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PEDAGOGY AND MULTICULTURALISM

Once upon a Genocide: Christopher Columbus in Children's Literature

Bill Bigelow

Robert Young, *Christopher Columbus and His Voyage to the New World*, (Let's Celebrate Series). Silver Press, 1990, 32 pp. (2nd grade).

James T. de Kay, *Meet Christopher Columbus*. Random House, 1989, 72 pp. (2nd grade).

Jan Gleiter and Kathleen Thompson, *Christopher Columbus*, (Great Tales Series). Ideals, 1985, 32 pp. (3rd grade).

Ingri and Edgar Parin D'Aulaire, *Columbus*. Doubleday, 1955, 59 pp. (5th grade).

Jean Fritz, *Where Do You Think You're Going, Christopher Columbus?* G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1980, 80 pp. (Upper elementary).

Lino Monchieri (trans. by Mary Lee Grisanti), *Christopher Columbus*. Silver Burdett, 1985, 62 pp. (Upper elementary).

Mary Pope Osborne, *Christopher Columbus: Admiral of the Ocean Sea*. Dell, 1987, 90 pp. (Upper elementary/middle school).

Sean J. Dolan, *Christopher Columbus: The Intrepid Mariner*, (Great Lives Series). Fawcett Columbine, 1989, 117 pp. (Middle school).

CHILDREN'S BIOGRAPHIES OF CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS FUNCTION AS PRIMERS on racism and imperialism. These books teach youngsters to accept the right of white people to rule over people of color, of powerful nations to dominate weaker nations. And because the Columbus myth is so per-

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vasive — Columbus' "discovery" is probably the *only* historical episode with which all my students at Jefferson High School are familiar — it is vital that educators analyze how this myth inhibits children from developing democratic, multicultural, and anti-racist attitudes.

The Columbus myth goes like this: Long ago there lived a great white man. This man was very brave, smart, and determined. He loved adventure. He sailed across the ocean and found many islands with dark-skinned people. He took possession of these islands and called the people "Indians." His name was Christopher Columbus — he discovered America.

Almost without exception this is the portrait of Columbus presented in biographies written for children. They depict the journey to the New World as a "great adventure" led by "probably the greatest sailor of his time." It's a story of courage and superhuman tenacity.

Yet behind this tale of courage, adventure, and "discovery" is the gruesome reality. For Columbus, land was real estate and it didn't matter to him that other people were already living there; if he "discovered" it, he took it. If he needed guides or translators, he kidnaped them. If his men wanted women, he captured sex slaves. If the indigenous people resisted, he countered with vicious dogs, hangings, and mutilations. On his second voyage, desperate to show his royal patrons a return on their investment, Columbus rounded up some 1,500 Taino Indians on the island of Hispaniola and chose 500 as slaves to be shipped back to Spain and sold. As one of the Spanish colonists wrote, the remaining Indians "rushed in all directions like lunatics, women dropping and abandoning infants in the panic, running for miles without stopping, fleeing across mountains and rivers."¹ Slavery did not show a profit as almost all the slaves died en route to Spain or soon after their arrival. Thus, Columbus decided to concentrate on the search for gold. Nonetheless, he wrote, "Let us in the name of the Holy Trinity go on sending all the slaves that can be sold."² As for gold, Columbus ordered every Taino 14 years and over to deliver a regular quota. Those who failed were punished by having their hands chopped off. In a mere two years of the Columbus regime possibly a quarter of a million people died. Yes, in 1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue — but he did much more than that.³

It is worth noting that none of this information is based on new or controversial research; in fact, some of the most horrifying details of Columbus' reign in the Indies come from biographers like Samuel Eliot Morison, who are great admirers of the admiral.

This article follows Columbus as he sails through children's biographies, comparing the books' versions of events with the historical record and then analyzing how these accounts may influence young readers. I especially focus on the authors' portrayals of Columbus' relationship to Native Americans and the way these accounts justify racism and other social inequalities. I conclude

with a brief examination of the pedagogy implicit in these books and a discussion of more appropriate ways to teach Columbus in this quincennial period.

