

The Absent Indian

by Colin Greene

Peggy Parish, best known for her Amelia Bedelia series, is a well-established and very popular author for “beginning readers.” She wrote almost three dozen children’s books and several series (“About Peggy Parish”). *Granny and the Indians*, published in 1969, is part of Parish’s smaller “Granny” series. The books in this series give humorous accounts of an old grandmother’s interactions with different groups of stereotypically rough and violent characters. Along with *Granny and the Indians*, Parish’s “Granny” series includes books such as *Granny and the Desperados*. A desperado is a “bold or violent criminal.” By placing them in the same series, Parish equates “Indians” to violent criminals. *Granny and the Indians* is a clear example of a children’s book that could subtly contribute to the development of implicit prejudices against American Indians.

The negative stereotypes of Native Americans in *Granny and the Indians* begin right from the front cover, where an illustrated Granny dances with squinty “Indians” with feathers in their hair and maracas in their hands. The illustrations throughout the book consistently carry out this theme and portray the Indian characters as bad tempered. They are always squatting and squinting and their heads are often tilted to the side as if they are confused. This angry theme is even more evident in the text where the author describes “those eyes, those angry Indian eyes” several times (Parish 13). The Indians are perfectly justified in being mad because, as the front matter describes, Granny is “stealing their food,” but the way the Indians deal with their fury is childish. Instead of confronting Granny when she steals their food, they hide behind trees and glare at her with angry eyes as if they cannot interact or speak with her. The “Indians” remain passive characters; they never take the initiative to confront or even to interact with Granny. They do, however, consider shooting her. Before they can take action and address the problem of Granny stealing their food, Granny’s house catches fire. The Indians are delighted about this because they assume Granny will be forced to move into town. To express their joy, the Indians have a big “pow-wow” (25). The illustration of their pow-wow shows the Indians stereotypically dancing in circles waving their tomahawks in the air. Almost all of the characters are exaggerated, either leaning very far back and looking to the sky or hunched over with their chests nearly touching their knees. Granny decides, after the fire, to go live with the Indians. The Indians are so repulsed by this idea that, in order to keep Granny away, they build her a new house and offer to bring her food every day (39). When they drop her off at her new house they warn her, “Stay out of our woods. We might shoot you yet” (39). The book ends with an illustration of Granny in the new house that the Indians built her. She’s holding a basket of food in her hand that the Indians brought her, and she has a mischievous smile. Directly above this illustration, the final two lines of the book read, “Granny never saw the Indians. They made sure of that” (40).

Whether or not Granny intentionally tricks the Indians into building her a new house and bringing her food every day or if events just played out in her favor is not important. Either way, the Indians look stupid, and either way, the reader is supposed to laugh at the Indians’ misfortune. According to the front matter of the book, “Beginning readers will...roar with laughter at the unusual peace treaty that concludes this very funny story.” Granted, *Granny and the Indians* does not openly advocate tricking Indians into giving readers free food and houses. Granny is not a sinister trickster who openly intends to harm the Indians, and even though the Indians think about shooting Granny, a child would probably not come away from this book with the idea that the Indians were especially evil. This is why the book is so dangerous: it plants ideas in young minds that are not even aware they are receiving ideas. One could easily argue, “it’s not that bad,”

and then keep it on the shelves. Then children may finish reading with subconscious ideas that Indians are a violent group of people that would consider shooting an old woman. They may be unaware of the diversity among American Indian tribes, cultures, and traditions.

On the *Harper Collins Children's* website, a "young Peggy Parish fan" is quoted as saying, "I hate reading but your books are changing my opinion." Young readers flock to Peggy Parish's books because they are fun to read. Again, this can be dangerous. Parish's books mold children's view of the world, and it is easy to understand how the subtly racist material that makes up some of her books, such as *Granny and the Indians*, is helping to foster prejudices children will carry with them to adulthood. The types of opinions Parrish is forming are the ones that children will not even realize have been internalized. When children finish reading this book, they will unknowingly have an inaccurate view of American Indians as simple-minded people from a long time ago.

