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The Columbus Myth: Power and Ideology in Picturebooks about Christopher Columbus

Christina M. Desai

Abstract

In 1992, the 500th anniversary of Columbus's landing in the Bahamas was simultaneously celebrated and denounced in the US. Damaging facts about Columbus and the impact of his voyages were aired along with demands for truth and change. This study analyzes the power relationships and political ideology of picturebooks about Columbus published in the US in the 20 years since that anniversary to determine what messages and attitudes young readers are likely to absorb from them and whether the picturebook image of Columbus has evolved. It draws on the ideas of progressive educator Herbert Kohl, who demonstrates how the analysis of power relationships in stories reveals their political stance (*Should We Burn Babar?*, 1995), and on the tradition of progressive librarianship, which seeks to promote intellectual freedom and positive images in children's literature of all peoples. The study finds extensive use of certain narrative techniques, including patterns of assumptions, avoidance, event selection, and omission. Patterns in illustration and sentence structure (use of passive voice, etc.) as well as stereotyping and Eurocentrism also abound. Finally, mild historical revisionism is introduced in more 'balanced' titles, though the definition of balance is problematic. This article finds that the Columbus myth persists with little change, and that few titles present child readers with alternative perspectives.

Introduction: The Myth

Triplets abound in children's literature. There are three bears, three blind mice, three musketeers and three well-known ships: the Nina, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria—iconic vessels that led to the discovery of the New World and the founding of the world's greatest democracy. Or so the legend goes. As children we learned the tale of the young weaver's son from Genoa who dreamed of the sea and dared to believe the earth is round, who studied hard and lived to fulfill his dream of discovering a new route to the Indies by sailing west. We heard about his lengthy petitions to various royal courts for support, the scoffing of the foolish royal advisors, Queen Isabella's pawning of her jewels to raise funds, and final approval by the royal couple. We admired his courage and determination in setting out on a long, perilous voyage, facing impossible odds with a terrified, then mutinous crew. We cheered his safe landing in the New World, where he knelt in thanks and claimed the land for Spain, and friendly natives were delighted to hand over their gold in exchange for gifts of glass beads, wool caps, and hawks' bells. We read of his triumphal return and hero's welcome at Court, followed by ill luck and a sorry death, to the end unaware that he had reached America.

It is not difficult to discover that the reality was quite different. Columbus probably was born in Genoa. He did go to sea at a young age and educated himself in geography, astronomy, and navigation. He did plead for royal support and Court advisors did scoff. They, like other educated people of the time, understood that the earth is round, but were correct in thinking that Asia was too far from Europe to reach by sailing west. The crewmen were right to fear they might never see land again. Columbus did yearn for the glory of discovery but also for gold, and lots of it. And the indigenous peoples he encountered were not long fooled by the paltry gifts Columbus offered.

In his book, *Columbus: His Enterprise* (1991), Hans Koning refutes this heroic image and accepted narrative point by point, from well-known and long available sources. He shows that Columbus's enterprise in the Bahamas was basically imperialistic: Columbus landed on populated islands, yet claimed those lands for Spain. He subjugated, then enslaved the indigenous people to satisfy his hunger for gold. He punished natives who failed to fulfill his unrealistic gold quotas by chopping off their hands (p. 83). He used vicious dogs and torture on those who resisted (p. 78). In his reexamination of Columbus history, Miles Davidson notes that, when unable to amass enough gold, Columbus filled his returning ships instead with human cargo to be sold as slaves, and doled out others as slaves to Spanish settlers (1997, p. 445). While estimates vary (understandably), Columbus's impact on the native population was clearly massive: "In 1492, there were some 300,000 native islanders yet by 1548 fewer than 500 remained" (Ingber, 1992, p. 243). Slavery, warfare, and disease in roughly 50 years wiped out a population that had existed for centuries. Earlier scholars have concluded that by repeating the myth of Columbus's triumph, children's books "function as primers on racism and imperialism" and that, since they serve as introductions to the Columbus myth, picturebooks "provide children with formative impressions about Columbus" (Taxel, 1993, p. 15). They "teach youngsters to accept the right of white people to rule over people of color, of powerful nations to dominate weaker nations" (Bigelow, 1992, p. 106).