Portrait of Columbus: The Books vs. the Historical Record

Columbus' Motives

Why did Columbus want to sail west to get to the Indies? The answer offered to children in today's books seems not to have changed much since I was in fourth grade. I remember my teacher, Mrs. O'Neill, asking our class this question. As usual, I didn't have a clue, but up went Jimmy Martin's hand. "Why do men want to go to the moon?" he said triumphantly. Mrs. O'Neill was delighted and told us all how smart Jimmy was because he had answered a question with a question. In other words: just because — because he was curious, because he loved adventure, because he wanted to prove he could do it — just because. And for years I accepted this explanation (and envied Jimmy Martin).

In reality, Columbus wanted to become very rich. It was no easy task convincing Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand to finance this highly questionable journey to the Indies, partly because his terms were pretty outrageous. Columbus demanded 10% of all the wealth returned to Europe along the new trade route to Asia (where Columbus *thought* he was headed) — that's 10% of the riches brought back by *everyone*, not just by himself. Furthermore, he wanted this guaranteed *forever*, for him, for his sons, for their sons, in perpetuity. He demanded that he be granted the titles "Viceroy" and "Admiral of the Ocean Sea." He was to be governor of all new territories found; the "Admiral" title was hereditary and would give him a share in proceeds from naval booty.

As for Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand, curiosity, adventure, and "exploration" were the last things on the minds of these Spanish monarches. They wanted the tremendous profits that could be secured by finding a western passage to the Indies.

The books acknowledge — and even endorse — Columbus' demands and readily admit that securing "gold and spices" was an objective of the Enterprise. "Of course [Columbus] wanted a lot! What was wrong with that?" James de Kay's *Meet Christopher Columbus* tells second graders. Yet this quest for wealth as a motive for Columbus' expedition is downplayed in favor of adventure. "Exploration" meant going to "strange cities" where "many wonderful things" could be seen (de Kay, 1989). Travel was exciting: Columbus "felt the heady call of the open sea. 'I love the taste of salt spray in my face,' he told a friend, 'and the feel of a deck rising and falling under my

feet..." (Monchieri, 1985). Columbus spends time in Lisbon, "a great center for discovery and exploration" (Osborne, 1987).

According to these eight biographies, the major reason that Columbus wants to sail west is his deep faith in God. "He believed that it was only important to do what God wanted him to do — and he believed that God wanted him to discover a new route to the Indies. Another amazing thing about Columbus was his unswerving religious faith" (*Ibid.*). Columbus thought:

that the Lord had chosen him to sail west across the sea to find the riches of the East for himself and to carry the Christian faith to the heathens. His name was Christopher. Had not the Lord chosen his name-saint, Saint Christopher, to carry the Christ Child across the dark water of a river (D'Aulaire, 1955)?

Using a term like "heathens" to denote the indigenous peoples of America without offering the slightest criticism is a problem shared by most of the books I reviewed. Columbus "would claim the new lands he found for Spain, and would convert the peoples he found there to Christianity" (Dolan, 1989).

Children's miseducation in international affairs begins with the factors each book emphasizes to explain Columbus' Enterprise. Religion, curiosity, adventure — all those motives are given preference in Columbus biographies over the quest for wealth and power for the Spanish empire. Each of these motives, of course, pales before — and would have been irrelevant without — the economic needs of the Crown. In burying these more fundamental material forces, the Columbus books encourage students to misunderstand the roots of today's foreign-policy exploits. Thus, students are more likely to accept platitudes — "We're involved in Latin America for freedom and democracy" — than to look for a less altruistic explanation. Ultimately, life and death decisions turn on our understanding of the roots of foreign policy. As my student, Bobby, said in class one day: "If people thought they were going off to war to fight for profits, maybe they wouldn't fight as well, or maybe they wouldn't go."⁴

The Kind and Noble Columbus

None of the biographies I evaluated — all in print and widely available — disputes outright any of the ugly facts about Columbus and the Spanish conquest of the Caribbean. Yet the sad irony is that every one of them encourages children to root for Columbus. "It was lucky that Christopher Columbus was born where he was or he might never have gone to sea" (Fritz). "There once was a boy who loved the salty sea" (D'Aulaire). Some of the books, particularly those for younger readers, refer to Columbus affectionately, using his first name. Unlike the people he will later exterminate, Columbus is treated as

a real human being, one with thoughts and feelings. “When Christopher Columbus was a child, he always wanted to be like Saint Christopher. He wanted to sail to faraway places and spread the word of Christianity” (Osborne). By contrast, the books have nothing to say about what the Indians may have wanted. Gleiter and Thompson’s *Christopher Columbus* is structured as a conversation between Columbus and his son, Fernando. The Admiral of the Ocean Sea is good and kind. In illustrations he has perfect teeth and a strong chin. The series title of Robert Young’s *Christopher Columbus and His Voyage to the New World* sums up the stance of every biographer: “Let’s Celebrate.”

