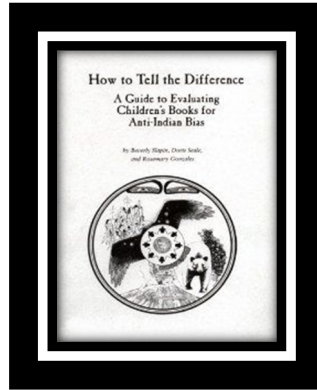


## How to Tell the Difference: A Guide for Evaluating Children's Books for Anti-Indian Bias

[[www.oyate.org/index.php/resources/41-resources/how-to-tell-the-difference](http://www.oyate.org/index.php/resources/41-resources/how-to-tell-the-difference)]



This 1996 guide by Doris Seale, Beverly Slapin and Rosemary Gonzales explains Oyate's very basic criteria for evaluating books about native peoples, or that engage Native themes. I recommend it for all schools. "Makes it easier for parents, students, teachers and librarians to choose undistorted books about the lives and histories of indigenous peoples." Order it at Oyate – Price: \$5.50.

### Criteria from Oyate's *How To Tell The Difference*

#### A) LOOK AT PICTURE BOOKS:

- A.1) In ABC books, is "E" for "Eskimo" or "I" for Indian present?
- A.2) In Counting books, are "Indians" counted?
- A.3) Are children shown as "playing Indian"?
- A.4) Are animals dressed as "Indians"?
- A.5) Do "Indians" have ridiculous names, like "Indian Two Feet," or "Little Chief"?

#### B) LOOK FOR STEREOTYPES:

- B.1) Are Native peoples portrayed as savages, or primitive craftspeople, or simple tribal people, now extinct? *Select only books in which Native peoples are shown as human beings, members of highly defined and complex societies.*
- B.2) Are Native societies oversimplified and generalized? Are Native people all one color, one style? *Select only books in which Native societies are presented as separate from each other, with each culture, language, religion, dress, unique.*
- B.3) Is the art a mishmash of "generic Indian" designs? *Select only books which pay attention to accurate, appropriate design and color, and in which are clothes, dress, houses drawn with careful attention to detail.*

#### C) LOOK FOR LOADED WORDS:

- C.1) Are there insulting overtones to the language in the book? Are racist adjectives, like "primitive," "pristine," "simple," "Injun" or "savage" used to refer to Indian peoples? *Select only books in which the language respectful, and worthy of use in reference to any other technologically advanced person or group of people.*

#### D) LOOK FOR TOKENISM

- D.1) Are Native people depicted as stereotypically alike, or do they look just like whites with darker faces? *Select only books in which Native people are depicted as genuine individuals, having unique and complex qualities and characteristics.*

## E) LOOK FOR DISTORTION OF HISTORY

**E.1) Is there manipulation of words like “victory,” “conquest,” or “massacre” to justify Euro-American conquest of the Native homelands?** Are Native Nations presented as being responsible for their own “disappearance?” Is the U.S. government only “trying to help?” *Select only books in which is history put in the proper perspective: the Native struggle for self-determination and sovereignty against the Euro-American drive for conquest and greed.*

## F) LOOK FOR VICTIMIZATION

**F.1) Does the story encourage children to believe that Native peoples accepted defeats passively?** *Select only books in which the story show the ways in which Native people actively resisted the invaders or continue to work for self-determination and sovereignty today.*

**F.2) Are Native heroes limited to those who, in some way or another, are believed to have aided Europeans in the conquest of their own people (Examples include some popular depictions of Pocahontas, or La Malinche)?** *Select only books in which Native heroes are admired because of what they do for their own people.*

## G) LOOK AT THE LIFESTYLES

**G.1) Are Native cultures presented in a condescending manner?** Are there paternalistic distinctions between “them” and “us?” Are Native peoples depicted as needing aid from outsiders, and having no ability to govern their own land and people effectively? *Select only books which focus on respecting Native peoples and understanding of the sophistication and complexity of their societies.*

**G.2) Are Native peoples discussed in the past tense only, supporting the “vanished Indian” myth?** Is the past unconnected to the present? (Be thorough – use of the past tense is a pervasive issue in books about Native peoples. Remember that any general reference to a tribe which is not explicitly to historical events, should be written in the present tense. For example, the sentence “Many California tribes *used* acorn in their meals” should actually have been written in the PRESENT tense, as this is still a widely consumed food among many California Natives.) *Select only books in which the continuity of cultures represented. Look for values, religions, and morals, as an outgrowth of the past, connected to the present, and taking the people into the future.*

**G.3) Is a society portrayed in a distorted or limited way?** Are religions described as “superstitions,” with backward or primitive connotations?

