

A sea of good intentions: Native Americans in books for children.

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## A Sea of Good Intentions: Native Americans in Books for Children

Melissa Kay Thompson

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A Sea of Good Intentions:

# Native Americans in Books for Children

## Melissa Kay Thompson

Th[e] disparate treatment of both property and political rights [of Indian nations in contrast to non-Indian] is not the result of neutral rules being applied in a manner that has a disparate impact. Rather, it is the result of formally unequal rules. Moreover, it can be explained only by reference to perhaps unconscious racist assumptions about the nature and distribution of property and power. This fact implies an uncomfortable truth: both property rights and political power in the United States are associated with a system of racial caste.

Joseph Singer, "Sovereignty and Property," 1991

An Indian stood on the cabin roof, clad only in breechcloth and leggings and carrying a hatchet. His lean body glistened in the glaring light. [The children] had seen Indians in Pittsburgh, shiftless, slouching men who loitered in doorways and begged money for whiskey. Their father had told them whiskey lured the Indians away from their own people. It made them useless and dependent on the white men. The man looming over Amos was different. He had a power and fierceness those begging Indians lacked, a fierceness that scared Amos to the ends of his toes. (17)

Patricia Willis, *Danger Along the Ohio*, 1997

Children's book authors and critics typically stereotype indigenous peoples. Whether intentionally or not, they perpetuate and extend the "system of racial caste" noted above and they reinforce the legacy that traveled via Columbus to the Western hemisphere. On the latter point, Robert A. Williams, Jr. states that "... the racist legacy brought by Columbus to the New World [included] the use of law as an instrument of racial domination and discrimination against indigenous tribal peoples' rights of self-determination" (36). In this article, I am focusing my **[End Page 353]** attention on the network of institutions (literary, educational, and legal) that enable conventional stereotypes to crisscross White culture, linking these institutions. What emerges is a glimpse of how such well-meaning establishments serve one master: hegemonic White cultural dominance.

In examining novels published between 1995 and 2000, I found that I could group them in three loosely arranged categories: perils-on-the-frontier stories, captivity narratives, and tales narrated from the perspective of an imagined American Indian protagonist. Here, I will cover frontier and captivity stories, as well as tales based on historical events (including those that portray government-run boarding schools).

## Perils-on-the-Frontier

The cover illustration for *Danger Along the Ohio* (1997) makes the book look exciting. It shows three White children and a friendly-looking cow swimming away from a burning barge. A statement on the cover reads: "After an Indian raid separates them from their father, can they brave the wilderness alone?" The first major scene in the book depicts this "Indian" attack on White settlers.

In one paragraph at the beginning of her book, presented in the epigraph above, Patricia Willis manages to delineate the two major historical stereotypes: the "Indian" as savage beast and as drunken dependent. In Willis's book, indigenous peoples appear as two wooden personifications: the image of animals who attack

peaceful white settlements for no other reason than pure savagery, and the more recent stereotype leveled at "city Indians"--that of homeless, alcoholic beggars.

The supposed moral and physical superiority of the White children is unmistakable throughout Willis's story, although Willis attempts to introduce some crosscultural camaraderie. The White children rescue an "Indian boy" from the river. They dub him "Red Moccasin," and Willis's narrator describes him as having the "eyes of the enemy" and the look of a "wounded wildcat" (89, 95). The boy, like the Indian depicted in the attack, is more animal than human. Willis portrays his physical and psychological subjugation by the White children in a scene where he relinquishes his knife: "Despite the look of outward calm, the boy appeared to shrink back within himself. He was beaten. He had shown weakness. In...



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