

Many Trails, Many Tribes: Images of American Indians in Fiction

Since Christopher Columbus first set foot on American land, encountered the natives, and described them in his journal as "tall and handsome, their hair not curly, but flowing and thick, like horsehair," American Indians have captured the imagination of authors and their audiences throughout the world. Like many early explorers and colonists, Columbus brought his Old World experience and prejudices to bear on people about whom he knew nothing and with whom he could barely communicate. He assumes that their enemies are cannibals in service to the Great Khan, and that "they would readily become Christian; it appeared to me that they have no religion." He finds them surprisingly friendly and gullible: "I gave them some red bonnets and glass beads which they hung around their necks, and many other things of small value, at which they were so delighted and so eager to please us that we could not believe it." Thus begins one of the myths about American Indians; they are so naïve that one can buy their land with a string of beads; if one compensates them appropriately (as for oil discovered on Osage land), they'll squander the money on fancy cars that they'll abandon when they run out of gas.

Columbus also marvels at the virtues of the natives he encounters; in return for "things of small value," they offer gifts, seem to help Columbus in his quest for the source of their small amounts of silver and gold, and feed his men. He notes their physical beauty and the beauty of their crafts: their canoes, their homes, pottery, and masks. In Columbus' observations of American Indians as both childlike and virtuous, one can find the roots of the romanticist idea of the "noble savage."

Later explorers and early colonists of the Americas often encountered American Indians who were less welcoming or even actively hostile. William Bradford describes the new land as "a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men" and believes "that Satan hath more power in these heathen lands... than in more Christian nations," although he describes the fortuitous discovery of "diverse fair Indian baskets filled with corn" and, later, the establishment of amicable relations with the Wampanoag people. The popular captivity narratives of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries describe "the bloody Heathen ready to knock us on the head," yet, unwittingly, some of these narratives reveal compassion on the part of the Indians for their captives.

None of these early accounts of American Indians--in journals and diaries, travel literature histories, or captivity narratives--can be considered as fiction, yet the images of American Indians emerging from them are so highly colored by the presumptions of their authors as to seem fictional or mythical. Indians are rarely shown as individual human beings; instead, they function as symbols of the unknown. Depending on the author's attitude

toward the wilderness as either a paradise full of exotic spices and precious metals to be exploited or the den of Satan to be overcome, the American Indian is viewed either as a childlike yet innately noble savage or as a bloodthirsty heathen. The American Indian is also sometimes viewed as an agent of Providence, as in the case of Bradford's corn, or a teacher whose methods of agriculture and warfare, among others, were adopted and adapted by early settlers, enabling their survival in the wilderness. Even individual American Indians--such as Squanto, the ever-popular Pocahontas, Sitting Bull, and Crazy Horse--have been constantly recreated to fit into one or more of these categories--noble, childlike, wise, or ruthlessly bloodthirsty.

When Americans began to write their own novels, the American Indian could serve as a handy villain, an exotic romantic hero or heroine, or a trustworthy sidekick skilled in the ways of the wilderness. James Fenimore Cooper, who uses American Indians to fill all of these roles in *The Last of the Mohicans*, describes the American Indian character in his introduction to the novel:

Few men exhibit greater diversity, or, if we may so express it, greater antitheses of character, than the native warrior of North American. In war, he is daring, boastful, cunning, ruthless, self-denying, and self-devoted; in peace, just, generous, hospitable, revengeful, superstitious, modest, and commonly chaste.

Yet from this diversity of traits, Cooper creates American Indian characters who have become stereotypical fixtures of American novels to this day. The relentless and vengeful Magua could be the prototype of the vicious Blue Duck of Larry McMurry's *Lonesome Dove*. Chingachgook evolves into the Lone Ranger's Tonto. The handsome, brooding, and elusive Uncas, who dies for the sake of a woman he could never possess, is another version of the constantly revised Pocahontas.

Another stereotype not found in Cooper, but predicted by early accounts of American Indians, is that of the Indian as lazy spendthrift. Christopher Columbus saw his own opportunity in the Indians' generosity, but American Puritans found the Indians' apparent lack of industry and materialism to be repugnant. Events in Indian Territory in the latter years of the nineteenth century and the early part of this century--giving allotments of land to American Indians and the discovery of oil on some Indian land in Oklahoma--led many Americans to view these Indians as undeservedly wealthy. In reality, newly rich Indians often found themselves on the horns of a dilemma. Money seemed to give access into and require participation in the white man's world, which was at odds with traditional Indian values. John Joseph Mathews' novel *Sundown*, published in 1934, describes this dilemma. The hero, Chal Windzer, is perhaps the first American Indian character in fiction

to be depicted as a "marginal man"--a character who is caught between the white and Indian worlds and belongs in neither. As a result, he appears indecisive, directionless, passive, and lazy, but Mathews provides the reader with background sufficient to elicit a sympathetic response to Chal's plight. In Edna Ferber's *Cimarron*, published in 1929, the reader sees only the results of the dilemma:

Indians are bad people... They're dirty and lazy, and they steal.

