

Books are Good Medicine

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ABSTRACT: There is tremendous power in the books we read as children and teens. Stories are how we learn about people, places, and events very different from our own experiences. Many people are curious about Native Americans, yet too many books contain inaccurate information that perpetuates harmful stereotypes and misrepresentations. Angeline Boulley will share her journey from a young reader who did not see herself in the books she read, to writing a bestselling mystery thriller set in her Native American community.

Ahniin! Angeline Boulley nindiiznikaaz. Mukwa dodem. Zisabaaka Minising endjoonjiibah. Hello! My name is Angeline Boulley. I'm Bear Clan. My family comes from Sugar Island, which is a small island between the United States and Canada. I am an enrolled citizen of the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians.

Introducing myself in **Ojibwemowin** connects me to my community and celebrates that our **Ojibwe language** and cultural teachings are still here . . . because of stories. Storytelling is how we share what it means to be **Indigenous** or **Native**, and what it means to be human.

First, let me go over the terminology I will use.

- I use Native as a general term to encompass all Indigenous peoples in the U.S. I use the term 'Indian' when I am quoting an official name that includes 'Indian' or the word is used in a historical reference. Native is the term I prefer to use when I speak of Indigenous people in general. Unfortunately, the U.S. government uses the term 'American Indian,' which many deem inaccurate since we [Indigenous peoples] predate 'America' as a country and 'Indian' was a misnomer because Columbus mistook his landing to be in India.
- There are many groups of Indigenous peoples with similar cultural traditions and

language; we often refer to these groupings as a Native nation. My Native nation is the Ojibwe or Chippewa Nation. 'Ojibwe' is our name for ourselves which then became anglicized into 'Chippewa' by early settlers and colonizers. There are other Native nations such as Iroquois, Potawatomi, Seminole, and Cherokee.

- Within each Native nation there can be many tribes or bands. My specific Native tribe is called the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians. My tribe is one of 574 Indian federally recognized tribes [from among many Indigenous nations], meaning officially recognized by the United States government.
- My tribe, the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians, is comprised of several historic fishing villages. The Sugar Island Band is one of those historic fishing villages. I consider this to be my Ojibwe community and I am related to many community members.

Now, let us talk about stories. I was raised on stories. My father is a traditional firekeeper, which makes me a 'firekeeper's daughter' in real life! He tells stories while tending ceremonial fires at our tribe's special cultural events such as conferences, funerals, and powwows. Firekeepers ensure that protocols are followed because ceremonial fires are different from ordinary campfires. You don't roast hot dogs, or talk politics, or even gossip around a ceremonial fire. Only good thoughts and words to feed that special healing fire. The fire will be maintained for the duration of the special event. It provides a bond for participants to visit the fire and know that everyone there is united in a similar purpose.

I firmly believe that »Stories are good medicine.« Whether we see ourselves on the page or experience lives quite different from our own, we connect to something larger than ourselves – our humanity – through story.

In *Firekeeper's Daughter*, the main character Daunis Fontaine isn't just protecting her loved ones and her community from those who want to distribute a powerfully addictive drug in her Ojibwe community. She realizes that she is also protecting Indigenous knowledge from outside entities who have always sought control over our resources – whether it is land and water rights, our children and their education, our language, culture, and spirituality; and even to

control our own narratives.

I was 18-years-old before I read a book featuring a Native person as the main character. It wasn't until I read such a book that I realized the omission in my reading experiences up to that point. If I had not read a story featuring a Native person, then it was likely that my classmates had never done so either. This meant that the characters we read did not look like me [a Native girl with very light colored skin] or have a family like mine [with a Native father and a non-Native mother] or a community like mine [my Ojibwe community where my ancestors had lived for countless generations].

If we read stories about scientists, inventors, musicians, astronauts, teachers, leaders, surgeons, and architects – yet they all come from the same background, gender, socio-economic status, and heritage, then we are teaching students that the lived experiences of some are the only ones of value. There are powerful lessons when we see and read about the accomplishments of people from diverse backgrounds. It reinforces the inherent worth of all peoples.

When I was a child, we read a series of books by Laura Ingalls Wilder. The most popular one was ***Little House on the Prairie***. It was about a pioneer family living in the late 19th century as they struggled to survive and prosper on land they settled in the midwest and plains regions of the United States. The books were regarded as beloved classics for children. But in these stories, Native people were not regarded as actual people. The original version of ***Little House on the Prairie*** included a passage, »There were no people. Only indians lived there.« Native people were described in dehumanizing ways – as 'wild,' 'fierce,' and 'yipping.' The prevailing thought of many Americans at the time was that, »The only good indian is a dead indian.« Indeed, this phrase is used on multiple occasions in the ***Little House on the Prairie*** books. Ma Ingalls [the mother] is terrified of Native people, who would come to the Ingalls' home demanding food or other supplies.

