bruchac's provides oral tradition and cultural humor, King presents a satirical approach to provide reflection on social norms, and Tingle presents a historical fiction story that touches Indian Removal. These texts work together to help students understand Indigenous peoples as diverse communities that are filled with rich experiences, rather than people limited to the past.

There are similarities and differences between the four books that allow students to gain a deeper understanding of Indigenous cultures. Each author brings their own tribal heritage to their writing, in an authentic and respectful way. It is important for students to understand that there are many different tribes and break the stereotype that Indigenous peoples are one of the same. Providing literature that exposes them to the various practices of each group is a great way to do so. Picture books like *A Coyote Solstice Tale* and *How Chipmunk Got His Stripes* use approachable characteristics such as humor and animals, whereas *Sees Behind Trees* and *How I Became A Ghost* use deeper elements such as emotional complexity, leadership, and historical context.

Implementing anti-bias/anti-racist practices help create a classroom that allows every student to learn about culture, history, and identity through equity and justice. This could include stories that prioritize Indigenous-authored stories, challenge stereotypes, and encourage students to identify unfairness. These books embody the goals of ABAR because they show indigenous characters with dignity, respect, and authenticity. They also present Indian Removal, without erasing resilience. When student digest these perspectives critically, they learn to see bias, and understand how various perspectives deepen their knowledge of the world.

Providing literature that is representative of Indigenous peoples is essential for creating a classroom that is equitable, authentic, and inclusive. The four books I have chosen demonstrate diversity through Indigenous nations and the ways representation can support critical literacy. Using indigenous authored books helps build a curriculum that respects culture and builds a social just learning environment. Literature is a great way to help students gain skills of empathy and critical learners.

### References

Bruchac, J., & Bruchac, J. (2001). How chipmunk got his stripes. Dial Books for Young Readers.

Dorris, M. (1996). Sees behind trees. Hyperion.

EdChange. (n.d.). Stages of multicultural curriculum transformation.

<http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/curriculum/steps.html>

King, T., & Clement, G. (2009). A coyote solstice tale. Groundwood Books.

Tingle, T. (2013). How I became a ghost. The RoadRunner Press.

Wright, Z. (2022). We can't just teach about heroes and holidays and call it culturally responsive.

EdPost.

<https://www.edpost.com/stories/we-cant-just-teach-about-heroes-and-holidays-and-call-it-culturally-responsive>