Still, oil was oil, and Indians were Indians... The Osages still whirled up and down the Oklahoma roads... They crashed into ditches and draws and culverts as of old, walked back to town and, entering the automobile salesroom in which they had bought the original car, pointed with one dusky finger at a new and glittering model.

'Nother,' they said, succinctly. And drove out with it. Linda Hogan in *Mean Spirit* presents both sides of parts of the same story as Ferber, but with some humor and joy, although the focus of her novel is on the actual murders of Osage Indians by white people who wanted to acquire their oil wealth. N. Scott Momaday tells a story very similar to *Sundown* in *House Made of Dawn*; although his protagonist, Abel, has no material riches, he faces Chal's dilemma. Like Chal, he is a veteran (World War II this time), has lived in the white world, and has tried to return to his native pueblo, both without success.

In *Okla Hannali*, R. A. Lafferty tries to create a new myth for the American Indian that draws on the most ancient literary tradition of the western world, and depicts a Choctaw man, whose life spans almost a century--including historical events such as the removal of eastern Indian tribes to present-day Oklahoma and the Civil War--as an epic hero. Hannali Innominee has many traits in common with Homer's Odysseus, including a love of travel. Lafferty's novel also alludes to many other common and not so common myths about American Indians. Assumptions about Hannali's naivete allow him to beat several experienced New Orleans gamblers at poker; and Lafferty refers to spurious connections between American Indians and the Welsh, the lost tribes of Israel, and the people of Atlantis that were posited by eighteenth-century gentlemen.

While the stereotypes associated with American Indian characters in fiction persist, particularly in popular genre fiction such as historical romances and westerns, the growth of American Indian fiction (by Indians about Indians) has resulted in novels--written by both Indians and non-Indians--that depict American Indians as complex individuals. The Cherokees in Barbara Kingsolver's *Pigs in Heaven*, for example, are presented as interesting people, first, as well as members of an extended family which is the Cherokee Nation.

The novels in this series are arranged in the order of their interior chronology, from the wars between the French and British in the 1750s as imagined by Cooper to Kingsolver's depiction of characters moving through the late 1980s; thus, *Okla Hannali* is the second novel in the series although it was published in 1972, and *House Made of Dawn*, which was published in 1968, follows *Mean Spirit*, which appeared in 1990. These novels represent innovations in the fictional characterizations of American Indians rather than presentations of familiar stereotypes, as do the novels suggested for further reading, although *Okla Hannali* and *Mean Spirit* allude to passing and prevailing myths about American Indians, and Cooper's novels are sometimes given dubious credit for establishing the stereotypes of savage heathen and noble savage.

The five novels under discussion also have to do with much more than images of American Indians in fiction. They interpret segments of American history, explore human Nature, and deal with values. They show the impact of greed and poverty, love and war, and family and homelessness on human life. In the case of Momaday and Hogan, the novels are also about images of white people in American Indian fiction.

The Last of the Mohicans

by James Fenimore Cooper (1826)

In his preface to *The Leather-Stocking Tales*, Cooper apologizes for his sometimes idealized portraits of American Indians (Uncas and Chingachgook), but excuses himself on the grounds "of an author's privileges" and the requirements "of romances, to present a beau-ideal." The American Indians depicted by Cooper in *The Last of the Mohicans* are both noble savages and savage savages. Magua, as Leslie Fiedler says, "is so essentially the bad Indian, 'reptile,' 'fury,' 'Devil,' and Shylock in one, that beside him Cooper's other villains seem scarcely to exist." Even the stoic and beautiful Uncas, the last of the Mohicans of the title, takes the scalp of a French soldier, to which Natty Bumppo responds, "'Twould have been a cruel and an unhuman act of a whiteskin; but, 'tis the gift and natur' of an Indian, and I suppose it should not be denied. I could wish, though it had befallen an accursed Mingo, rather than that gay young boy from the old centuries," In Cooper's world, there are a few good Indians, many indifferent Indians, and some supremely evil Indians.