The books cheer Columbus on toward the Indies. Each step on the road to “discovery” is told from his point of view. When Columbus is delayed, this is the “most unhappy part of his great adventure” (de Kay). One could be excused for thinking that torturing Indians or taking hundreds of slaves might be a bit more “unhappy,” but point of view is everything and these books give the Indians no standing. Every successful step toward realizing the Enterprise is rewarded with exclamation marks: “Yes, [the Queen] would help Columbus!” (Osborne) “After all these years, Columbus would get his ships!” (de Kay)

Columbus’ devout Christianity is a theme in all the books — and is never questioned. The most insistent of these, and the worst of the lot in almost every respect, is Sean J. Dolan’s *Christopher Columbus: The Intrepid Mariner*. Already by the second page of Dolan’s reverent volume we’re reading about Columbus’ attachment to his leather-bound Bible. Dolan continually dips us into the admiral’s thoughts, and these meditations run deep and pious:

[He] believed that the awe-inspiring beauty that surrounded him could only be the handiwork of the one true God, and he felt secure in his Lord and Savior’s protection. “If only my crewmen shared my belief,” Columbus thought.

This is only on the third page — and Dolan’s narrative goes on like this for 114 more. The reader is practically strangled by Columbus’ halo. He calms the sailors on his first voyage by speaking to them of Jesus: “‘Seek and ye shall find,’ the Bible tells us. I am at peace with my God, and He assures me that my mission will succeed. I entreat you to share my confidence.” In case this isn’t convincing enough, however, Columbus promises his men futures of nobility, huge estates, and jewels.

Jean Fritz’s *Where Do You Think You’re Going, Christopher Columbus?* is the only book to adopt a somewhat skeptical tone about religion as a motive for Columbus and his sponsors. Fritz tells her readers that Queen Isabella:

was such an enthusiastic Christian that she insisted everyone in Spain be a Christian too.... Indeed, she was so religious that if she even

found Christians who were not sincere Christians, she had them burned at the stake. (Choir boys sang during the burning so Isabella wouldn't have to hear the screams.)

This is pretty strong stuff, but the implied critique would likely be lost on the book's targeted readers, upper-elementary students.

The close association between Jesus, God, and Columbus in all the books, with the possible exception of Jean Fritz's, functions to discourage children from criticizing any of Columbus' actions. "Columbus marveled at how God had arranged everything for the best," the D'Aulaires write. Well, if God arranged everything, who are we, the insignificant readers, to question? Even without Biblical references, nothing in the books encourages children to question the conduct and objectives of the Enterprise. Yet Christianity serves to shield Columbus even more completely. Moreover, no book even hints that the Indians believed in their own God or gods who also watched over and cared about them. The Columbus expedition may be the first encounter between two peoples — Us and Them — where children will learn that "God is on *our* side."

Evils? Blame the Workers

Columbus' journey across the Atlantic is not an easy one, according to most of the books, because his crew is such a wretched bunch. The sailors are stupid, superstitious, cowardly, and sometimes scheming. Columbus, on the other hand, is brave, wise, and godly. These characterizations, repeated frequently in many of the books, function later in the stories to protect the Columbus myth from becoming tarnished; anything bad that happens, like murder and slavery, can always be blamed on the men. Columbus, the leader, is pure of heart; the rabble embodies everything wicked and selfish. The books anticipate and may even reflect some of the Reagan-era rethinking of the Vietnam debacle: the war was a noble crusade, but was lost by undisciplined and drugged-out soldiers. (These negative portrayals are less pronounced in Monchieri's *Christopher Columbus*. The book depicts seamen as pliant and ignorant, but at least concedes that "almost all proved to be good sailors.")

