

First Nations children's books in a public library context – considerations for sharing

By Michèle Adams.

This piece grew out of the author's participation in LIBR 569A: Information Practice & Protocol in Support of Indigenous Initiatives, a seminar offered at SLAIS, the iSchool at UBC.

Introduction

Over the last five decades, major shifts have occurred in how Canadians approach First Nations cultural artifacts – after long darkness a new era is dawning with many positive changes, including better understanding of and greater respect for the concept of First Nations' cultural ownership of their own narrative in all its manifestations. This means that some of the wrongs of the past are beginning to be redressed, that the privacy of sacred images is less frequently violated, that stories owned by particular First Nations communities or families are being told only by those with rights to those stories, that materials that have been separated from their rightful First Nations context are being returned to that context, etc. This redress has a range of consequences, of course; a talk offered by members of UBC's Museum of Anthropology staff to our SLAIS seminar group in the fall of 2013 quickly revealed the complexities of providing access to a First Nations collection – complexities like deciding whether to provide access, to whom to provide access, or whether the First Nation elders who have given permission for a display understand that they are offering access to things that, in the particular librarian's informed judgment, should not be seen by outsiders, for example. During this period of cultural adjustment, it can feel like this is a new world of unanswerable questions, exacerbated sensitivities, and freighted meanings — so much so that when it comes to interacting with material that is associated with any First Nation, for some librarians, anxiety can be the first reaction, and (more problematically) silence the second.

The specific topic here – First Nations children's books – seems far simpler. After all, they are children's books, and so they should be shared in a children's library, in the cheery area set aside for child

browsing, where low chairs and bright colours invite all young readers to form a lifelong love of literature. Shouldn't they?

What's the best way to share First Nations children's books? (or is there a best way?)

Should First Nations children's books be shared in the general children's collection – is this even a good way, never mind the best? In some libraries, books and materials associated with or authored by First Nations, including First Nations children's books (i.e., books so identified), are pulled from the general public library collection and sequestered in completely separate areas. This move is celebrated by some librarians and patrons, who view such shelving choices as a fine way to welcome First Nations browsers and create a dedicated space for them. It is especially appreciated when the First Nations section is appointed and given signage that evokes respect for and awareness of First Nations aesthetics, their contributions to culture and literature in general, and to children's literature in particular.

So, is this the best way?

Who is being served?

First Nations children? First Nations parents and caregivers? All children? All parents and caregivers? Teachers and leaders? The public as a whole? All of the above?

While such questions may read as obvious, considering them up front can be helpful in engendering thoughtful, reflective consideration of this topic.

Why share these books?

Apart from the standard reasons – pleasure, art, literacy, community, education – for sharing all books, are there special reasons that make sharing these First Nations children's books particularly

important for a public library? And if so, should these special reasons be considered?

Informal consultation with a range of readers and librarians, as well as some research into this general area, brings forward several reasons for sharing that seem particularly relevant in this context. Apart from the value of First Nations children's books as works of art, the importance of children's books to developing literacy, the educational impact on all children of learning about Canada's First Nations cultures and history, the wholesomeness of First Nations children enjoying such books and benefitting from learning more about various First Nations cultures, as well as studying their own specific cultural backgrounds, there are a number of current theories that endorse First Nations authored children's works as being particularly beneficial in key pedagogic areas for young readers.

For example, the article "Epistemologies in the Text of Children's Books: Native- and non-Native-authored books" (Dhegani, 2013, 2133-2151) indicates that Native-authored children's books may have pedagogic advantages in supporting a wide range of learning, including vocabulary development, science learning, environmental awareness, relational intelligence and human kinship understanding. While aspects of this study may need further consideration in terms of selection criteria and conclusions, the previously mentioned "advantages," as quantified in the appendices of the "Epistemologies..." article, could certainly be used persuasively to support collection development in this area, as well as fuller use of First Nations children's books in a broader range of classroom applications. In a similar vein, the article "Into the Thicket: Seeing the Forest for the Trees in Children's Picture Books," (Ellis, 2011, 146-157), though it has a quite different tone and focus, also winds up endorsing a First Nations children's book, and by implication all First Nations children's books, as uniquely helpful in developing 'enviro-imagination,' thereby creating environmentally conscious, proactive citizens.