American Indians today face serious social problems, and if the majority of Americans truly believe that American Indians are a thing of the past and don't really exist any more, then our society will not feel a pressing need to help them overcome their problems. Even if we did understand that a substantial number of American Indians are still alive, we would still be less inclined to help a group of people we don't respect. Helping them will probably fall low on our priority list.

Elementary school is an important time in the human developmental process, when children are forming their core beliefs. Routine exposure to these simplified stereotypes of American Indians results in young people forming implicit prejudices. These unconscious prejudices are a major source of the racism and discrimination that American Indians face today. An effective way to make these prejudices go away is to remove the propaganda that fuels them.

Unfortunately, it is very common for elementary and middle school students to be exposed to falsified American Indian culture especially in books. *Granny and the Indians* is only one example of many. There are countless examples of prejudiced children's literature that has become very popular.

The Education of Little Tree and *The Indian in the Cupboard* are additional examples of popular children's books that may ingrain negative images of American Indians into young minds. *The Education of Little Tree* was written by Asa Carter, under the pseudonym of Forrest Carter. "Asa Carter was a segregationist," and it "is beyond reasonable doubt" that he "was the leader of a Ku Klux Klan branch" (Bollman). Carter presented *The Education of Little Tree* as an autobiography about his life "as a self-taught Cherokee author and spokesman" (Reid). Despite Carter's proven racist background, his book's proven lack of truth, and the "white-supremacist ideology, imagery, and language" found in *The Education of Little Tree* (Bollman), the University of New Mexico Press continues to include a foreword which confirms the story as "Carter's autobiographical remembrances" found to be "as accurate as it was mystical and romantic" (Carter v-vi).

According to its front cover, *The Education of Little Tree* has sold over 1 million copies to date, but Lynne Reid Banks' book *The Indian in the Cupboard* is even more popular, having sold over ten million copies worldwide. It was so popular in text that the Columbia Pictures Corporation developed it into a feature-length film. Despite its popularity, *The Indian in the Cupboard* is not ideal for young children. In addition to its inaccurate portrayal of American Indians, this book effectively reinforces the idea that American Indians are only relics of the past. When a character sees an "Indian" and responds, "Well I'll be jiggered...A bloomin' Indian! This is a rum dream," a child could easily infer that American Indians do not exist anymore (Banks 45). These books are representative of much of the racist propaganda that children are exposed to every day.

There are many types of racist propaganda, and there are several different ways of categorizing it. I believe the best way to do so, however, is through two groups: obvious propaganda and inconspicuous propaganda. It is obvious that inconspicuous propaganda is more dangerous. People are conditioned to see racism as bad, or politically incorrect. A book blatantly racist toward American Indians probably would not make it into an elementary school library or classroom. If for no other reason, the school librarians and teachers would not want to be accused of being racist and risk their job, so they would not let obviously racist propaganda into the school. Less obviously racist propaganda, on the other hand, can and does make it into elementary schools all the time. Most American public elementary schools display this subtle racism with movies such as *Pocahontas*, with our routine elementary school Thanksgiving Day celebrations where we dress up as Pilgrims and Indians, and with books that portray American Indians in a simplified, inaccurate and often negative light. Books may be the least conspicuous and therefore the most dangerous form of anti-American Indian propaganda to which these young students are exposed. The less obviously racist a book is, the more dangerous it becomes because people may not even notice. As long as the book appears to have some other redeeming qualities, the racism may not appear to be severe enough to warrant taking the book off the shelves. The superficial good qualities distract people from the well-hidden prejudices.

On one level, there are the distractions that allow the book to stay on the shelf, and on a deeper level, there are the distractions that keep us from even seeing real American Indians. Children's books such as *Granny and the Indians* are part of a big disappearing act. Authors use literary sleight of hand to create the illusion that American Indians have all but disappeared. Vulgar caricatures divert our gaze from real American Indians and their real problems. Indeed, these literary illusions follow a similar routine to most disappearing acts. Most disappearing acts, however, do not end until the magician makes something reappear. This is the difference between prejudiced children's literature and a typical disappearing act. If children keep reading books like *Granny and the Indians*, the illusion of the nonexistent, absent Indian may become reality.

Works Cited

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