Scope and Approach

This study fills a gap in scholarly assessment of the ideological stance of picturebooks about Columbus published in the US in the 20 years since the 500th anniversary of his landing (1992–2012), to determine if the critical analyses and protests of that time have resulted in significant changes to the myth. Critical discourse analysis tells us that most texts reflect, but may at times contest, the dominant power relationships within a society. Historical fiction often reflects the values of the time in which it is written, rather than that of the events described. Progressive educator Herbert Kohl demonstrated that "power relationships in literature reveal the politics of both the story and, frequently, the author" (Kohl, 1995, p. 4). Drawing on Kohl and the tradition of progressive librarianship, which seeks to promote intellectual freedom and positive images of all peoples, I analyze the power relationships evident in these books to uncover their unspoken political ideology and the resulting messages and attitudes children in the US are likely to absorb from them.

John Stephens notes that "it is increasingly impossible 'to conceptualise childhood as a protected time and place of play' when millions of the world's children experience life quite otherwise" (2012, p. v). Yet adults (publishers and authors raised on the Columbus myth) continue to shield children from harsh realities rather than abandon their hero, revealing a rose-colored conception of the child audience. This leads to the use of various narrative techniques, illustrated below, including patterns of assumptions, avoidance, event selection, and omission. Patterns in illustration and sentence structure (use of passive voice, questions, etc.), as well as stereotyping and Eurocentrism also abound. Finally, a mild form of historical revisionism is introduced in more 'balanced' titles, that is, titles in which some negative facts about Columbus are presented. These attempts at balance often raise more questions than they answer, as they present readers with contradictory images of Columbus. This article examines whether these books present alternative points of view that could enable children to weigh the evidence.

The study examines a selection of picturebooks published in the US between 1992 and 2012. Titles were identified using standard databases such as WorldCat and Children's Literature Comprehensive Database, and were selected based on reasonable availability in libraries and bookstores. For purposes of this study, I

define picturebooks loosely, as heavily illustrated books addressed to a young audience (roughly K-4), usually 32 pages, but sometimes longer, where illustrations predominate. The latest available editions are used on the grounds that new editions present the opportunity to revise. Rather than catalog every instance of every pattern, I cite representative examples.

Biography as Curriculum

Several titles begin dramatically *in media res* at the moment Columbus spies land (deRubertis, 1992; Krensky and Green, 2003), but most tell his life story chronologically. Thus they function as biographies, purporting to tell a true story. They often form part of a series, such as “First Biographies” or “Great Explorers.” Book reviewers routinely note their potential for use in the classroom. It is fair to say that, like textbooks, these books reflect current values and decisions about what should be taught: “In this sense, any textbook becomes a signpost or a marker for the values and beliefs of the era in which it was written” (Phillips and Phillips, 1991, p. 1). In a longitudinal content analysis of high school textbook treatments of Columbus, Manuel Bello and Annis Shaver (2011) found that accounts of Columbus’s expedition are still “based on tradition despite the availability of overwhelming evidence from extant historical documents” (p. 140). They find “almost no changes” (p. 144): “Hero worship still tends to dominate the content of Textbooks” (p. 145), which still discuss Native Americans only “in terms of their relationship with Europeans” (p. 146). These statements apply equally to the children’s books in this study, perhaps not surprisingly, given the miniscule number of children’s books written by Native Americans (Hill, 2011, p. 446). Like textbooks, they are privileged in classrooms and presented as truth. An exception is *A Coyote Columbus*, by native author Thomas King (2007), which challenges the assumptions and perspectives found in the others. King’s text does not purport to be a history or biography; rather, faced with the myriad uncritical historical accounts of Columbus’s life, King uses instead a mix of creative fiction, history, humor, and myth to convey a Native American perspective on Columbus’s impact.

What we teach children matters, and it sticks. Rebecca Sanchez (2010), in a “consciousness raising activity” designed to help her pre-service education students “understand how their historical content knowledge has been influenced by the dominant culture and the prescribed history canon” (p. 70), found that they had retained only a handful of trivial “factoids” (p. 71) from the sanitized version of Columbus history taught in the early grades, despite having revisited this topic in high school and college. They failed to develop a deeper understanding due to “the impact of years of repetitive, shallow, and sometimes inaccurate history instruction” (p. 76). While the Columbus books examined here are not textbooks, they are presented in classrooms as non-fiction, and contribute to the “shallow,” often “inaccurate” instruction about Columbus many receive in US schools.