Taken together, the books' portrayals serve as a kind of anti-working class/pro-boss polemic. "Soon [Columbus] rose above his shipmates, for he was clever and capable and could make others carry out his orders" (D'Aulaire). Evidently, ordinary seamen are not "clever and capable" and, thus, are good merely for carrying out the instructions of others. "Soon [Columbus] forgot that he was only the son of a humble weaver," the D'Aulaires write, as if a background as a worker were something to be ashamed of, a history that needs to be forgotten. The books encourage children to identify with Columbus' hardships, even though his men worked and slept

in horrible conditions while the future admiral slept under a canopy bed in his private cabin and had a personal servant. The lives of workers are simultaneously ignored and held in contempt.

The “Discovery”

The Indigenous Peoples as Non-Humans

At the core of the Columbus myth — and repeated by all eight books — is the notion that Columbus “discovered” America. Indeed, it’s almost as if the same writer churned out one ever so slightly different version after another.

James T. de Kay describes the scene in *Meet Christopher Columbus*:

The sailors rowed Columbus to the shore. He stepped on the beach. He got on his knees and said a prayer of thanks.

Columbus named the island San Salvador. He said it now belonged to Ferdinand and Isabella.

He tried to talk to the people on San Salvador. But they could not understand him.

Of course *he* couldn’t understand them, either. But the inability to understand is attributed to the Indians alone.

Is it these Indians’ implied ignorance that allows heavily armed men to come onto their land and claim it in the name of a kingdom thousands of miles away? In *Christopher Columbus and His Voyage to the New World*, Robert Young avoids even raising the question as he fails to inform his young readers of the *people* on these islands. Young’s Columbus found “lands,” but no people; in illustrations we see only palm trees and empty beaches.

Why don’t any of the books prompt students to question what rightfully should be portrayed as the beginning of an invasion? Naïvely, I kept waiting for some writer to insert just a trace of doubt: “Why do you think Columbus felt he could claim land for Spain when there were already people living there?” Or “Columbus doesn’t write in his journal why he felt entitled to steal other people’s property. What do you think?”

This scene of Columbus’ first encounter with the Indians — some version of which is read in school by virtually every child in the United States — constructs a powerful metaphor about relations between different countries and races; it’s a lesson not just about the world 500 years ago, but about the world today. Clothed, armed, Christian, white men from a more technologically “advanced” nation arrive in a land peopled by darker skinned, naked, unarmed, non-Christians — and take over. Because no book indicates which characteristic of *either* group necessitates or excuses this kind of bullying, stu-

dents are left alone to puzzle it out. Might makes right. Whites should rule over people who aren't white. Christians should control non-Christians. "Advanced" nations should dominate "backward" nations. Each answer a student might glean from the books' text and images invariably justifies imperialism and racism: it's acceptable for one people to determine the fate of another people; it's acceptable for white people to control people of color.

In Columbus' New World "adventures," the Indians are merely background noise. The indigenous people appear as a *presence* in most of the books I reviewed, but their lives count for nothing. *Where Do You Think You're Going, Christopher Columbus?* is the only book that tries to imagine what the Indians might have been thinking about the arrival of the Spaniards. Still, the point here seems more to gently poke fun at Columbus and crew than to seriously consider the Indians' point of view: "...if the Spaniards were surprised to see naked natives, the natives were even more surprised to see dressed Spaniards. All that cloth over their bodies! What were they trying to hide? Tails, perhaps?" Jean Fritz's interior monologue for the Indians makes fun of the explorers but in the process trivializes the Indians' concerns; indigenous people appear silly and superstitious.

Not one Columbus biography ever asks children: "What might the Indians have thought about the actions of Columbus and his men?" According to Mary Pope Osborne, Columbus "thought [the Indians] could easily be brought under control and that they had no religion of their own. He wrote that they would make 'good Christians and good servants.'" But Osborne doesn't prompt students to wonder what the Indians would have thought about Columbus' plans. She is content to repeat the admiral's racism without comment or critique. In these biographies, Indians don't think, feel, or speak.

The silent Indians in Columbus stories promote a contemporary consequence. Children absorb the message that white people in developed societies have consciousness and voice, but Third World people are thoughtless and voiceless objects. The text and images rehearse students to look at the world from the assumption: *they* are not like *us*. A corollary is that *we* are more competent than *they* in determining the conditions of their lives: their social and economic systems, their political alliances, and so on. Intervention in Vietnam, subversion of Salvador Allende's government in Chile, the invasions of Grenada and Panama, the attempted overthrow by proxy of the Nicaraguan and Angolan governments: "our" right to decide what's best for "them" is basic to the conduct of this nation's foreign policy. The Columbus myth, as most children's first exposure to "foreign policy," helps condition young people to accept the unequal distribution of power in the world.

