TRICK OR TREAT:
COYOTE IN CHILDREN'S PICTURE BOOKS

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Coyote, legendary mediator between the sacred and profane in Native American mythology, has increasingly become a mediator between ethnic populations in children's picture books. Seemingly simple but culturally complex, Trickster figures such as Coyote appear in publications written by both American Indians and non-Native Americans. But just as folktales change when they cross geographical and cultural boundaries, so does Trickster transform. Do non-Native authors alter the character rashly, failing to understand and appreciate the complex role of Trickster? Or do these books provide a valuable bridge between cultures?

Beverly Slapin, author of *Through Indian Eyes,* recently sent me this IRONIC memo:

Eight Steps to Turn a Native Legend into a
Children's Book (for fun and profit)

1. Go to the library and find a people's legend told to and written down by an anthropologist. Don't worry about asking any people's permission to use or change the legend—they may consider it sacred, but it is public domain, and according to white people law, it is yours for the taking.
2. Take the legend out of its language, out of its context, out of the values it teaches, and out of its group. Be sure to remain oblivious to the language and life ways of the people whose legend you hold in your hands. That way, you can be more objective
3. Choose the details you think are important—never mind what is important to the people whose legend you are working on. Cut out all references to violence, sex, or anything you don't particularly like or understand.
4. Belabor every detail to make it sound more authentic than the original telling. For instance, if the legend reads, "There was no fire here, only

far upriver at the world's end," change it to, "Long ago, the people had no fire. Day and night they huddled in their houses in the dark and ate their food uncooked. Oh, they were miserable."

5. Improve on the dialogue. Let your imagination run wild.
6. Find an artist who knows nothing of the legend or its people but knows how to copy details from a museum.
7. If you can, have the manuscript and illustrations checked by non-Native anthropologists. Make sure to thank them in the introduction. Call up a Native person too—any Native person. Even if she hangs up on you, you can thank her in the introduction. After all, she picked up the phone when you called.
8. Think of an imaginative title that will make a publisher see income potential. Calling the legend a coyote story is good. Non-Natives like things called coyote stories, even if they're not. If the publisher bites, you can always change the legend and make it a coyote story.

Are non-Native authors, publishers, and illustrators really this ignorant? Do parents, schools, and librarians who purchase books care about cultural context or authenticity?

Many Native Americans object to outsiders writing their stories, raising issues of ownership of the tales and their adaptation and pointing out that appropriation exploits and commercializes Native cultures. Lenore Keeshig-Tobias, a Canadian Ojibway writer, says that taking these stories for adaptation is not sharing, it is "poaching" (118-19). On the other hand, authors, publishers, and illustrators may feel that they are acting as historians, recording and even contributing to Native culture.

When Native Americans tell Coyote myths they frequently include tribal sacred truths. Reprinted for young children, a story can become a caricature of the culture. Coyote is a psychological, folkloristic, and literary archetypal figure. Especially in a children's book it is tempting to transform an archetype to a stereotype, an over simplified image that conjures a fixed response and taps ex-

isting attitudes and feelings, usually with derogatory implications. For example, Coyote is foolish, and some readers may conclude that this reflects the foolishness of American Indians. The Trickster archetype, for example, is illustrated by the variety of terms and descriptions folklorists have used to describe Coyote. In articles and books Coyote has been described as an alienated figure; audacious; beneficent being bringing culture and light to his people and a creature of greed, lust and stupidity; betwixt and between; a braggart; one who breaks taboos; childish; a coward and the essence of courage; creator and destroyer; culture hero; a Demigod bringing culture and light to his people; one who dupes others and is duped himself, egotistical; an enemy of the boundaries; one whose function is to add disorder and so make it whole; a figure of the margins, yet somehow at the center; the First creator; one with gamy holiness; Gemini; a giver and negator; gross; an inspired handyman; humble braggadocio; an imitator; innocent; one who knows neither good nor evil; a likable rascal; lustful; a marginal figure; a mediating figure; one who merges the secular and the sacred; a negative hero; Old Man; one who rules by passion and appetite; the spirit of disorder; a tolerated margin of mess; a transformer; an unrestricted ego; vexing; a wandering hero; and my favorite, one who evades academic capture and definition.[1]

As a result of indifference or lack of knowledge, readers who stereotype lump together all "Indians," when in truth American Indian nations have different political, kinship, and philosophical systems. Native Americans also have different Trickster figures, and even those who share Coyote may assign different functions to his role. In the Southwest Hopi pueblos in New Mexico and Arizona, Coyote is usually a mischief-maker; for neighboring Navajos, he is often a menacing figure playing a role in sacred ritual (Stott 92). After one Northwest Indian told a Coyote story to a Southwest American Indian, the listener commented "He doesn't know Coyote. Coyote wouldn't eat fish" (Toelken 192).