Protectionism

Children’s literature has its roots in didacticism and protectionism. Children’s biographies of great men, including Columbus, have traditionally served to provide models of manly virtues such as courage and determination, and historic US values, such as scientific progress and westward expansion. Rudine Sims posits an implicit “belief in the power of children’s literature to change the world” (qtd. in Taxel, 1997, p. 300) leading to the impulse to protect young readers from bad ideas. Bill Bigelow (1989) warns, though, that protectionism may not be entirely innocent: that there “are groups in our society who could benefit from everyone having a false or limited understanding of the past” (p. 639), suggesting possible “contemporary abuses of historical ignorance.” Given books that praise Columbus for occupying

native lands, he asks, wouldn't students conclude that "white people have the right to dominate nonwhite people? That might—or wealth—makes right?" He concludes, "the textbooks condition students to accept some form of inequality" (p. 642). Susan Gardner concurs, asserting that the Columbus myth "has served Euroamerican culture with a legitimizing script—for invasion, conquest, Westward expansion—which accounts for its durability and acceptability" (1991, p. 285). She infers that while the ostensible motive may be to protect children from violent realities, the implicit message is even more "dangerous" as it condones violent dominance by the powerful. In her defense of humanities education, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, Nussbaum (2010) warns that, as emphasis on the humanities declines in the US, curricula are increasingly designed to advance economic growth. She posits that such curricula will "present national ambition, especially ambition for wealth, as a great good, and will downplay issues of poverty and global accountability" (p. 21). The books examined here certainly exemplify such a curriculum and promote its agenda, by glorifying conquest and profit at the expense of ideals such as human rights and self-determination. Columbus was a man of his imperialistic times, certainly, but also, these books suggest, a man of our own. Powerful interests, whether individual, governmental, or corporate, can more easily abuse power when citizens accept inequalities and fail to think critically about their history or insist on its ideals.

Protectionism has receded in many areas of children's literature. Books about formerly taboo topics (child abuse, homophobia, etc.) are now abundant. This trend extends to biographies of controversial historical figures. But though some claim heroes are "old fashioned" (Halpin, 2010, p. 265) since they so often turn out to be less than perfect, Columbus's imperfections have not tarnished his image. Many historians now favor emphasis on "objective forces and mass movements" over individual achievement (Whittemore, 1972, p. 520). Yet activist heroes such as Rosa Parks are portrayed as lone actors, rather than as part of larger social movements (Kohl, 1995, pp. 30–56). Kohl found that these individuals' stories always end in "hope or success" and noted an "almost total absence of books, fiction and nonfiction, that question the economic and social structure of our society" (1995, p. 59). Treatments of Columbus in the books examined here exemplify that success and that absence of social context, by portraying him as a lone hero who prevailed over the doubters, while avoiding discussion of his impact on our economic and social structure, which began with his appropriation of America's lands and resources. Notably, native author King's *Coyote Columbus* ends, not with success, but with the arrival of yet another European explorer.

Assumptions

The most obvious assumption found in most of these titles is that it was fine for Columbus to name and lay claim to every island he visited. The fact that "Indians" were already living there is not shown as a problem since they were gentle and friendly. Thus the power differential between Europeans and natives is implicit (and approved) from the start. Often Native Americans hardly get a mention. For example, in Gleiter et al.'s text, Columbus, reminiscing, mentions "Indians" only as one of the many "problems" he endured, along with storms, worms, and food shortages (1995, p. 31). Only Jane Yolen and David Shannon's young native protagonist testifies to the immensity of the impending tragedy, and observes that, while Columbus was very free with gifts of bells and beads, he gave them none of his weapons (1992, n.p.). Some raise the question of why the "New World" was named after Vespucci, not Columbus (Molzahn, 2003, p. 42; Bailey et al., 2008, p. 33), but with few exceptions, the books examined here do not question the assumption that Columbus had imperial naming rights wherever he landed.