Theft, Slavery, and Murder Justified

Columbus' genocidal policies toward the Indians were initiated during his second journey to the Americas. The three books aimed at children in early elementary grades, Gleiter and Thompson's *Christopher Columbus*, de Kay's *Meet Christopher Columbus*, and Young's *Christopher Columbus and His Voyage to the New World* conveniently stop the story after his first journey — as mentioned, Young's book ignores the Indians' existence entirely. Thus, the authors escape having to confront slavery and mass murder. One can imagine the violins playing toward the conclusion of de Kay's story:

The king and queen looked at the gold and the Indians [with whom Columbus had returned]. They listened in wonder to Columbus' stories of adventure. Then they all went to church to pray and sing. Tears of joy filled Columbus' eyes.

All his dreams had come true. He was rich. He was famous. And he had found a way to the Indies.

Donald Trump before the fall; a fairy tale for eight-year-old millionaire wanna-bes. Because none of the three books says a word about the fate of the Indians, the Columbus myth can take root in young minds without being complicated or stained by the violence to come.

Yes, Columbus returned to a hero's welcome in Spain after his first trip. He also came back telling all kinds of lies about gold mines and spices and unlimited amounts of wealth to be had for the taking. The admiral needed royal backing for a second trip, and so it was important to convince his sponsors that the islands to which he would return contained more than parrots and naked heathens.

During this second voyage, in February of 1495, Columbus launched the slave raids against the Tainos of Hispaniola. Four of the eight books I examined — the ones aimed at older children — admit that Columbus took Indians as slaves (Monchieri, Fritz, Osborne, and Dolan). However, their critique is muted, as no account tells children what slavery actually entailed for its victims. One of the books, Monchieri's *Christopher Columbus*, says that taking slaves was "a great failing of Columbus.... He saw nothing wrong with enslaving the American Indians and making them work for Spanish masters.... Missionaries protested against this policy, but they were not listened to." End of discussion. Mary Pope Osborne in *Christopher Columbus: Admiral of the Ocean Sea*, writes that "this terrible treatment of the Indians was Columbus' real downfall" — she merely *says* slavery was terrible without *showing* any of the terror. In fact, Osborne is unable to offer even this minimal criticism of the admiral without at the same time justifying his actions: "Since Columbus felt

despair and disappointment about not finding gold in the Indies, he decided to be like the African explorers and try to sell these Indians as slaves." Neither book describes the character of slave life — or slave death.

The other two biographies simply offer Columbus' own justifications for taking slaves: "African explorers were always sending Africans back to Spanish slave markets, Columbus told himself. Besides, the natives were all heathens. It wasn't as if he were selling Christians into slavery" (Fritz). Note again how ineffective this facetious tone is when the author presents no direct critique. "Because the Indians were not Christians, Columbus believed that they could be enslaved and converted without the Spanish feeling any guilt" (Dolan). Dolan later blames slave-taking all on the men: "Given the attitude of the men at large, however, [Columbus] had little choice but to give his approval to the slaving sorties." This is an absurd claim, made without any evidence. As quoted earlier, in Columbus' own journal he invoked the blessing of the Holy Trinity to continue the slave trade — so long as it remained profitable.

Ultimately, all four of these biographies offer children only Columbus' pitiful rationalizations for slavery. Imagine, if you will, Nazi war crimes described in this way — nothing about the suffering of the victims, tepid criticism of the perpetrators — their crimes explained through the justifications of Hitler and his generals. How long would these books last in our schools?

From the beginning, locating gold was Columbus' primary objective. In one passage, not included in any of the children's books, Columbus writes: "Gold is a wonderful thing! Whoever owns it is lord of all he wants. With gold it is even possible to open for souls the way to paradise."⁵ Two of the eight books, those by Fritz and Dolan, do describe in some detail Columbus' system for attempting to extract gold from the Indians. Dolan writes that Columbus instituted "a system of forced tribute: each Indian was to provide a certain amount of gold each year. Penalties for failure to comply with this rule included flogging, enslavement, or death." Nothing here about cutting people's hands off, which is one of the punishments Columbus inflicted, but still it's pretty explicit. Fritz writes simply that Indians who didn't deliver enough gold "were punished." She concludes that "between 1494 and 1496 one-third of the native population of Hispaniola was killed, sold, or scared away."

