



PROJECT MUSE®

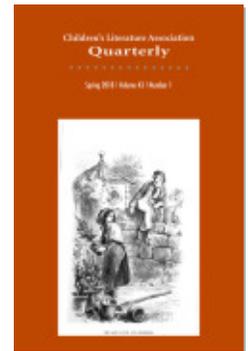
Paul Goble, Storyteller by Gregory Bryan (review)

Erica Kanesaka Kalnay

Children's Literature Association Quarterly, Volume 43, Number 1, Spring 2018, pp. 115-118 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/chq.2018.0012>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/686682>

where you've always recognizable." An illustrator should "Change and change and change it" (125), which can be seen in his best-known picture books, *Where the Wild Things Are*, *In the Night Kitchen*, and *Outside Over There*.

Perhaps it is because he was in psychoanalysis for an extended time—he remarks to Gross at one point that "My therapies went on forever" (199)—that Sendak was so open and revealing in these interviews. He is consistently frank, and he provides strong, and sometimes harsh, assessments of other illustrators and of himself. One interviewer, Nuwer, describes him as "irritable and phlegmatic" (80). As he aged, Sendak became a bit of a curmudgeon; death and loss became more frequent topics, and he began to worry about his legacy. He tells Sutton, "My talent is knowing how to make a picture book. Knowing how to pace it, knowing how to time it. The drawing and writing are good, but if my whole career counted on that I wouldn't have made it very far." He argues that it wasn't until *The Juniper Tree* (1973) that he learned to "really draw" (149; orig. emphasis).

Sendak was the first American to be awarded the Hans Christian Andersen Medal. Despite his distaste for the sentimentality found in many of Andersen's fairy tales, he was troubled by a similar concern: that he would be recognized solely as a writer for children. These interviews, while highlighting Sendak's influential work as a children's picture book author and illustrator, also reveal him as an astute critic of the picture book tradition

and emphasize his wide-ranging accomplishments in many other media and art forms.

Work Cited

Sendak, Maurice. "The Shape of Music." *Caldecott & Co.: Notes on Books and Pictures*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988. 3–9.

Jan Susina is a professor of English at Illinois State University, where he teaches children's literature. He organized the successful 1997 nomination of Maurice Sendak as an Honorary Fellow of MLA, the only children's author to be selected to join this group of distinguished men and women of letters.



Paul Goble, Storyteller. By Gregory Bryan. Pierre: South Dakota Historical Society, 2017.

Reviewed by Erica Kanesaka Kalnay

In *Paul Goble, Storyteller*, Gregory Bryan investigates something of a mystery: How did a boy of white, middle-class British background come to write over forty children's books on American Indian themes? While in recent years Goble has been charged with cultural appropriation, Bryan makes no attempt to hide the fact that this biography pays tribute to a man for whom he maintains a deep admiration. The consequent laudatory tone comes to represent both a strength and a limitation of his project. Written with the assistance of Goble himself, this biography achieves an intimate perspective on the work of a major figure in children's literature. However, some readers may find

Bryan's treatment of the controversies surrounding Goble's books insufficiently critical or even problematically apologetic.

This is the first biography of its kind. No other book-length study of Goble's life has yet been published, aside from his thirty-two-page children's autobiography *Hau Kola: Hello Friend* (1994). Richly illustrated and concisely written, *Paul Goble, Storyteller* should be of interest to specialists and nonspecialists alike. In fifteen short, digestible chapters, Bryan explores the influences that contributed to Goble's singular aesthetic and to his lifelong preoccupation with Native American cultures.

Born in 1933, Goble grew up in an artistic family that nurtured his creativity and his love for nature and adventure. Childhood reading likewise played a role in his early fascination with indigenous ways of life. As a young boy, he enjoyed Golden Age children's classics such as *Treasure Island*, *The Jungle Book*, and *Two Little Savages*, in addition to nonfiction settler narratives such as the writings of George Catlin. By quoting from these works in epigraphs that frame each chapter, Bryan emphasizes their formative role in shaping Goble's imagination. What results is a palimpsestic effect, revealing the traces of a Victorian colonialist imaginary underlying Goble's contemporary picture books. Bryan observes that these favorite childhood texts "mirror experiences and attitudes from [Goble's] life, proving the power of books to inform and shape us." He then adds, "Goble's own books have been informing and positively shap-

ing readers for decades" (x). It is this second claim to which Goble's critics may object.

After publishing several books on Native American themes while still residing in England, Goble relocated to South Dakota in the late 1970s. Bryan reports that Goble developed a close relationship with individuals from nearby tribal nations, including Edgar Red Cloud of the Oglala Lakota, who had adopted him on an earlier visit. As Bryan stresses, Goble hoped that his children's books would honor, preserve, and transmit the traditional Plains Indian stories that he gleaned from storytellers such as Red Cloud. He approached this task not only by retelling these narratives, but also by attempting to translate their oral form to the printed page.

However, the biography also demonstrates the ways in which Goble's books depart from a strict adherence to the traditions of the Plains Indians, embracing a far more eclectic aesthetic. In *The Girl Who Loved Wild Horses*, a winner of the Caldecott Medal in 1979, we can find horses inspired by the ledger art of the Plains Indians galloping alongside billowing black clouds inspired by traditional Chinese paintings. Before devoting himself to creating picture books full-time, Goble worked as a furniture designer, and his illustrations also evince a graphic sensibility influenced by midcentury modern design. Across his oeuvre, he sustains a thoughtful use of line, shape, and white space that recalls his design training. A significant contribution of this book is therefore its illuminating close readings of Goble's art in collaboration

with biographical research.

