

Abstract

„Re-Gaining the Past and Shaping the Present: Indigenous Children’s Fiction from Aotearoa New Zealand, Canada and the United States.”

*Picture books are a significant means
by which we integrate young children
into the ideology of our culture.¹*

Since the inception of indigenous writing in English, the question of what it means to be Inuit, Cree, Blackfoot or Māori in postcolonial settler societies reverberates strongly in all indigenous art forms. Thematically, the import of indigenous traditions and their significance for the formation of contemporary identities takes a predominant position. While catering for the need to enunciate a specific indigenous view, they constitute living traditions that unequivocally display transcultural features.

The present paper explores the interplay of visual and verbal art, focusing on picture books by indigenous minority peoples in Aotearoa New Zealand, Canada and the US. By contributing to a growing canon of what is increasingly called multicultural children’s literature, indigenous writers have recognized the need to offer the new generation a distinct indigenous interpretation for re-imagining the past in order to construct present identities.

Indigenous children’s fiction succeeds in communicating “a message beyond the portrayal of customs and culture as being exotic or strange”²: Rather than laying emphasis on ‘otherness’ as something alien, the picture books discussed succeed in re-inscribing a valorization of the native elements in their respective societies. Thus, the combination of verbal and visual imaginary in picture books reveals an inherent dimension of cultural translation and blending, which point to the manifestation of multiple identities in contemporary postcolonial societies.

¹ Perry Nodelman, “Illustration and Picture Books,” in *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children’s Literature*, ed. Peter Hunt (London: Routledge, 1996): 116.

² Jacqueline Lazú, “National Identity. Where the Wild, Strange and Exotic Things Are: In Search of the Caribbean in Contemporary Children’s Literature,” in *Children’s Literature: New Approaches*, ed. Karín Lesnik-Oberstein (Hampshire & New York: palgrave macmillan, 2004): 200.