Some of the other characters and events in *The Last of the Mohicans* are stereotypes associated with the romance genre. The easily frightened and fragile, blonde and blue-eyed Alice is the fair maiden, claimed by the knight, Major Duncan Heyward. Her dusky half-sister, Cora, with her West Indian mother, her sympathy for the Indians, and her

canniness--she always remembers to mark the trail--is the dark lady. Munro's confusion over Heyward's interest in his daughters (he assumes Heyward wants the eldest, Cora), the kidnapping of the maidens, Magua's unhealthy interest in Cora, and the mysterious caves and cliffs and waterfalls are all typical of the events and scenery of romance novels. Natty Bumppo is often discussed as the prototype of the cowboy hero, who has his own literary genre, the western.

While Cooper's prose is often sense and Natty Bumppo has a tendency to digress into ponderings of complex moral issues, the story is action-packed and was made into a popular film in 1993. Cooper's novels are among the earliest to present American Indian characters and helped to create the myth of the stoic, stealthy, loyal noble savage whose knowledge of nature and physical prowess are almost magical.

Okla Hannali

by R. A. Lafferty (1972)

R. A. Lafferty is well known as a science fiction writer, but few readers are familiar with his historical novel, *Okla Hannali*. In his preface to the novel, Lafferty talks about growing up in Oklahoma and inevitably knowing Indians as playmates, classmates, and friends. The "straight stuff" and "whoppers" his friends told him about their history engendered in him the desire to know at least part of the whole story, hence his epic cataloguing of the hundred years of Hannali Innominee, "a larger-than-life Choctaw politician, businessman, trader, farmer, ferryman, town builder, fiddler, culture-keeper, and mingo (Choctaw for headman)."

The story of Hannali Innominee takes the reader from his birth in Mississippi to the Civil War battles fought in Oklahoma with Indians on both sides and to the brink of Oklahoma statehood. Hannali's dialogue is written in a stream-of-consciousness style which, the narrator claims, reflects the way Choctaws talk. Hannali Innominee likes to talk and likes to have the last word. He is a practical man and a man of action, larger than life and large in life, and--as a literary character--has been compared to Paul Bunyan. The drama of the story is the role played by the Choctaws in the Civil War--the schism between the wealthy mixed-blood slave-owning Choctaws and those like Hannali Innominee who were against slavery.

Mean Spirit

by Linda Hogan (1990)

Chickasaw author Linda Hogan's novel, *Mean Spirit*, is the second most recent book in the series, having been published in 1990. (*Pigs in Heaven* was published in 1993.) In order of

historical setting, *Mean Spirit* should be discussed before *House Made of Dawn*. In terms of American Indian characterization, however, *Mean Spirit* shows us characters who are neither noble savages nor marginal men, but who are very complex, interesting, and real. The strangest character in the novel, John Stink, is taken from real life. The real-life Stink was "buried" alive due to an epileptic condition which produced a death-like coma. Coming out of his coma, Stink was able to escape from his grave (due to an Indian practice of interring corpses in a sitting position with a small opening for a window) and spend the rest of his life as a ghost (both in his own and others' perceptions).

The "mean spirit" of Hogan's novel is greed, and both Indian and non-Indian characters are subject to it or victimized by it. The period depicted in the novel, the early 1920s, is the most infamous period in Oklahoma history; Hogan draws on the outrageous but true stories surrounding the stealing of Osage allotments after the discovery of oil in eastern Oklahoma. The novel's focus is on the Graycloud family--its white and Indian members--and their determination to escape the machinations of those who would steal their land. They are able to survive due to their own generous spirits and help of the "Hill People," traditional Indians who seem to exist in a parallel universe in the magical world of *Mean Spirit*.

House Made of Dawn

by N. Scott Momaday

N. Scott Momaday's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *House Made of Dawn*, is one of the first to depict an American Indian character as the "marginal man" unable to function fully in either the white or traditional Indian worlds. The novel is exceedingly complex and subject to radically different interpretations. The protagonist, Abel, returning to his pueblo after his service in World War II, resists his grandfather's advice and orderly traditional lifestyle, but murders the "white man" (an albino Indian) out of some sort of superstitious dread and fear for his grandfather's life.

After he is released from prison, Abel moves to Los Angeles where he meets the Priest of the Sun, a Kiowa Indian (like Momaday) who has invented his own religion loosely based on several different American Indian tribal beliefs. Despite the sermons of the Priest of the Sun and the support and love of his Navajo friend Ben and the white women, Angela and Millie, Abel remains isolated. He cannot adjust to the white world, cannot hold a job, succumbs to alcohol, and is finally badly beaten by a hostile policeman. In the last chapter, Abel again returns to his pueblo. His fate there is subject to the reader's interpretation.