In these narratives, the "discovery" or "opening up" of the Americas is assumed to be a good thing. While some note the inaccuracy of the term "discovery," they continue to use it (DeVillier, 2001, pp. 5, 7). These

terms show the authors' perspective to be Eurocentric and the assumed audience to be the Euro-American child since no one needed to "open up" America to the indigenous peoples already there. Even in the simple rhyming story by Jane Kurtz and Paige Billin-Frye (2007) about the American origin of pumpkins, the perspective is Eurocentric: Kurtz and Billin-Frye give Columbus the credit for "discovering" the pumpkin so that ultimately European settlers in America could grow it, carve it, and put it in a pie on Thanksgiving. Almost every page takes place in Europe or on the sea with Columbus, leading up to his vegetable discovery. The author hasn't considered that young native readers did not need Columbus to introduce them to pumpkins.

Another assumption is that Columbus excelled at science (astronomy, navigation, geography, etc.) which made him superior, especially to common sailors and Native Americans. While we know that he was wildly mistaken in his calculation of the distance from Europe to Asia, his arrival on American shores is taken as proof, not only of his courage, but also of his theory. Almost all the biographies describe the young Christopher as studious (Bauer and Dubois, 2009, n.p.; Gardeski, 2001, p. 8; Abnett, 2007, p. 4), and the adult Columbus as learned, pointing out the Indies on his charts to elderly Court advisors (Gleiter et al., 1995, p. 18; Ansary, 1999, p. 14). These advisors opposed his venture, not because they believed the earth to be flat, but because of their own educated estimates of the distance and the limited capabilities of ships of that time.

On the other hand, the sailors are invariably described as ignorant, fearful and/or grumbling (e.g., Macdonald and Antram, 2004, p. 20; Markle and Akib, 2008, p. 22; Bauer and Dubois, 2009, n.p.; Landau, 2012, p. 23). The crew's fears are portrayed as superstition, based only on sailors' lore, since they lacked knowledge of science or nautical instruments. Yet despite the known limitations and inaccuracies of those nautical instruments (Bailey et al., 2008, pp. 22–23), several authors use them as teachable moments, providing inset diagrams with explanations (McCormick, 2005, p. 12; Morganelli, 2005, p. 17). Even Macdonald and Antram (2004), who trivialize both the cast of characters and the endeavor, show respect for the scientific instruments (p. 16). The episode in which Columbus used a lunar eclipse to frighten natives into supplying food (Wade, 2007, p. 25) paints them as gullible and uneducated, despite the fact that Columbus and his crew, marooned on a lush tropical island, had to rely on Native American bounty (and know-how) to survive.

Given the reverence for science displayed in these texts, the value of exploration follows (Ansary, 1999; Gardeski, 2001; Kline, 2002; McCormick, 2005; Landau, 2012). After noting the fact that within 20 years of Columbus's landing, "over half" the native population of the islands had perished, a character in Gerry Bailey et al. (2008) states that we "celebrate Columbus for the positive things he did—his discoveries" (p. 33). The connection between those discoveries and those deaths is not explored. Gleiter et al. assert that though Columbus never reached the Indies, "He had done something much more important" (1995, p. 26), quoting a triumphant Columbus laying claim to San Salvador and "many more islands for Spain" (p. 28). Even one of the more critical authors, who describes the deadly devastation that followed in Columbus's wake, ends on a positive note, framing Columbus as an intrepid explorer whose spirit we should emulate (Ansary, 1999, p. 29). The need to conduct exploration with respect for indigenous peoples and environments is never mentioned. Only Vicki Liestman's picturebook (from 1991, before the period under review here) explicitly raises this issue (p. 52). Liestman also, in simple language, holds Columbus accountable for instituting slavery (1991, p. 28) and explains frankly why the Tainos destroyed

La Navidad¹ (p. 37).