*Select only books in which Indian religions and traditions are described accurately, in the context of their civilizations, and commanding as much recognition and legitimacy as any practice or belief in the Christian or any other major religion.*

**G.4) Is there an ethnocentric Western focus on material objects, such as baskets, pottery, rugs?** Examples include depicting these objects strictly as “art,” or as a means to trade with Euro-Americans. *Select only books in which the writer shows an understanding of the relationship between material and non-material aspects of life.*

**G.5) Are Native peoples shown as “relentlessly ecological”?** *Select only books in which Native societies are described as coexisting with nature, having achieved such delicate balance as a result of their advanced understanding of Earth systems, scientific process, and principles of sustainability.*

## H) LOOK AT DIALOG

**H.1) Do the People speak in either a sort of “early jawbreaker,” broken English, or in the oratorical style of the “noble savage”?** *Select only books in which the People use language with the consummate and articulate skill of those who come from an oral tradition.*

## I) LOOK FOR STANDARDS OF SUCCESS

**I.1) In modern times, are Indian people portrayed as childlike and helpless?** Does a white authority figure – pastor, social worker, teacher – know better than Native people themselves what is “good for them?” Are Indian children “better off” away from their families? *Select only books in which Native adults seen as mature individuals who work hard and make sacrifices, in order to take care of their families, and for the well-being of the people.*

**I.2) Do Native people and their communities contrast unfavorably with the “norm” of white middle-class suburbia?** *Select only books in which Native people and their communities are seen as their own cultural norm.*

**I.3) Does it require Native people to adhere to “white” values and standards in order to get ahead or experience success?** *Select only books in which Native values of cooperation, generosity, sharing, honesty, and courage are seen as integral to growth and development.*

#### **J) LOOK AT THE ROLE OF WOMEN**

**J.1) Are women completely subservient to men?** Do they do all the work, while the men loll around, waiting for the next hunt? *Select Only Books in which women are portrayed as the integral and respected part of Native societies that they really are.*

#### **K) LOOK AT THE ROLE OF ELDERS**

**K.1) Are elders treated as a dispensable burden upon their People, to be abandoned in times of trouble or famine?** Are they portrayed as querulous, petulant, demanding, nagging, irritating, or boring? *Select only books in which elders are treated as loved and valued custodians of the People’s history, culture, and life ways. They should be depicted as active members of the community, whose contributions are valued and appreciated. They should be as cherished in the words of the writer as they were and are in the lives of the People depicted.*

#### **L) LOOK FOR THE EFFECTS ON A CHILD’S SELF-IMAGE**

**L.1) Is there anything in the story that would embarrass or hurt a Native child?** Are there any explicit or implicit lessons that would be harmful if instilled upon a child, Native or non-Native? *Select only books in which there is one or more positive role models with which a Native child can identify. Children should feel empowered and inspired by the literature they read.*

#### **M) LOOK AT THE AUTHOR’S OR ILLUSTRATOR’S BACKGROUND**

**M.1) Is the background of the author and illustrator devoid of qualities that enable them to write about Native peoples in an accurate, respectful manner?** Is there an ethnocentric bias that leads to distortions or omissions? *Select only books for which the author’s and illustrator’s background qualifies them to write about Native peoples. Their perspectives should strengthen the work.*

### **ADDITIONAL CRITERIA BY OYATE**

As a companion to Oyate’s previous publication, *How to Tell the Difference: A Guide for Evaluating Children’s Books for Anti-Indian Bias*, and to assist their own evaluative work, Oyate has added some additional evaluation criteria:

#### **➤ LOOK FOR THE AUTHOR’S OR ILLUSTRATOR’S RELATIONSHIP TO THE STORY:**

- 1) Does the author completely fabricate a story in the vague style of a Native legend?** *Prioritize books in which the author situates the stories in the context of her own culture and family.*
- 2) Does the author fail to acknowledge or pay tribute to the source of the story?** *Prioritize books in which the author acknowledges and honors the source of the story.*
- 3) Does the author acknowledge a vague, unnamed “elder” to validate the story?** *Prioritize books in which the author’s acknowledgment genuinely reflects her own relationship to the story.*
- 4) Is the illustrator culturally disconnected from the story?** *Prioritize books for which the illustrator is genuinely connected to the story.*

➤ **LOOK FOR THE AUTHOR'S OR ILLUSTRATOR'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE STORY:**

- 1) **Does the author attempt to portray a cultural outsider's version as having importance beyond the children's book that contains the particular story?** *Prioritize books for which the author understands and relates the deep significance of the story.*
- 2) **Does the author's note obfuscate the origins of the story?** *Prioritize books for which the author's note clearly and distinctly tells the origins of the story.*
- 3) **Does the author rationalize major changes to a story?** *Prioritize books for which the author adheres to the original oral story.*
- 4) **Does the author seek to justify a retelling from outside the culture by implying that the culture itself has disappeared?** *Prioritize books for which the author honors the continuing existence of the culture and the life of the people from an insider perspective.*
- 5) **Does the author's cultural belief system overlay the belief system of the people whose stories are being told?** *Prioritize books in which the author honors the belief system of the people whose story is being told.*
- 6) **Is the author's "humor" an arrogant, insulting, offensive or mean-spirited portrayal** of the people whose stories are allegedly being told? *Prioritize books for which the author's humor reflects the culture from which both the author and the story originate.*
- 7) **Is the author culturally disconnected from the story?** Does the author try to make parallels with European-based cultures that do not in fact exist? *Prioritize books for which the author is genuinely connected to the story.*
- 8) **Is the author a cultural outsider with no ties to the story**, other than having gone shopping? *Prioritize books for which the author is a cultural insider directly connected to the community being depicted.*
- 9) **Does the author use the word "story" or "tale" or "myth" or "legend" to minimize the importance of traditional oral histories?** *Prioritize books for which the author accepts the validity of Native oral stories as true and legitimate tribal histories.*