The passive voice in Fritz's version — "*was* killed, sold, or scared away" — functions to protect the perpetrators: exactly *who* caused these deaths? More significantly, however, these accounts fail to recognize the Indians' humanity. The books' descriptions are clinical and factual, like those of a coroner. What kind of suffering must these people have gone through? How did it feel to have their civilization completely destroyed in the space of just a few years? What of the children who watched their parents butchered by the Spanish gold-seekers? These books show no passion or outrage — at

Columbus, at the social and economic system he represented, or at textbooks for hiding this inhumanity for so many years. This devastation happened to human beings — several hundred thousand of them, maybe more. Why don't the writers of these books get angry? Jean Fritz is so ho-hum that she can end her story with a tribute to Columbus: certainly he “had performed brave deeds, but not even he could appreciate the extent of his achievement.”

I find the most “honest” books about Columbus' Enterprise — those that admit slavery and other atrocities — also the most distressing. They lay out the facts, describe the deaths, and then it's on to the next paragraph with no look back. These books model for children a callousness toward human suffering — or is it simply a callousness toward the suffering of people of color? Apparently, students are supposed to value bravery, cunning, and perseverance over a people's right to life and self-determination. The stories prepare young people to watch without outrage the abstract nightly news accounts — a quick segment about an army massacre in El Salvador followed by a commercial for Chrysler Le Baron.

Contempt for Native Resistance

Given that Columbus biographies scarcely consider Indians as human beings, it's not surprising that native resistance to the Spaniards' atrocities is either barely acknowledged or treated with hostility. Gleiter and Thompson's *Christopher Columbus*, notes that in future trips Columbus “fought with the natives.” In a sentence, Lino Monchieri writes, “The Indians became rebellious because [Columbus] compelled them to hand over their gold.” At least here the author credits the Indians with what might be a legitimate cause for revolt, though she offers no further details. Mary Pope Osborne buries the cause of resistance in non-explanatory, bland, victimless prose: “But the settlers had run into trouble with the Indians, and there had been a lot of fighting.”

Some writers choose to portray Indian resistance not as self-defense, but as originating from the indigenous people's inherently violent nature. In *Meet Christopher Columbus*, “unfriendly Indians” surprise the innocent Spaniards: “Suddenly more than 50 Indians jumped out from behind the trees. They had bows and arrows. They attacked the men. The men fought back. One Indian was hit by an arrow. Another was badly cut.” Thus, Indian resistance to the Spaniards' invasion and land grab is not termed “freedom fighting,” but instead is considered “unfriendly.” Ironically, this story portrays the violence of the Spaniards as self-defense. Notice that these Spaniards earn the designation “men” while the Indians reside in some other category of humanity.

The books that bother to differentiate between distinct groups of Indians single out the Caribs for special contempt. They present Caribs as cannibals, although no historical evidence exists to corroborate such a claim.⁶ The Caribs

lived on islands “so wild and steep, it seemed as if the waterfalls came tumbling out of the clouds. The Indians who lived there were wild too. They were cannibals who ate their enemies” (D’Aulaire). In Dolan’s *Christopher Columbus: The Intrepid Mariner*, Columbus sends an armed contingent to “explore” the island that today is St. Croix. Because Caribs attack the Spaniards, Dolan considers this resistance sufficient to label the Caribs as ferocious. In fact, according to the account of Dr. Diego Alvarez Chanca, an eyewitness, the Indians only attacked when the Spaniards trapped them in a cove.⁷ In today’s parlance, the Caribs were the “radicals” and “extremists” — in other words, they tenaciously defended their land and freedom.