Reading a story with illustrations is different than listening to a tale being told and creating mental pictures to accompany it. A picture book imposes the illustrator's interpretation. A kindergarten student asked storyteller Susan Strauss after hearing several Coyote stories, "Just who is Coyote? Is he a man or an animal or a spirit?"[2] Would a child respond in this way after seeing the illustrations in a picture book?

Story source notes provide an opportunity to give cultural information or information about a story, its characters, source(s) for the rendering of the text, and changes/adaptations made by the writer. Source notes in children's picture books, however, are often incomplete or misleading. Here are a few examples:

In *Coyote and the Laughing Butterflies,* edited by Harriet Peck Taylor, the acknowledgment states: "I gratefully acknowledge the American Folklore Society for permission to use this adaptation" (NP). The title of the article, author, and publication in which the story originally it appeared are not cited, however.

In *Coyote and the Firestick: A Pacific Northwest Indian Tale,* retold by Barbara Diamond Goldin and illustrated by Will Hillenbrand, the author notes at the end of the book that Coyote is the chief character in the legends of the Pacific Northwest, as well as in many stories told over the whole western half of North America. In reality, Raven is the Trickster figure for many Native American nations in the Pacific Northwest, and other Trickster figures are common in the Southwest, Plains, and Northeast. Interestingly, the illustrator's comments are more informed: "The Pacific NW Indians who told Coyote stories lived primarily in plateau areas of Washington, Oregon, and in northern California" (Goldin NP). The illustrator adds cultural information as well.

In *Coyote and Native American Folk Tales,* retold by Joe Hayes and illustrated by Lucy Jelnick, storyteller-author Hayes writes in the introduction: "Many American Indian stories are sacred. They are part of the religion of the people who tell them, and so belong to just one tribe or sometimes just part of a tribe. Sometimes Coyote plays a part in these religious stories. But, the Coyote stories in this collection are different. They are told for entertainment. They are especially loved by children, who delight in Coyote's foolish antics. These stories do not belong to any single tribe. Most of them can be found among Native peoples throughout the west" (6)[3]

Coyote: A Trickster Tale from the American Southwest, by Gerald McDermott, has extensive notes about Coyote but does not indicate the source of this particular story. *Coyote Goes Walking,* retold with pictures by Tom Pohrt, is another children's picture book with information about Coyote but no source note for the story text.

In *Coyote Places the Stars,* retold and illustrated by Harriet Peck Taylor, the author acknowledges using a traditional text and lists several sources, which add authenticity. Taylor proceeds to make structural and motivational changes to this traditional text, however, eliminating Coyote's first trip to the stars, and changing the motivation for his second trip without noting that she has adapted the story.

Paul Goble is a non-Native American author of children's Native American picture books acclaimed by both Native and non-Native reviewers. Goble's books have won Aesop Prize awards from the Children's Folklore Section of the American Folklore Society. In his introduction to *Iktomi and the Buzzard: A Plains Indian Story,* he has fun with the issue of non-Indians writing Indian folk tales:

> Hi kids! I'M IKTOMI! And proud of it! Don't read this book. That white guy, Paul Goble, is stealing my stories and making money off of them. This book is ethnically insensitive material about me; its racial epithets just bring me into contempt, ridicule and disrepute. Hey! You're G-R-E-A-T kids! I've got my rights; I don't have to put up with this derogatory, disreputable, disparaging, and denigrating slurs and offensive designations. I'm being victimized. I have always been here on this Turtle continent. And I'll be the last here, long after all white people have been forgotten. I'm no racist, but I'm excited just thinking about it! I'm nobody's football or baseball mascot! I was the first member of the Great Lakota Sioux Nation, born in Nihil, SD and etc., etc., etc. . .(NP)[4]

In *Ma 'ii and Cousin Horned Toad: A Traditional Navajo Story* told and illustrated by Shonto Begay, this Native American author's notes add to the text, including the following: "These stories show us proper ways to conduct ourselves. They also explain natural phenomena. But they are also pure entertainment. Whenever we come upon a horned toad we gently place it over our heart and greet it, 'Ya ateeh shi che' (Hello, my grandfather). We believe it

gives strength of heart and mind. We never harm our grandfather. Ma'ii is coyote" (NP).

A picture book is a compilation of pictures and story text. Both contribute to the authenticity of the publication and have the potential to be offensive. Beverly Slapin and Doris Seale, in their publication, *Through Indian Eyes: The Native Experience in Books for Children,* cite many books that lack consistency with the story's source and the illustrations. For example, in *Knots on a Counting Rope,* by Dine, the story is identified as taking place in the Navajo nation, but Slapin points out that the hair styles of the women are similar to those of Mandan, Piegan, Blackfeet, or Atsima, and the faces of the men are more northern Plains than anything else. While the authors state, "The costumes are a mix of Hopi and Navajo celebration garbs, because their reservations are so close to each other, the tribes usually participate together in ceremonies." Slapin comments, "Is it necessary to say that Hopi people would not be showing up at a Navajo horse race in sacred ceremonial gear?" (183).

