

A Report on the
Sign of the Beaver,
by Elizabeth George Speare

Students and Teachers Against Racism is an organization whose purpose is to identify and remove discrimination against American Indian students from the classroom and from curriculum. In our experience, we have found that certain kinds of material, especially involving stereotypes, used in the classroom can contribute to civil rights violations. American Indian children may also experience anger and shame when confronted with certain books and material, particularly when they feel they have been misrepresented or history is wrongly depicted. Some A.I. children may feel that a school that promotes such material is offering them the blatant message that the school harbors anti-Indian feelings towards them.

American Indian students suffer higher drop-out rates than any other ethnic group. In some urban areas, those rates may average around 10-20 percent. However, on reservations and in border towns, these rates can soar to 30-50%. Historically, education has not been kind to American Indian people and as a result, parents who had negative experiences with their own schooling may not encourage their children to complete their education. American Indian children need all the support they can get in order to be successful in school. A book like Sign of the Beaver reminds American Indian children of the hateful attitudes of non-Indians in the past, and brings those attitudes into the classroom today. The fact that the book completely misrepresents historical truth is yet another reason to remove it from the school. If a book like this is to be used at all, it must first be used with lesson plans that explain stereotypes and propaganda, and how they were used to undermine American Indian people in order to inflict genocide in the pursuit of Manifest Destiny.

It is imperative that schools recognize that the materials used in the classroom effect the students that they teach. In order for American Indian students to succeed, they must believe that the school respects them and has full confidence they *can* succeed. Any book that promotes the attitude that non-American Indian students are superior to Indian students, can dislike them without reason, and can mock their ways and culture only serves to alienate the American Indian students from the class. The Sign of the Beaver is guilty of all of these attitudes.

Two people within our organization assessed the book. One is an Ojibwe doctoral candidate who is focusing his dissertation on racism, the other is a White, Civil Rights case worker for our organization. We have assembled this report based on their findings. We sincerely hope that this helps bring understanding to the situation at hand.

The Sign of the Beaver by Elizabeth George Speare

Books that are written by whites about Indians virtually always, even with the best of intentions, stereotype Indian people. Many writers will defend their writing by saying they have done considerable research, however, unless the writer has had extensive contact with the culture they are writing about, the opinions formed by the writer can only be done from their own cultural perspective, and often, bias.

In books that portray the past without historical accuracy and with disregard for the American Indian perspective of history, the ways of Am. Indians are often judged according to white standards of civilization rather than from a position of respect for the culture they are depicting. Since the non-Am. Indian perspective is usually based on blaming the victim, it is easy to see how the young American Indian child might become angry at the manner in which their ancestors are portrayed. The fact that whites held themselves harmless while removing the Indians from their land, destroying their crops and fields, destroying their homes, disrupting their culture and frequently forcing the Indians to starve, as well as committing outright genocide, is a perspective that must be exposed in the classroom, not perpetuated.

In books such as *The Sign of the Beaver*, *The Indian in the Cupboard*, and *The Little House on the Prairie*, Indians are almost always portrayed speaking pidgin English, appearing lazy or foolish, and as being backward and un-evolved. This is seen from Chapter Three on, in *The Sign of the Beaver* we were able to highlight at least 36 pages out of 135 that contained some kind of anti-Indian reference such as stereotypes, cultural misrepresentations, and other offensive passages based on bias rather than truthful representation. For the sake of brevity we will only highlight some of the more offensive statements in the following paragraphs:

Chapter Eleven, page 52: Or they would tramp along the creek to a good spot for fishing. Attean seemed to have plenty of time on his hands. Sometimes he would just hang around and watch Matt do chores. He would stand at the edge of the corn patch and look on while Matt pulled weeds.

"Squaw work," he commented once.

Matt flushed. "We think its man's work," he retorted.

