

Talking with Children about the Impact of the Columbian Exchange on Native Americans

by 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 Mexico. The inability to produce a share of gold brought death and cultural annihilation to the Taino people and others. 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.



A pall-bearer lifts the coffin of Columbus

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 descendents of the original inhabitants of this island. They were exterminated by the Spanish conquistadors.

As they learn about the slaughter of the Native Peoples of the Americas by Columbus and those who followed him, prospective teachers are 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.

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. The next article in this series will examine Native American culture as a living culture.

A valuable resource for teachers is *Seeds of Change: The Story of Cultural Exchange after 1492* by Sharryl Hawke and James Davis (Addison-Wesley, 1992). 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

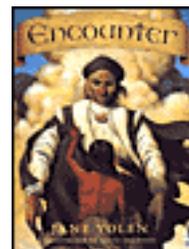
Americas to Europe. Students should discuss “Who benefited from this exchange?” and “Were the benefits provided Native Peoples by horses enough to make up for the enormous toll extracted by disease and conquest?”

A second resource for teachers is *Keepers of the Earth: Native American Stories and Environmental Activities for Children* by Michael Caduto and Joseph Bruchac (Fulcrum, 1997). This book presents traditional tales from many different Native American tribes and cultures. Each story is accompanied by activities through which children learn about nature and the environment. Teachers can use this resource to help students appreciate the value Native Americans place on nature.

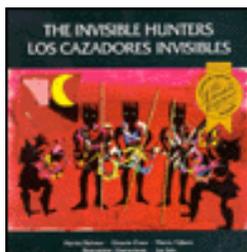
1. The Coming of the Europeans.

Morning Girl by Micheal Dorris (Hyperion, 1992). 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 this story, the author imagines what life was like on San Salvador, just before the arrival of Columbus. 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.

Encounter by Jane Yolen, illustrated by David Shannon (Voyager Books, 1992). 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.”



The Journal of Christopher Columbus edited by Cecil Jane (Bramhall House, 1960). In his diary, Columbus depicts the Taino as guileless, simple people, and he considers what advantage he can make of this. In one observation, he writes, “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.” Columbus’ Diary is accessible to fifth or sixth grade readers, although it may be better to use the book for a read-aloud rather than for independent reading.



The Invisible Hunters: Los Cazadores Invisibles by Harriet Rohmer, illustrated by Joe Sam (Houghton Mifflin, 1992). This is an English /Spanish bilingual book. Children 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.”

2. 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.

Sky Dogs by Jane Yolen, illustrated by Barry Moser (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990). In this story, the Blackfeet people are frightened when they first see the large animals, as big as elk, that they call “Sky Dogs.” 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.

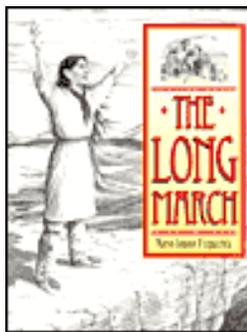
Crazy Horse’s Vision by Joseph Bruchac, illustrated by S.D. Nelson (Lee & Low Books, 2000). Crazy Horse was a member of the Lakota tribe. Horses had been part of their means of survival as far back as anyone could remember. When he was eleven-years-old, Crazy Horse tamed a wild horse, and his father 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.

Death of the Iron Horse by Paul Goble (Bradbury, 1987). In this story, based on actual events, the horse is integral to the life and culture of the Cheyenne people. 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.”

3. The Removal of the Native Peoples 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.

The Trail on Which They Wept – the story of a Cherokee Girl by Dorothy and Thomas Hoobler (Silver Burdett, 1994). In this story, a young girl describes the removal of the Cherokee people from Georgia and their long journey to Oklahoma. 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 US soldiers, she says “I will come back and build another.”



The Long March. A Famine Gift for Ireland by Marie Louise Fitzpatrick (Wolfhound, 1998). 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 the tribal discussion that follows, 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 book places the struggles of the Choctaw and Irish in a broader context and introduces children to the complexity of life choices.

Waheenee – An Indian Girl’s Story by Buffalo Bird Woman (University of Nebraska, 1982). The story introduces us to Waheenee as a young girl and leaves us at the end with her as an old woman. 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 by Joseph Bruchac, illustrated by Shonto Begay (National Geographic Society, 2002). This picture book about the Navajo long walk in 1864 shows how another group of Native People was victimized by the westward expansion of the United States. It has difficult text and is primarily useful as a teacher resource