But this is what the ***Little House on the Prairie*** story did not tell.

Pa Ingalls [the father] chose to be a squatter [illegally occupying] on Native land known as the Osage Diminished Reserve. It was Indian Territory in Kansas that was established by the Treaty of 1825 with the Osage tribe whereby they ceded [sold] some land and kept ownership of a portion, which was called a reserve. Some 33 years later, the Osage had never been paid for the land they ceded under the terms of the Treaty of 1825. There was much demand for more land to be opened up to settlers. Pioneers traveled to Kansas in anticipation of the unceded land opening up to settlers. But Pa Ingalls [the father] knew it was still Indian Territory when he cut trees to build a log home. He treated the land as his own, preparing it for farming, digging a well, and hunting game for food and to sell furs.

If you were a Native family living on land you had not ceded and the U.S. government had not paid for the portion of the land that you did cede to them over thirty years prior, what would you do? If it was part of your culture to take an annual hunting trip west to secure big game, food to last through the winter, and when you returned there was a pioneer family living and farming on your land in a home built from your trees, what would you do? And if the treaties had provisions where the Natives were legally entitled to charge these pioneer-squatter-settlers rent, how would that change the way you read the *Little House on the Prairie* story about wild Indians coming to the Ingalls home and demanding food and other supplies?

There are powerful lessons students learn in the books they read. When the stories of only some people are taught, and not those of other people, our lessons become filtered through a narrow lens. When truth is not taught, then whatever is taught becomes the truth.

If you only read about Native peoples from the narrow lens of the *Little House on the Prairie* story or other similarly filtered, distorted, inaccurate, incomplete, and downright irresponsible stories then you do not know the truth of Native peoples. You know a curated version that paints Native people as either romanticized, wise, noble, spiritual environmentalists or as soulless, wild, merciless savages. The truth is neither of these extremes. To formulate an idea of what a Native person is, based on these misrepresentations, does a disservice to actual Native people today.

What few stories there are about Native peoples are set in the past or are generalized to include feathered headdresses, tipis, horses, and an inherited leadership that parallels the Indian Chief as a King. There are no such things as Indian princesses; it is merely a romantic myth of the beautiful Indian maiden whose worth is based on her physical beauty and proximity to power.

With *Firekeeper's Daughter*, I was determined to write a Native protagonist who was strong both physically and mentally. Daunis is a large young woman, nearly six-foot-tall. She is sturdy and muscular – a powerhouse who plays ice hockey on a boys' team. She doesn't have coppery tan skin nor does she chant or sing, play the flute, weave baskets, create pottery, or wear turquoise jewelry. And yet, she is a Native young woman. Not half this and half that, but an Ojibwe person.

She, like me, has heard a thousand times, »Oh, you don't look Native«, because she – like me – doesn't fit the Indian princess stereotype. So we defend our Native identity, to explain how we can be Native without looking exactly like the generalized imagery that you were taught. We defend ourselves until we realize that no measure of proving oneself will ever be adequate when the standard is that limited. I do not defend my identity any longer. I know who I am and where I am from. I loved telling Daunis's story because she, too, comes to that epiphany and claims her Ojibwe identity.

Every child and teen deserves to see their lived experiences portrayed in a book. My classmates and I deserved to read stories that featured Native people from a variety of backgrounds, eras, and lived experiences. In this way, we would learn that Native people are not a monolith, or singular story frozen in the past. The more stories from as many different regions and cultures, the better to convey the diversity of Native peoples.

There are 574 Native tribes that are formally recognized by the United States government. Each has its own history, language or dialects, form of governance, cultural teachings and traditions, and eligibility for citizenship. Even within Native tribes there is much diversity. I share this with

you to counter the misinformation that harms Native people.

Author James Joyce wrote, »In the particular, we find the universal.« I sought to tell a very specific story set in my Ojibwe community, full of nuances, uncomfortable truths, and joyful moments. And in that specific story, I hoped for readers to connect with Daunis and to feel as if they truly know and cheer for this young woman.

I hope I have told a story through *Firekeeper's Daughter* that sparks an interest in learning more about Native people, particularly stories about Native children and teens authored by Native writers. Representation in children's literature matters. Telling stories that portray Native characters as fully-developed, complex, flawed humans helps to counter the books, films, and other media that perpetuate inaccurate information.

In closing, it is by reading about the lived experiences of other peoples that we develop awareness, understanding, empathy, and compassion of other children, cultures, and nations.

Miigwech! Thank you.