Attean said nothing. He did not offer to help. After a time he wandered off without saying goodbye. It must be mighty pleasant, Matt thought to himself, to just hunt and fish all day and not have any work to do. That wasn't his father's way, and it wouldn't ever be his. The work was always waiting to be done, but if he got the corn patch cleared and the wood chopped today, he could go fishing with Attean tomorrow-if Attean invited him.

The implication that Matt has so much work to do and Attean does nothing but hunt and fish reflects the condescending attitude of settlers at the time. The Puritan ethic was that hard work kept the devil away. American Indian people certainly had their share of hard work in sustaining their lifestyles even in harsh weather. However, because the type of hard work American Indian people needed to perform in order to survive was not recognized as generating profit, by the settlers standards it was judged less important.

Early writings also show that the settlers were astonished at the hard work Am. Indian women did. However, what is virtually always left out of the conversation is that women worked hard because they were seen as equals to men in every way, which was not true

of the status of European white women, who were often written about as possessions, who had little say in the home, in business, in politics or any other decision making process. In fact, Susan B. Anthony arrived at the idea of fighting for women's rights from the Oneida women with whom she spent considerable time. The opinions of American Indian women were valued and respected, and they were often the ones who retained rights to their home, possessions and children. All of that was unheard of by the settlers, who treated women and children as possessions. Therefore, the implication that "squaw's work" was demeaning was a white value, and does not accurately reflect the American Indian values at all.

Page 97: Attean think squaw girl is not good for much.

Women were highly regarded in all tribes, and were seen as sacred in that they are creators of life. Many tribes were, and still are, matriarchal societies while white society has always been patriarchal. Also, the use of the word squaw is inappropriate as it reflects women's genitalia. While it may not have been used by all tribes exclusively in that manner, from tribe to tribe it was. The word entered common usage from the traders who adapted the word for use for prostitutes. It is not a word that connotes respect and there have been many complaints by Indian women who even today are called squaw by ignorant people. It is not a good word to teach children to use. The same can be said for the book's constant reference to redskins, which is said to have originated from the time when Indians were hunted for bounty. Since the entire dead body was difficult to transport, Indians were skinned, and the bloody skins were called redskins. The period of time *The Sign of the Beaver* takes place is indeed during the time of bounty hunting Indians. It is gruesome and offensive to many American Indian people today, and is often seen as being the same kind of racial slur as nigger.

This next passage shows another cultural misrepresentation:

Matt knew that the Indian boy came day after day only because his grandfather sent him. For some reason, the old man had taken pity on this helpless white boy, and at the same time he had shrewdly grasped at the chance for his grandson to read. If he suspected that Attean had become the teacher instead, he would doubtless have put a stop to the visits altogether.

Attean's grandfather was kind and had Attean bring food each day for Matt. Later in the book, the grandfather insists that Matt attend a ceremony to celebrate his involvement with Attean in the killing of the bear. At the end of the book, the grandfather has Attean ask Matt if he would like to travel with the tribe as they are forced to relocate because the trappers had eliminated too much of their food sources. The grandfather certainly recognized that Attean was spending a considerable amount of time with Matt, so why on earth would he have put a stop to Attean's teaching Matt how to survive? In fact, in light of what was happening historically, precisely at that time and in that area, with tribes being forced to relocate due to having their forts burned, their people killed by diseases purposely brought into their midst and bounties that were offered for their scalps by proclamations from the government, it is amazing that the grandfather didn't leave Matt there to fend for himself in the first place.

It seems that the only reason to portray the grandfather as disapproving of Matt gaining anything in the relationship with Attean, is to attribute unattractive behavior based on lack of generosity on the grandfather. Not only is this passage inconsistent with other descriptions of the grandfather, but American Indian cultures in general actually disapproved of greedy and withholding behaviors. In essence, this passage exists solely to promote racism, which unfortunately happens throughout the book.

Chapter Eighteen, page 94: He was not surprised when she led him straight to the most substantial cabin in the clearing. He had recognized on the night of the feast that Saknis was a chief.