Pigs in Heaven

by Barbara Kingsolver (1993)

In Barbara Kingsolver's first novel, *The Bean Trees*, the heroine decides to leave the small Kentucky town in which she grew up, thus escaping inevitable and imprisoning marriage and premature motherhood, and to change her name. She decides her new name will be determined in the place where her car first runs out of gas, which is Taylorville, Illinois; hence, Marietta becomes Taylor Greer. However, she doesn't escape motherhood. In the parking lot of a bar in Oklahoma, Taylor is presented with a two-year-old Indian girl by its dead mother's sister. Taylor protests, "If I wanted a baby I would have stayed in Kentucky... I could have had babies coming out of my ears by now." But by the time they arrive in Arizona, Taylor is determined to keep and protect the child, whom she has named Turtle due to her tendency to hold on tight. Much of *The Bean Trees* revolves around Taylor's efforts to adopt Turtle, which she finally achieves with the help of a Guatemalan refugee couple posing as Turtle's Cherokee parents.

Nothing is legal about Turtle's adoption except for the paperwork. In the sequel to *The Bean Trees*, *Pigs in Heaven*, Taylor and Turtle's security is shattered. Turtle insists she has seen a man fall into a concrete spillway at Hoover Dam, and Taylor knows that Turtle never lies. The subsequent rescue of Lucky makes Turtle a celebrity; she is invited to appear on *Oprah* for a program called "Children Who Have Saved Lives." Annawake Fourkiller, a young Cherokee lawyer, accidentally sees Turtle on television, recognizes her as an Indian child, and decides to undo what must be an illegal adoption under the Indian Child Welfare Act.

Annawake travels from Tahlequah to Tucson to urge Taylor to return Turtle to the Cherokees. This begins Taylor and Turtle's flight--first to Las Vegas where they meet the larcenous Barbie, who also recognizes Turtle from *Oprah*, and then to Seattle. But all of the main characters in *Pigs in Heaven* are inevitably moving toward Heaven, Oklahoma, a small Cherokee town near Tahlequah once made famous by a photograph in *Life* magazine of Taylor's mother's distant cousin, Sugar Hornbuckle, "with a pop bottle raised to her lips and a crown of daisies in her hair, leaning against the WELCOME TO HEAVEN sign." By the end of the novel, the sign is gone, but Taylor's mother Alice, Cash Stillwater, Annawake Fourkiller, and Taylor and Turtle find their welcome in Heaven.

Kingsolver's American Indian characters are fully developed alongside the other characters, and she shows all of the characters to have similar needs. Although Taylor and her mother have a Cherokee ancestor, they do not see themselves as Indians. Annawake's boss, Franklin Turnbo, describes himself as "a born-again Indian." Even Taylor's boyfriend Jax (named after the beer) and his German landlady Gundi discuss the seeming conflict between belonging to a tribe and being an individual:

'But how can you belong to a tribe, and be your own person, at the same time? You can't. If you're verifiably one, you're not the other.'
'Can't you alternate? Be an individual most of the time, and merge with others once in a while?'

But the Cherokee residents of Heaven--Uncle Ledger, Cash, Sugar, and the rest--seem to thrive as individuals because of their sense of connection to an extended family which is also their tribe.

For Further Reading

About Images of American Indians:

William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation* and captivity narratives, such as Mary Rowlandson's quoted above, can be found in many standard anthologies of early American literature.

The Voyage of Christopher Columbus: Columbus' Own Journal of Discovery. Newly restored and translated by John Cummins. New York: St. Martin's, 1992.

Leslie Fiedler. *Love and Death in the American Novel*. 1966; New York: Doubleday, 1992.

Nicholas J. Karolides. *The Pioneer in the American Novel 1900-1950*. Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1967.

Albert Keiser. *The Indian in American Literature*. 1933; New York: Gordon Press, 1972. In 1933, Keiser suggested that new novels with American Indian characters would cease to be written, as American Indian culture would disappear.

Charles R. Larsen. *American Indian Fiction*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1978.

William W. Savage, Jr., ed. *Indian Life: Transforming an American Myth*. Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1977.

More Novels

Michael Dorris. *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water*. New York: Henry Holt, 1987.

Michael Dorris and Louise Erdrich. *The Crown of Columbus*. New York: Harper, 1991.

Louise Erdrich. *Love Medicine*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, 1984.

Tony Hillerman's detective novels featuring Navajo policemen Jim Chee and Joe Leaphorn.

John Joseph Mathews. *Sundown*. Norman, University of Oklahoma, 1988.

Leslie Silko. *Ceremony*. New York: Viking, 1977.

James Welch. *The Indian Lawyer*. New York: Norton, 1990.

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