However, there is also the perspective that no special argument should be made, or needs to be made, to promote the acquisition and growth of First Nations children's book collections. For some the books should be acquired and promoted because they are children's books by First Nations authors and illustrators, period.

Why shouldn't – or wouldn't – one share these books?

Some members and supporters of First Nations communities greet certain works that have been identified as "First Nations children's books" with distaste, because these particular books do not possess true First Nations lineage. Rather, they are that vaguely defined thing, "First Nations-Themed." This can be confounding as, while there are many out there who are keen to announce themselves as arbiters of such questions, there is no universal purity test for such books.

For example, one writer, Marie Anneharte Baker, decries non-First-Nations Anne Cameron writing children's books that retell First Nations tales (Baker, 2000, 133-134), while another – Max Dashu – holds up the same Anne Cameron as an exemplar of how a non-First-Nations author can respectfully tell or retell such stories, stating that "Indian people value her work," and that Cameron, having been told these tales by her adopted Elders, virtuously returns financial rewards to their community, rather than battening on those monies herself (Dashu, 1994).

Given this sort of controversy, if a book in your library is marked as First Nations, or is not marked as First Nations but is telling, or purporting to tell a First Nations narrative, should you share it? Promote it via Readers Advisory? Read it aloud at storytime? What if the author isn't First Nations but has been given permission by an Elder? What if that permission was granted long ago and is now disputed? What if 'kids really love it' – and request it at storytime? And so on . . .

Such quandaries are unavoidable, as there is no single authoritative entity that is "First Nations" and empowered to utter absolute truths – that fact must simply be accepted and respected. Knowing your collection can help, but isn't the whole answer. It may be worth noting that in a recent discussion among interested, committed library colleagues, the final response to questions around what books were okay to be shared and why, was "It's tricky" – "tricky" was repeated several times, perhaps suggesting that the question of what really is okay in this area can feel treacherous.

Recommendations

Acknowledging that 'things are tricky' isn't a classic recommendation – yet accepting that there is no single correct response, no way to be consistently right or even inoffensive is an important step.

Humility, with all that implies, is also a key recommendation here – flexibility is needed, as well as willingness to be challenged, and a gracious acceptance of input. At the same time, remaining thoughtful, so as to weigh a range of sometimes-competing directives, is also important. Unfortunately, where an area is complex and emotionally charged, there is always the option of not engaging there.

For example, when creating storytelling programming for children, there is enormous range and choice of material. If there's a great picturebook in the collection that is stickered First Nations, and another great picturebook that is not so defined, will the librarian choose the less potentially problematic book? If he or she has used First Nations picturebooks at storytime before and been told that he or she is reading from an illegitimate or inauthentic book, or that while the book is legitimate, the librarian is engaging in cultural appropriation by reading the book out loud, or by the mode of performance, will he or she take the advice on board, modify choices thoughtfully, and continue using First Nations material – or, next time, simply choose something by Maurice Sendak or Kenneth Oppel instead? In Children's Readers Advisory, might a librarian shrink from recommending a First Nations children's book, unsure if it is deemed truly First Nations, unwilling to make a mistake?

In terms of pulled-out versus not-pulled-out First Nations children's collections, my recommendation despite cost would be both – that is, copies in a separated collection and copies in the general shelving area.

Finally, while this oft-repeated locution has become something of a punchline, I think the answer here truly is "more education" – and that would be my major recommendation. First Nations children's books should be read and enjoyed, and should be promoted and made accessible by library

professionals. However, hoping that all library professionals will just 'get out there' and work with First Nations children's books, risking criticism and disapprobation, may be unrealistic – and here an addition to current practice could help. Appropriately-led workshops designed to help librarians inform themselves more fully about First Nations children's books, and to develop good practices around how to share them, would garner real benefits in effective, confident promotion and sharing of these valuable collection materials. In terms of who should design such workshops, professionals at SLAIS and at Xwi7xwa library would be good resources for recommendations on leaders for such workshops, as would Elders of local First Nations.

References

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