Just as the Columbus myth conditions young people to accept unequal colonial relations between the predominantly white, Christian, technologically more complex, better-armed culture and the “non-white,” “undeveloped” culture, so, too, are young people conditioned to reject the right of the oppressed to rebel. We have a right to own Their land, and They should not protest — at least not violently. Those who do resist will be slapped with a pejorative descriptor — cannibal, savage, communist, militant, radical, hard-liner, extremist — and subdued. Black South Africans’ fight against apartheid, the Palestinians’ *intifada*, Honduran peasants organizing for land redistribution, the United Farm Workers’ quest for union recognition: Columbus biographers’ blindness to or contempt for native resistance implicitly discourages students from paying serious attention to these and other contemporary movements for social justice. Obviously, this twisted history leaves children similarly ill-prepared to recognize and respect current Indian struggles for land and fishing rights. Biographer Sean Dolan even labels Columbus’ own men as “notorious troublemakers” when they resist his dictates. Apparently for Dolan, challenging authority is crime enough for sailors’ imprisonment and subsequent executions by hanging, as he offers no further justification.

Columbus’ Legacy

I expected each book to end with at least some reflection on the meaning of Columbus’ voyages. None did. In fact, only one book, *Meet Christopher Columbus*, even suggests that today’s world has anything to do with Columbus: thanks to the admiral, “Thousands of people crossed the ocean to America. This ‘new world’ became new countries: the United States, Canada, Mexico, Brazil, and many others.” An illustration below these words depicts a modern ocean liner. Yet there is nothing here about the *character* of that new world.

It’s much simpler for the authors to ignore both the short- and long-term consequences of Columbus’ Enterprise. Instead of explicitly linking the nature of Columbus’ Spain to 20th-century America, each book can function as a kind of secular “Book of Genesis”: In the beginning, there was Columbus —

he was good and so are we. This way, the decency of today's society is implicitly confirmed without resort to any open discussion or documentation.

This is a grave silence. Besides the genocide of native peoples in the Caribbean, the most immediate effect of Columbus' voyages was the initiation of the Atlantic slave trade between Africa and America. The Spanish monarches issued the first laws governing this slave trade as early as 1501 and by 1510 shiploads of enslaved Africans were transported to America for sale.⁸ As historian Basil Davidson writes:

Throughout the years that followed it was to be the searing brand of this trade that it would consider its victims, not as servants or domestic slaves who deserved respect in spite of their servile condition, but as chattel slaves, commodities that could and should be sold at whim or will.⁹

This was the new world that Columbus did not so much discover as helped to invent. In the emerging commercial ethos of his society, human beings were commodities whose worth was measured largely in monetary terms. The natural environment was likewise cherished not for its integrity or beauty, but for the wealth that could be extracted. Columbus' Enterprise and the plunder that ensued contributed mightily to the growth of the nascent mercantile capitalism of Europe. His lasting contribution was to augment a social order that valued and continues to value the world in commercial terms: How much is it worth?



Why are Columbus biographies characterized by such bias and omission? I doubt any writers, publishers, or teachers consciously set out to poison the minds of the young. The Columbus story teaches important values, some would argue. Here was a young man who, despite tremendous adversity, maintained and finally achieved his objectives. Fear and narrow-mindedness kept others from that which he finally accomplished.

In the Columbus biographies, however, these decent values mingle with biases against working-class people, people of color, and Third World nations. The blindness of writers and educators to these characteristics may be an indication of how pervasive these biases are in the broader society today. The seeds of imperialism, exploitation, and racism were planted with Columbus' first trans-Atlantic Enterprise — and these seeds have taken root. Without doubt, ours is a very different world than 15th- and 16th-century Spanish America, but there is a lingering inheritance: the tendency for powerful groups to value profit over humanity, the use of racial and cultural differences to justify exploitation and inequality, vast disparities in living conditions for different social classes, as well as attempts by economically and militarily strong nations to control the fates of weaker nations. Hence, life amid injustice in to-

day's United States inures many of us to the injustice of 500 years earlier. Characteristics that appear to someone as natural and inevitable in the 20th century will likely appear as natural and inevitable in descriptions of the world five centuries ago.

The Pedagogy of Columbus Biographies

As I've indicated throughout this review, the Columbus stories encourage a passive relationship between reader and text. The books never pose choices or dilemmas for children to think through. Did Columbus have a right to claim Indian land in the name of the Spanish crown? Were those Indians who resisted violently justified in doing so? Why does the United States commemorate a Columbus Day instead of a Genocide Day? Each biography is structured as a lecture, not as a dialogue of problem posing. The narratives require readers merely to listen, not to think: "Just sit back — we'll tell you all you need to know about Columbus and the discovery of America," the books seem to suggest. The text is everything, the reader nothing. Not only are young readers conditioned to accept social hierarchy — colonialism and racism — they are also rehearsed in an authoritarian mode of learning.