In accepting the value of exploration and conquest unconditionally, even those writers who recount some of the negative impacts of Columbus's voyages fail to fault him for those impacts. As a result, the overarching assumption in these books is that despite devastating impacts on native populations, Columbus is a hero. The detailed attention paid to his lowly origins, determined spirit, bold idea, and great discoveries conveys great stature, whatever else he may have done. Some authors take a more irreverent attitude, admitting that he was obstinate, greedy, even that he practiced slavery, but treat these faults lightly, as minor offenses. Even authors who describe some of Columbus's wrongs, like Elaine Landau, who notes that present day Native Americans "dislike the cruel treatment their people received from Columbus and his men" (2012, p. 38–39), end by praising Columbus as a hero worthy of celebrations and monuments. A subtext in some books is that we owe Columbus a debt of gratitude because his landing was the first step in the formation of the US (Aloian, 2010, p. 14; Craats, 2011, p. 7).

Selection/Omission/Avoidance

In historical narrative, decisions on which episodes to select or omit reveal authors' estimation of their importance. Columbus books for the young repeatedly retell the same myths and include the same narrative elements. Some are at pains to dispel some of the myths, but only those already widely discredited. For example, Bailey et al. (2008, p. 36) correct the myth that Queen Isabella pawned her jewels to finance Columbus's voyage, though even as far back as 1955, the Columbus classic by the D'Aulaires (p. 22) refuted that story. Aloian (2010) reveals that "Columbus is known for discovering the Americas, but a Viking named Leif Eriksson visited North America for the first time 500 years earlier" (p. 11). This fact is inset on a page describing the indigenous peoples, who are not credited with discovering anything.

Admittedly, picturebooks afford little space for comprehensive detail or finer points. Yet the repetition of the same scenes and the same omissions by author after author is striking. A comparison of five titles shows the prevailing pattern of event selection. Titles by Christina Gardeski (2001), Trish Kline (2002), Lola Schaefer (2002), Mary Wade (2003), and Bauer and Dubois (2009) contain almost identical story elements. All include the young Columbus as a dreamer, his longing to go to sea as an explorer, his determination to sail west to the Indies, his petitioning the Court and its granting of funds for three ships (always named), his long sea voyage, triumphant landing, and meeting with "gentle" or "helpful and friendly" natives he called "Indians" (though Schaefer omits all mention of natives). Bauer and Dubois (n.p.), Wade (p. 28), and Schaefer (p. 21) include the sad fact that Columbus never knew he had reached a new continent. Kline and Schaefer mention that he made three more voyages but tell nothing about them. All end on a positive note extolling exploration and discovery.

Priorities are apparent also in the amount of space authors devote to events. Bauer and Dubois's short text begins and ends with ships at sea and 16 pages involve sailing or maps. A quarter of the book recounts Columbus's pleas for royal support. Only one double-spread shows Native Americans (n.p.). Stephen Krensky and Norman Green (2003) devote 16 out of 48 pages to the first sea crossing (pp. 14–29). Abnett (2007) in a 24-page comic devotes six pages to Columbus's stormy return journey, including his disputes

¹ La Navidad was a colony founded on Hispaniola by Columbus, where he left 39 crewmen before returning to Spain after his first voyage. Some died from disease or infighting; however, the cruel, demanding, and lawless conduct of these men was so reprehensible that a native cacique (chief) led an attack in which all remaining Europeans died (Stone, 1978).

with Martin Pinzon and King John (pp. 16–21). Columbus at sea, ships at sea, sailors at sea, and maps of the sea fill many pages, leaving little space for what Columbus did when he landed. Fully half of Barry Smith's 32-page title describes the first return journey. Many describe only the first voyage (Smith, 1992; Lowe et al., 1992; Abnett, 2007; Bauer and Dubois, 2009). Even Sandra Markle and Jamel Akib (2008), whose book is specifically about the animals Columbus encountered, give a brief outline of the story, including the names of the ships, the grumbling crew and friendly natives, but devotes only one sentence to subsequent voyages (p. 41). Omitting those voyages sidesteps any discussion of conflict with indigenous peoples that might reflect poorly on Columbus.

