

Children's Literature

Talking with Children about the Columbian Exchange

Lynette Field and Judith Y. Singer

In a dimly lit Cathedral in Seville, in southern Spain, there are larger than life statues of four pall-bearers. Each one stands at a corner of an over-sized coffin. The coffin holds, as we are led to understand, the remains of Christo Colon, also known as Christopher Columbus. Not far away, the altar of the cathedral, covered in gold leaf, brings shimmering light to the dull surroundings. This is the gold presented to the King and Queen of Spain, Ferdinand and Isabella, by Columbus and those who followed him.

This gold was stolen from the Native Peoples of America. The Taino's inability to produce a share of gold brought them death and cultural annihilation. Other aboriginal peoples shared a similar fate. The gold amassed from the Americas still belongs to the Catholic Church of Spain. It was originally stored in a tower by a river in Seville. None of it appears to have been put to constructive use. It just sits there, drawing admiration from tourists and other travelers.

Two Sides to the Story

Across the Atlantic Ocean, in the United States, Columbus is widely honored. His name is attached to highways, rivers, parades, school and work holidays, and organizations like the Knights of Columbus. "Puerto Rican Discovery Day," the day Columbus presumably landed at the island now known as Puerto Rico, is celebrated with food, music and dancing, but not by descendants of the original inhabitants of this island. Spanish conquistadors and disease exterminated them.

As they learn about the slaughter and

enslavement of the Native Peoples of the Americas by Columbus and those who followed him, prospective teachers are often troubled by the disjuncture between what they learned in school as children and what they are learning now. They learned that "explorers" and "Indians" traded with each other, lived in relative peace, and learned from each other. According to standard history books, the "Indians" were primitive and needed to learn many things from Columbus and the Europeans in order to become "civilized." This belief in the primitiveness of the pre-Columbian natives of the Americas persists to the present day and is used to justify appropriating native land and wealth. The history of Native Peoples in the Americas is one long tale of exploitation and abuse.

Joseph Bruchac, a foremost Native American scholar of Native American history and lore, notes that people were given "two ears so that we may hear both sides of every story." Unfortunately, in the stories about the conquest of the Americas by Europeans, the voices of

Native Peoples were usually silenced, some by war, others by cold and hunger, and most by disease and death."¹

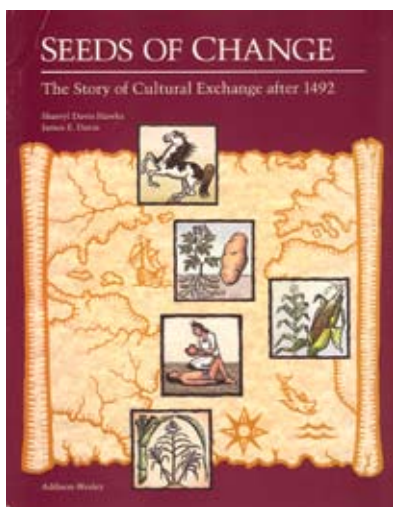
We believe the children's books discussed in this article can rectify this imbalance. They help elementary school teachers present the complexity of Native American points of view and offer students a fuller understanding of the long-term impact of the Columbian exchange on Native Peoples. The first set of books explores encounters between Native Peoples and Europeans. The second set looks at the cultural and tribal wealth generated by the coming of horses, particularly for the Plains Indians. The final set recounts forced marches from fertile fields to barren land and children forcibly separated from their parents in an effort to wipe out memories of their language and culture.

Seeds of Change

A valuable resource for teachers is *Seeds of Change: The Story of Cultural Exchange after 1492* by Sharryl Hawke and James Davis.² It provides an overview of the long-term impact of Columbus's voyages on the Native Peoples of the Americas. The Columbian Exchange precipitated the creation of a new blending of peoples and cultures from Africa, Europe, and the Americas. The Europeans brought horses, smallpox and sugar cane with

them to the New World. They also brought new crops, like potatoes and corn, from the Americas to Europe. Students should discuss “Who benefited from this exchange?” and “Were the benefits provided Native Peoples by horses enough to make up for the enormous toll extracted by disease and conquest?”

A second resource for teachers is *Keepers of the Earth: Native American Stories and Environmental Activities for Children*.³ This book presents traditional tales from many different Native American tribes and cultures. Each story is accompanied by activi-



ties through which young students learn about nature and the environment. Teachers can use this resource to help students appreciate the value Native Americans place on nature.

The Coming of the Europeans

It is not possible to know exactly what happened to the people who lived in the Caribbean hundreds of years ago. However, we can imagine what it might be like to live so close to nature. In the story *Morning Girl*, the author imagines what life was like on San Salvador, just before the arrival of Columbus.⁴ He tells his story through the eyes and ears of two siblings, Morning Girl and Star Boy, who alternately squabble and take care of each other, as siblings might do in the present day.