By implication, I've tried in this review essay to suggest the outlines of a more truthful history of Columbus and the "discovery" of America. First, the indigenous peoples of America must be accorded the status of full human beings with inalienable rights to self-determination. The tale of "discovery" would need to be told from their perspective as well as from the Europeans. Although there is little documentation of how the Indians interpreted the Spaniards' arrival and conquest, readers could be encouraged to think about these events from the native point of view. What the Indians may have thought as they were "pacified" by dogs and swords and forced into searching out impossible amounts of gold should be juxtaposed with the thoughts of the conquerors. Columbus' interior monologue should not be the only set of thoughts represented in the story. A more accurate tale of Columbus would not simply probe his personal history, but would also analyze the character of the social and economic system he represented. Children might also be asked to think about how today's world was shaped by the chain of events begun in 1492. Above all, young readers must be invited to think and critique, not simply required to sit passively and absorb others' historical interpretations. Such a book is waiting to be written.¹⁰

Thus, until we create humane and truthful materials, teachers may decide to boycott the entire Columbus canon. The problem is that the distortions and inadequacies characterizing this literature are also found throughout other children's books. A better solution is to equip our students to read critically these and other stories — inviting children to become detectives, interrogating their biographies, novels, and textbooks for bias. In fact, because the

Columbus books are *so* bad, they make perfect classroom resources to learn how to read for social and literal meaning. After students have been introduced to a critical history of Columbus, they could probe materials for accuracy. Do the books lie outright? What is omitted from the accounts that would be necessary for a more complete understanding of Columbus and his encounters with native cultures — what do the books say about slavery, for example? What motives do the writers suggest Columbus had and how do those compare with the actual objectives of the admiral and the Spanish monarches? Whom does the book prompt the reader to “root” for and how is this accomplished? What role do illustrations play in shaping readers’ understandings of Columbus’ Enterprise? Why do the books tell the story as they do? Who in our society benefits and who is hurt from these presentations?¹¹

Teachers could assign children to write their own Columbus biographies — and some of these could be told from Tainos’ point of view. Or youngsters might take issues from their own lives suggested by the European invasion of America — fighting, fairness, stealing, racism — and write stories drawn from these themes. One of my students at Jefferson High School in Portland, Nicole Smith-Leary, wrote and illustrated a book about a young boy named Chris, who moves to a new neighborhood and “discovers” a clubhouse built by three other boys. Nicole took her story, which ends more happily than the one after which it’s patterned, and read it in several elementary school classrooms.

Encouraging students to ask critical questions in their reading directly challenges the passivity promoted by the Columbus biographers. Instead of merely absorbing the authors’ words, children can begin to argue with them. Significantly, to invite students to question the injustices embedded in text material is implicitly to invite them to question the injustices embedded in the society itself. Isn’t it about time we used the Columbus myth to allow students to begin discovering the truth?

NOTES

1. Spanish colonist, Michele de Cuneo, quoted in Koning (1976: 84).
2. Quoted in *Ibid.* (p. 85).
3. See de Las Casas (1971), Keen (1959), Koning (1976), Morison (1965), Zinn (1980), and Meltzer (1990).
4. See Bigelow (1989: 635–643).
5. Christopher Columbus in a letter to Isabella and Ferdinand, 1503, cited in Johansen and Maestas (1979: 16).
6. On cannibalism in the Caribbean, see Carew (1988), Hulme (1986), Sale (1990), de Las Casas (1971), and Sued-Badillo (1986).
7. See Morison (1965: 416–417).
8. See Davidson (1961: 45–46).
9. *Ibid.*: 46.

10. See Thomas' "The Untold Story" (1991: 32–33). A Spanish-language version appears as "*La Historia Jamás Contada*" in Ramos et al. (1992: 34–35). The first commercially published book to tell the "Columbus" story from the Tainos' point of view, by Yolen (1992), was written after this review first appeared. It has many weaknesses, such as a blame-the-victim tone, but is the only book of its kind.

11. See Bigelow (1989: 639).

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