Again, accumulated material wealth is a white value. It is unlikely the chief would have had the most substantial cabin. In most tribes, the chief was chosen to be so because he eschewed wealth and gave most of his possessions away. Greed has always been the antithesis of American Indian cultures and many tribes celebrated good fortune by giving away their possessions. This societal trait was documented by Columbus, by the Franciscan monks who decried the cruelty of the Spanish soldiers, by the pilgrims at Plymouth Rock, and in many other documents.

Beyond the cultural misrepresentations, the book is rampant with stereotypes which are as hateful and blatantly racist as any to be found anywhere.

Chapter Sixteen, page 78: Then he was aware of the Indians. They sat silently on either side of the fire, their painted faces ghastly in the flickering light.

Their painted faces would have been ceremonial and perhaps dramatic. A word like ghastly insinuates horror, which was not the intent and is not respectful of the culture.

Page 79: The Indians seemed satisfied. Smiles flashed in their dark faces. There was rough laughter, and then, seeming to forget him, they began to jabber to each other.

This comment about their jabbering to each other minimizes the beautiful and intricate Algonquin language. The image painted is cartoon-like, and again, very disrespectful and mocking.

Page 81: A lone Indian had leaped to the head of the line, beating a rattle against his palm in an odd stirring rhythm. He strutted and pranced in ridiculous contortions, for all the world like a clown in a village fair. The line of figures followed after him, aping him and stomping their feet in response.

The ridicule in this passage is hateful, mocking, demeaning and probably better describes the exaggerated antics of today's abusive Indian sports team mascots rather than of a American Indian involved in a ceremonial dance. Can you imagine how a American Indian child feels about this when they are described in such disrespectful terms? Ridiculous contortions? Clown in a village fair? There is nothing in this that embraces American Indian culture.

But then:

Matt found it simple to follow the step. His confidence swelled as the rhythm throbbed through his body, loosening his tight muscles. He was filled with excitement and happiness. His own heels pounded against the hard ground. He was one of them.

In this remarkable passage, all demeaning, belittling, ridiculous images disappear. Suddenly, when Matt, perhaps because he is white, dances in the same fashion, he is empowered. This passage is incredibly distressing. There are many whites who try to follow American Indian culture, appropriate it, and then tell American Indian people they are not performing their culture properly. There are stories of team mascots dancing ridiculously and telling American Indian people to be honored if they see white person mimicking their ways in inappropriate venues. There are whites who attempt to learn American Indian spirituality, then charge money for ceremonies. There are boy scouts that hold pow wows and tell American Indian attendees that they are dancing wrong. This passage rings with the very offensive suggestion that when Indians dance they are clowns. When the white boy dances, he is empowered. It is beyond condescending and well into imperialistic.

Throughout the book, Matt describes Attean in ways that make it clear he admires Attean, he is jealous of Attean, daydreams of besting Attean, distrusts Attean and very often says that he dislikes Attean. We are never given any reason he should have disliked Attean so much, since Attean teaches him to hunt, find his way through the woods, makes sure he has enough to eat, and invites him, against his grandmother's wishes, to participate in a ceremony. All of this is summed up in the fact that Matt is racist, and this book promotes the idea that it is perfectly acceptable to dislike someone for no reason, even if they save your life.

While in real life, we are not compelled to spend time with someone whose company we do not enjoy, a book like this absolutely promotes the idea that whites are superior and that racism against Indians is acceptable. It is a poor choice of books to subject any child to, no matter their race.

As an organization, we are glad this book has been brought to our attention. We will be filing this report with government civil rights agencies, with the publisher, and in time, we will also contact the media. We have had far too many complaints of children being called the names in this book, as well as violent and racist behavior on school grounds ranging from bullying to white gang whipping an Indian child, to ignore the fact that this book puts children's minds in harms way.

Report prepared by Christine Rose, Copyright 2006
Michael Eshkibok, Ojibwe, UND Doctoral Candidate, consultant for this report