As Bryan notes, Goble's trademark precision emerges most notably in his intricate handling of natural landscapes. While perhaps best known for his red sun motif, he devotes equal, if not greater, care to the world beneath our feet, meticulously rendering rocks, grass, foliage, flowers, and even litter. Across this lush topography, Goble playfully hides small animals—snails, lizards, birds, and squirrels—for attentive child readers to find. For Bryan, this artistic exactitude and Goble's interest in truthfully representing Native American cultures should be seen as fundamentally linked, both speaking to his "need for accuracy" (118).

Here a complication arises, however, in that Goble's eclecticism and his investment in cultural accuracy seem to be at odds. Referencing the praise of some of Goble's Native American supporters, Bryan contends that his outsider status paradoxically afforded him unique insights: "Goble, as a non-Indian born in another country, was able to see the value in what others had failed to appreciate" (93). In response to such claims, critics specializing in Native American children's literature, including Doris Seale and Beverly Slapin, have argued that Goble appropriates traditions that have long been valued by indigenous peoples, if not by the publishing industry. Seale states that Goble presumptuously acts as if Native Americans "have so lost our traditions, cultures and histories that we must be taught them by a white person" (Seale and Slapin 160).

Bryan addresses these charges in chapter 14, "The Pendulum Swings."

While he endeavors to preserve a measure of critical distance, he clearly believes that Goble's use of Native American themes should be seen as artistically innovative and ethically sound. Bryan also hints that critics such as Seale and Slapin have been hypocritical because they have shifted their positions on Goble's work over time: from recommending his books in *Through Indian Eyes* (1992) to arguing in *A Broken Flute* (2005) that they not only appropriate Native American stories but also reproduce inaccurate and offensive images and attitudes. However, it is worth noting that Seale's critique in *A Broken Flute* does not arbitrarily revise her assessment of Goble, but responds to what she perceives as the changing tenor of his work. While his earlier books demonstrate "some understanding" and "some humility," later ones take liberties that she finds disrespectful in the context of colonial violence writ large (Seale and Slapin 158). Seale objects in particular to Goble's turn to Iktomi, a Lakota trickster figure. His Iktomi character plays with Native American stereotypes and even delivers a metafictional commentary on Goble's own uncomfortable position as a white author of Native American stories. Bryan argues that critics have misconstrued how Goble merely taps into Iktomi's inherent irony. He then shifts responsibility to the character himself, writing that "Iktomi is still stirring things up and getting in the way" (181). However, whether a non-Indigenous author has the right to play with the ambiguity of Iktomi might still be contested.

Over the past decade, Debbie Reese

and other scholars have continued to critique how children's literature misrepresents Native American peoples and cultures. Readers of *Paul Goble, Storyteller* would therefore benefit from reading these perspectives in order to achieve a fuller understanding of some of the issues that Bryan elides. Moreover, while Bryan occasionally seems to assume otherwise, a critique of Goble's work need not be framed as an attack on his character. At heart, the #WeNeedDiverseBooks and #OwnVoices movements seek not to castigate and silence individuals or to censor literary history, but to redress long-standing and large-scale inequalities in a genre to which colonialist ideologies are endemic. Indeed, as a self-confessed "incurable romantic," Goble had motives that were arguably more earnest than opportunistic (45). However, as children's literature scholars well know, romanticism itself can be problematic, and critiques of his work from a Native perspective must be respectfully considered.

Paul Goble, Storyteller ultimately tells its own compelling story, evoking the changing cultural and political dynamics of children's literature over the past 150 years. Bryan depicts how *Two Little Savages* led to *The Girl Who Loved Wild Horses*, which in turn is giving way to today's growing awareness of the need for a greater number of children's books written by indigenous authors themselves. Whether he was fully aware of it or not, Goble's career speaks to how Anglophone children's literature has envisioned the colonialist past and how (we should hope) the genre is moving forward toward a decolonizing future.

Work Cited

Seale, Doris, and Beverly Slapin, eds. *A Broken Flute: The Native Experience in Books for Children*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield/AltaMira, 2005.

Erica Kanesaka Kalnay is a doctoral candidate in English literary studies at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.



Young Adult Literature, Libraries, and Conservative Activism. By Loretta M. Gaffney. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017.

Reviewed by Nadia Clifton

In this book, Loretta M. Gaffney explores young adult literature as a cultural and political phenomenon. By considering critiques and defenses of this literature and detailing the history and importance of librarians in shaping its canon, Gaffney jumps into a lively and strongly opinionated discussion on the relevance, importance, and role of young adult literature in the lives of teenagers. Each chapter includes historical background to bring the reader into the long conversation about adolescent literature, providing context for its ongoing discussion. By exploring the politics and power relationships in the act of reading, Gaffney puts forward a vision of these texts' extensive impact. As she writes, "YA Literature is not simply a collection of books: it is an idea about the value of youthful perspectives, the importance of forging identities and communities, and the power and possibility of public reading" (54).