In the publication, *Baby Rattlesnake,* a story attributed to Te Ata, a Chickasaw storyteller living in the Oklahoma territory, a Chickasaw tale is illustrated with Navajo clothing and Pueblo dwellings. In addition, the non-Native storyteller who is listed as co-author, Lynn Moroney, changes the traditional ending (which involves death as a punishment) without informing readers of the alteration.

Slapin disapproves of the illustrations in *Doctor Coyote,* by John Bierhorst, in which animal characters are dressed as Indians. Coyote wears blue jeans, a squash blossom necklace and drives a pickup He lives in a shack with a yard full of junk and an outhouse in the back. "Given the historical tendency of white people to think of the native population as being somewhere between animals and real human beings," Slapin has said, "these pictures, are to say the least, unfortunate" (127). As Jon C. Stott notes, "A picture book is a marriage of text and illustration and either one can serve to trivialize Coyote, using him as a messenger for heavy-handed moralizing or behavior modification" (26).

American Indian stories are often "owned" by families or nations, much as an author owns a copyright. Alexander Wolfe, a Salteaux storyteller, states, "Every family handed down its own

stories. Other stories, belonging to other families, could not be told, because to do so would be to steal."[5]

Telling a story to an anthropologist or non-Native friend does not mean granting permission for the story to be published, changed and prettified. In an article in *The Bloomsbury Review,* Margo Thunderbird is quoted as saying "They came for our land, for what grew or could be grown on it, for the resources in it, and for our clean air and pure water. They stole those things from us. And now, after all that, they've come for the very last of our possessions; now they want our pride, our history, and our spiritual traditions. They want to rewrite and re-make these things, to claim them for themselves"(Churchill 23). No wonder American Indians raise emotional and ethical issues about the publication of "their" stories!

Toelken writes in his textbook, *The Dynamics of Folklore,* "Should we stop publishing Navajo Coyote stories? . . . This is a good example of an irresolvable dilemma, one that has grown more acute through the years because folklore and anthropological field researchers have assumed the right of access to traditional materials and have assumed the right to publish or disseminate these materials however they saw fit without regard to the hesitancies, codes, taboos, and ritual concerns of the real owners of those stories. . . That they [Indians] feel dislocated and hurt while we feel only embarrassment is a clear indication of the differences in worldview. It is also testimony to the abuse of power" (284).

Publishing children's picture books is a business. The floodgates have long been opened, and Native American tales will continue to be published as long as parents and libraries buy these books. But these stories were created and meant for oral delivery, and the very process of adapting them for picture book presentation entails remodeling. Only with a balance of artistry and authenticity can these stories be maintained through informed rewritings so that they enhance multicultural comprehension. Revisions, adaptations, and translation of oral text into literary language can be done with sensitivity and respect-both to the story and to the people from whom the story was obtained. Source notes can provide information about where the text was obtained and how it was revised. Effort can be made to contact Native American storytellers to attempt to find out more about the story.

In the last decades, environmental consulting firms have met a need in our society. Perhaps a different kind of consulting firma folklore consulting firm-could offer services to publishers, not to hand out a seal of approval, but to guard against inaccuracies. Reviewers could ask such questions as: Did the authors attempt to talk to anyone from the Native American Nation about the story? Is the story still told? A Hopi tale illustrated with Navajo hairstyle and Coos lodges would be flagged. Currently, the implicit presumption seems to be that these stories are fossils, archaic remains bygone cultures. This organization could offer seminars for the publishing industry, discussing the responsibility involved in adapting Native American text. Since money, power, and ownership are issues, perhaps the publishers could designate a percentage of their profits to the American Indian Nation or to a Native American Indian organization. It is seductive to assume that a revised text is an improved text. This is frequently an inappropriate assumption, however. All of us can accept responsibility by writing book reviews and letting bookstores know when we feel a book is objectionable.

Former American Indian Movement (AIM) leader, Russell Means, states, "What's at issue here is the question that Europeans have always posed with regard to American Indians, whether what's ours isn't somehow theirs" (Churchill 24).

Sometimes a joke can make a point better than factual information:

Do you know what the Indians called this country before the Europeans arrived?

"Ours!"

NOTES

1. Munro S. Edmondson lists Trickster figures around the world in *An Introduction to the Science of Folklore and Literature.* New York: Holt, 1971. 142.

2. Quote here is taken from Susan Straus' *Coyote Stories for Children.*

3. The italics here were not in Joe Hayes' original text.

4. Goble is directly quoted here. The "etc., etc., etc. ." was not added.

5. M. Annette Jaimes, author of *Earth Elder Stories,* quoted by Lenore Keeshig- Tobias in "Poaching", page 118.

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