We can also put ourselves in the place of people who lived long ago, and we can wonder how we would feel if we had been there. In *Encounter*, Jane Yolen imagines that at least one child is fearful when he sees the “big white birds,” the ships which brought Columbus to his island. However, no one listens to the child’s warning. The chief declares that it is their tribal customs “to welcome strangers, to give them tobacco leaf, to feast them with the pepper pot, and to trade gifts.”⁵

In *The Journal of Christopher Columbus*, readers discover the explorer depicting the Taino as guileless, simple



people, and Columbus considers what advantage he can make of this. In one observation, he writes,⁶

They do not bear arms or know them, for I showed them swords and they took them by the blade and cut themselves through ignorance...They should be good servants and...I believe they would be easily be made Christians, for it appeared to me that they had no creed.

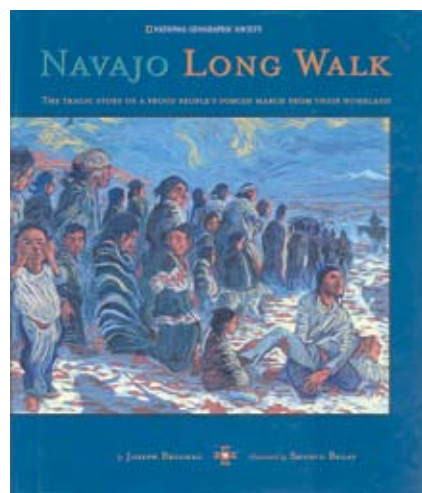
These excerpts from Columbus’ Diary are accessible to fifth or sixth grade readers, although it may be better to use the book for a read-aloud than for independent reading.

The Invisible Hunters: Los Cazadores Invisibles is an English/Spanish bilingual book.⁷ Student can read, enjoy,

and get the tone of the story from two languages. It is about first moments of contact between indigenous people in what is now called Nicaragua and the larger world. It retells the legend of Miskito hunters who were blessed with the gift of invisibility by their God, until they became greedy and used their blessing for profit and personal gain. The “Dar” warns, “You must never sell the wari meat (wild pig). You must give it away. You must never hunt with guns. You must hunt with sticks.”

The Coming of the Horse

Before the Spaniards came, there were

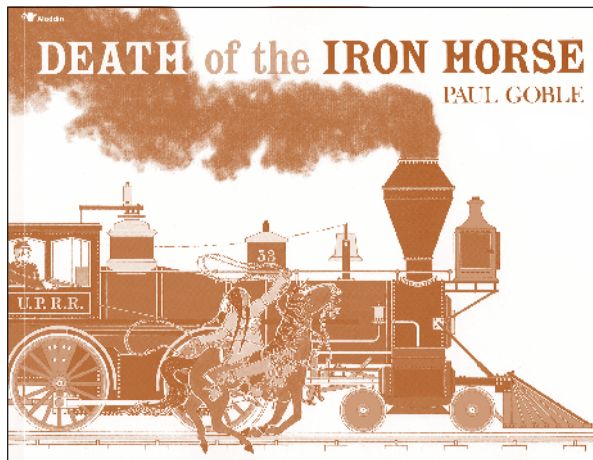


no horses in North America. Many of the Plains Indians tell stories about how their people came to depend on the horse. The horse made possible more efficient hunting and transportation, and it made warriors swifter in war and better able to defend their people. The next three stories illustrate how horses became integral to Native American culture on the Great Plains.

In *Sky Dogs*, the Blackfeet people are frightened when they first see the large animals, as big as elk, that they call “Sky Dogs.”⁸ The chief reassures the people and one little boy learns how to take care of the animals. He starts to ride on the sky dog’s back and comb its forelock. For his accomplishments, he is called “He-who-loves-horses.” “Eventually, the “Piegan,” the people

of many horses, became masters of the plains.

Crazy Horse was a member of the Lakota tribe. The book *Crazy Horse's Vision* tells how horses had been part of their means of survival as far back as elders in the tribe could remember.⁹ When he was eleven-years-old, Crazy Horse tamed a wild horse, and his father gave it to him as a gift. When Crazy Horse killed his first buffalo, he told his people, "I give this buffalo to all those in our camp who have no one to hunt for them." As tension grew



between the Lakota and the whites, it was hard to avoid conflict. Just as the horse benefited the Plains Indians, it was an effective tool for the soldiers and settlers to use against them.

In *Death of the Iron Horse*, based on actual events, the horse is described as integral to the life and culture of the Cheyenne people.¹⁰ The Cheyenne are out-numbered by the whites who keep coming from the East, looking for better lives for themselves and their families, and willing to take what they wanted from the Indians. Some of the young warriors of the tribe decide they will take a stand. They will stop the iron horse or railroad. Although they are successful at first, they soon realize, "Another Iron Horse is coming. This time there will be soldiers with horses in the wagons."

Removal to the West

As time went by, more and more white

settlers demanded land. The United States Government began a systematic removal of Native Peoples from their homes to barren lands further west. These next stories describe Native American journeys and experiences as they were forcibly removed from their land by soldiers and decimated by disease and despair.

