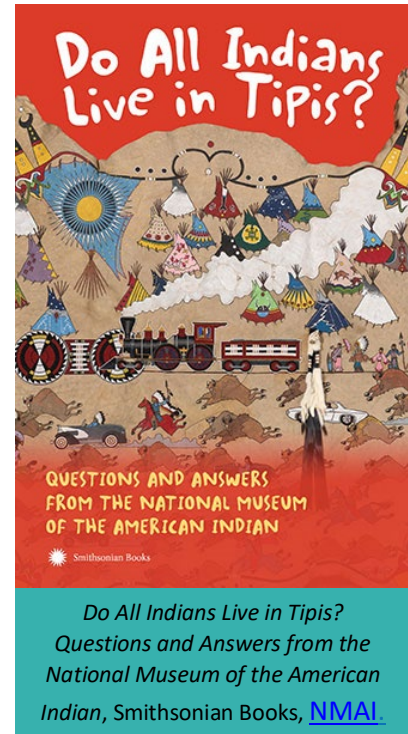


# Native American Literature in Your Classroom

Native Americans are represented in a wide variety of ways in children’s literature. Regardless of intention, these depictions often reinforce inaccuracies and stereotypes and fail to include the diversity of Native peoples who have lived on this continent for millennia. Too often, particularly with older books, Native Americans are presented in the past tense as a generic group of people rather than as thriving communities with sovereign political status, self-governance, histories, languages, and stories. [American Indian cultures have always been dynamic and changing.](#) As educators, we should select books and other materials that feature accurate and tribally specific portrayals of Native people, both past and present.

To help educators and parents choose high-quality materials, NMAI developed a rubric that outlines five criteria groups (Authority, Accurate Representation, Tribal Specificity, Language, and Contemporary Life) to consider when selecting texts. The goal of this rubric is to promote deeper and more critical thinking about Native American literature. The rubric is structured with questions that fall under each criteria group. Some questions have a clear answer, while others are more difficult to determine. You and your students may need to do further research on questions you were unable to answer. Tribal websites and our suggested resources are a good starting point. If too many boxes are left blank or elicit a ‘no’ answer, you may decide not to use the book at all, or you may want to use it for conversations about stereotypes and misrepresentation. The Dialogue Toolkit, provided under suggested books and resources, can support you in these discussions.

To counteract the belief that Native Americans are only historical, use books set in the present day. As you and your students analyze texts, keep in mind the power of visual representation. Look for Native American characters engaged in everyday activities, like playing videogames or lacrosse, or spending time with grandparents and pets. There are many Native authors that speak to the diversity and breadth of Native life, so check out our suggested books and resources, and bring new books into your classroom or library!



## Suggested books and resources:

- Use NMAI’s Worksheet for Selecting Native American Children’s Literature with your students to assess books in your library.
- Use these NMAI [books](#) by Native authors.
- Study the in-depth analyses of classic, popular, and award-winning books at [American Indians in Children’s Literature](#).
- Use award-winning books selected by the [American Indian Library Association](#).
- For recommended book lists about American Indians, go to [socialjusticebooks.org](#).
- Go to the website [Cynthia Leitich Smith](#) for additional information and book lists.
- Use NMAI’s [Americans Dialogue Toolkit](#), designed for students in grades 4–12, to discuss representation.
- Use this [helpful handout](#) about Native American dress and clothing.



# Worksheet for Selecting Native American Children’s Literature

Title \_\_\_\_\_ Author \_\_\_\_\_ Illustrator \_\_\_\_\_

Authority	YES	NO
Is the book written by a Native American author?		
If the book has illustrations, were they done by a Native American illustrator?		
Do the author and illustrator (Native or non-Native) provide evidence that they consulted with knowledgeable people within the tribal nation or community depicted in the book?		
Is the author's work recommended by scholars and organizations with expertise in Native literature?		

Accurate Representation	YES	NO
Is the text historically accurate? (Are specific dates and timeframes provided for historical events?)		
Do the illustrations represent Native history and culture accurately?		
Does the book include references that have a variety of sources, such as primary-source documents or links to tribal websites?		

Tribal Specificity	YES	NO
Are the characters and content tribally specific?		
Do the book’s illustrations avoid stereotypes and generalizations and show tribally specific clothing, arts, homes, and geographic regions?		
When characters are shown in regalia, is the depiction appropriate to the tribal nation and context? (Today, regalia is worn for specific reasons and not as everyday attire, and Plains-style headdresses should not be used to depict Native people outside of the Plains.)		
Do retellings or interpretations of traditional stories treat them with respect as sacred stories (not myths, legends, or folktales), specify tribal origin, and include notes about the source of the story and time of the year when it is appropriate to read it?		

Language	YES	NO
Is the dialogue realistic and free of Hollywood romanticisms (for example, phrases like “many moons ago” or broken English such as “me go help”)?		
Does the author use appropriate and respectful words when referring to Native people?		
Is the dialogue free of incorrectly used tribally specific words like “papoose” (the Narragansett word for “baby”), which cannot be universally applied across tribes?		
Does the book contain notes and/or glossaries that verify or otherwise support the accuracy of tribal languages when used?		

Contemporary Life	YES	NO
Are Native characters shown as individuals who engage in the same kinds of everyday activities that other kids do (going to camp, playing basketball, or spending time with family and friends)?		
Does the book present realistic portrayals of contemporary life among American Indians in various geographical settings: on or near reservations, villages, and communities, and in urban or rural areas?		