



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“Because we cherish children, because we respect the authority they relegate to us, because we abhor the racial, ethnic, cultural, and gender stereotypes of the past, we cannot use books with children that are less than excellent.”

-Jan LaBonty, “A Demand for Excellence in Books for Children”, from *Journal of American Indian Education*, Winter 1995

One of the regular emails I get is an update to Debbie Reese’s blog, American Indians in Children’s Literature (AmericanIndiansInChildrensLiterature.blogspot.com). Reese describes herself as a professor, Native parent and former schoolteacher, who is also an “insider who can offer an ‘insider’s perspective’ based on a lived experience.” On her blog she offers her “critiques, reflections and reviews of children’s books, teaching about American Indians, and playing Indian activities from a place of knowing that is enriched and informed by my experiences.”

What I particularly appreciate about Reese is her steadfast and consistent dedication to the topic of children’s literature and American Indians. It is a challenge for anyone to balance strong feelings and opinions with the need to educate the public on a topic that can be controversial or misunderstood. She manages this by remaining respectful of those of us – like librarians and teachers – who

are struggling to understand a subject in which most of us don’t have much background. She brings in articles, quotes, comments and opinions from other people, so her blog isn’t simply about her. She is forthright but kind and as I read my way through her posts, I am grateful for her commitment to teaching both children and adults.

One of her postings is a December 19, 2007 “Open Letter to Jan Brett,” from Theresa Seidel about Brett’s new book, *The Three Snow Bears*. As usual, the illustrations in this book are amazingly detailed and beautifully done. Seidel begins her letter by praising Brett’s artwork and joy for writing. But she then goes on to question why Brett chose to make this book, which is a version of Goldilocks and the Three Bears, with what Seidel calls “an Inuit twist.”

Why is there an Inuit theme? she asks. Does Brett feel she is promoting a culture by showcasing it to the world? Is

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Brett going to give something back to the community for appropriating their culture? She ends her letter with a list of questions she uses to judge a book like *The*

Three Snow Bears. All of them are excellent ones to keep in mind when a

book is about any culture, but the one that struck me as most powerful was: "Could you remove the Native aspects and still have a good book? If so, what was the motivation to include them?"

Another comment on the blog also hit home with me. On the back flap of the book, there is a description of Brett's trip to Iqaluit and how she was inspired to write the story. After pointing out that Brett may not actually have written these words, Reese questions the sentence "Jan saw the many intelligent, proud faces that became

her inspiration for Aloo-ki."

Why is "faces" modified with "intelligent" and "proud"? Reese asks. Is it because Inuit faces need these modifiers? Are there

such modifiers about the faces of other children in other schools? I would like to think that sentence would have given me pause, but I'm not sure it would have. I am thankful to Reese for pointing it out.

It is not easy to question ourselves, as book selectors, as parents and as readers. We need all the information we can gather, alongside an open mind and a questioning spirit. Reese's blog is a good resource for this topic and I highly recommend taking a look at it.