In the historical fiction *The Trail on Which They Wept: The Story of a Cherokee Girl*, a young girl describes the removal of the Cherokee people from Georgia and their long to Oklahoma.¹¹ It

depicts their uncertainty and sense of helplessness and also their strength. When young Tsaluh asks how long the trip will take, she is told by her grandfather "We don't know." As her grandmother leaves their cabin, which is burned by U.S. soldiers, she says, "I will come back and build another."

When the Choctaw People were asked by missionaries to send

money to help Irish people who are starving to death, many of them were uncertain about helping "Naholo" or white people. In this historical fiction, a grandmother recounts the story of the long march west of the Choctaw People. She tells how the Choctaw tried to live in peace with the white strangers, "but always the strangers wanted land, more land. In the end they wanted it all, and our people could do nothing to stop them." Because of their own history of oppression, the Choctaw decide to donate \$170 to Irish famine relief. *The Long March: A Famine Gift for Ireland* places the struggles of the Choctaw and Irish in a broader context and introduces students to the complexity of life choices.¹²

Waheenee: An Indian Girl's Story introduces us to Waheenee as a young girl and leaves us at the end with her as an old woman.¹³ Her life experiences are knit together by the stories she shares

with us. Many of them express the harm the newcomers brought upon the Native Americans. She explains, "Then smallpox came. More than half of my tribe died in the smallpox winter ... All the old people and little children died."

Navajo Long Walk about a forced march of 1864 shows how another group of Native People was victimized by the westward expansion of the United States.¹⁴ It has difficult text and is primarily useful as a resource for teachers. 📖

Notes

1. Michael Caduto and Joseph Bruchac, *Keepers of the Earth: Native American Stories and Environmental Activities for Children* (New York: Fulcrum, 1997), 14.
2. Sharryl Hawke and James Davis, *Seeds of Change: The Story of Cultural Exchange after 1492* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1992).
3. Sharryl Hawke and James Davis.
4. Micheal Dorris, *Morning Girl* (New York: Hyperion, 1992).
5. Jane Yolen, David Shannon, illus., *Encounter* (Stillwater, MN: Voyager Press, 1992).
6. Cecil Jane, ed., *The Journal of Christopher Columbus* (New York: Bramhall House, 1960), 7.
7. Harriet Rohmer, Joe Sam, illus., *The Invisible Hunters: Los Cazadores Invisibles* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1992).
8. Jane Yolen, Barry Moser, illus., *Sky Dogs* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990).
9. Joseph Bruchac, S.D. Nelson, illus., *Crazy Horse's Vision* (New York: Lee & Low Books, 2000).
10. Paul Goble, *Death of the Iron Horse* (New York: Aladin/Simon & Schuster, 1987).
11. Dorothy and Thomas Hoobler, *The Trail on Which They Wept: The Story of a Cherokee Girl* (New York: Silver Burdett/Simon & Schuster, 1994).
12. Marie Louise Fitzpatrick, *The Long March: A Famine Gift for Ireland* (Berkeley, CA: Tricycle Press, 1998).
13. Buffalo Bird Woman, *Waheenee: An Indian Girl's Story* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska, 1982).
14. Joseph Bruchac, Shonto Begay, illus., *Navajo Long Walk* (Washington, DC: National Geographic Society, 2002).
15. This article first appeared on pages 71-73 of the Winter/Spring issue of the *Social Science Docket* (vol. 6, no. 1, 2006), a joint publication of the New York State and New Jersey Councils for the Social Studies. A second article, planned for publication in that journal, will examine Native American culture as a living culture. For information about the *Social Science Docket*, visit www.njcss.org and www.nyscss.org.

LYNETTE FIELD teaches at Public School 9 in Brooklyn, New York. JUDITH Y. SINGER teaches elementary education social studies methods at Long Island University-Brooklyn in New York.

The Columbian Exchange explains why Indian nations collapsed and European colonies thrived after Columbus' arrival in the New World in 1492. It explains why European nations quickly became the wealthiest and most powerful in the world. It explains why Africans were sold into slavery on the far side of the ocean to toil in fields of tobacco, sugar, and cotton. The Columbian Exchange even explains why pasta marinara has tomato sauce. If you don't understand the Columbian Exchange, much of what you think you know about the history of the Americas may be wrong. Spanish soldiers did less to defeat the Incas and Aztecs than smallpox did. Divine Providence did less to bless the Puritan settlers of the Mayflower with good health and fortune than the Pilgrims' own immune systems did. Columbian Exchange is a term coined by Alfred W. Crosby in his revolutionary book *The Columbian Exchange* which was published in 1972. The term refers to the widespread exchange of animals, plants, human populations, diseases, technology and ideas that occurred between Afro-Eurasia and the Americas after Christopher Columbus landed in the New World in 1492. Here are 10 interesting facts on what has changed our lives more than any other thing in history. #1 Before the Columbian Exchange the Old World hadn't seen a tomato. Prior to the Columbian Exchange the Old World had never seen a catfish or