Others do mention conflict but diffuse the blame by using passive voice, generalizations, understatements, or unanswered questions. Some authors blame no one; others blame Spanish settlers or Native Americans. Barbara deRubertis characterizes the natives simply as "trouble" for Columbus: "All he found was trouble. Angry natives, / stormy seas, / greedy sailors, / and disease" (1992, p. 30). Explaining the settlers' deaths at La Navidad, Alter (2003, p. 22) blames disease for some, and natives, who "killed the others when they asked for food," for the rest, though contemporary accounts testify that the settlers were attacked for their rapacious conduct toward native women, gold, food, and anything else they desired. Arlene Molzahn (2003), who details all four voyages with no mention of any conflicts, gives no explanation for the massacre, using passive voice to state simply that all the settlers at La Navidad "were dead" on Columbus's return (p. 39). Ansary (1999) blames later European explorers and settlers for native deaths (p. 23). Krensky and Green generalize about the natives Columbus met on various islands, describing "most" as "helpful and friendly" (2003, p. 36). He says nothing about the unfriendly ones or why they might be unfriendly. Avoidance is also achieved through use of unanswered questions. Krensky and Green (2003) thus hint at issues without resolving them: "The Indians have never seen men with swords. Why have they come? What will they do?" (p. 33) while Spencer (1993) refers obliquely to the Spaniards' less noble motives: "But where were the great cities of the Indies? Where were the riches they were seeking? Not here" (p. 29). Rennay Craats (2011, p. 13) explains that some people object to Columbus Day celebrations because "the discovery of the Americas by Europeans led to the death of many American Indians" (p. 13). This understatement, in a very small textbox, is dwarfed on the page by a gargantuan bust of Columbus, above a child waving an Italian flag. Ironically, Yolen and Shannon's *Encounter*, published in the quincentenary year, 1992, and written from a supposed Taino perspective specifically to acknowledge the impact of Columbus's voyages on native peoples (Ingber, 1992), ends entirely in native self-blame: "We gave our souls to their gods. We took their speech into our mouths, forgetting our own" (n.p.).

In sum, readers are left with little concrete information about how Columbus's actions affected Native Americans and led to conflict. While we would not expect picturebooks to include explicit details, the absence or downplaying in so many titles of any reference to Columbus's theft of Native American liberty and lands is remarkable. Twenty years after the 500th anniversary of Columbus's landing, these works still reflect uncritically an imperialist ideology that takes weakness as an invitation to exploitation and resistance as an excuse to conquer.

Back Matter/Buttressing History

A striking feature of many of these titles is the use of back matter such as glossaries, timelines, and indexes, even in comic books (Abnett, 2007; Wade, 2007) and titles for the very young. They are marketed as educational non-fiction, with cover blurbs hyping their veracity, as in: "Read the true facts of the explorers' incredible voyages" (Kline, 2002, back cover). The choice of glossary words and timeline dates

shows what authors consider important. Indexes show what a book covers, and what it omits. In this sample, all three features reveal a Eurocentric focus. The number of glossary words, timeline dates, or index entries involving indigenous peoples, their environment, history, or artifacts is remarkably limited. Ansary's timeline is singular in beginning with the arrival of the first Americans from Asia (1999, p. 30), but this is the exception. Gardeski's picture glossary includes: Bahamas, Columbus, King Ferdinand, Queen Isabella, Native Americans, parade, and ships (2001, pp. 30–31). Even Kline's 24-page book includes a timeline of Columbus's life, a six word glossary, and an index consisting of: father, king, maps, Native Americans, people, pirates, sailors, ship, Spain, and voyages (2002, pp. 22–24). Alter's glossary is more eclectic: arthritis, caravels, mainland, malaria, musty, navigation, pagodas, scurvy, and Vikings (2003, p. 30), but no less Eurocentric. Macdonald and Antram's glossary is more extensive, but mostly nautical; the one term referring to the Americas is "yams" (2004, p. 31). Even Markle and Akib's glossary, in *Animals Christopher Columbus Saw*, contains mostly terms related to navigation and trade, not to animals or environments of the Americas (2008, p. 44). Again, the most recent examples are not the most inclusive. In subtle ways young readers are unlikely to perceive, they are channeled into thinking that the western perspective is the norm; indigenous peoples are inconsequential.

Illustrations/Stereotyping

One of the functions of illustrations in picturebooks is to shape reader's emotional response (Schwarcz, 1982, p. 93). Koning states the obvious in remarking that books about Columbus position readers "to root for the three ships" (1991, p. 50). While authors may have little or no input on which images publishers select to illustrate their books, the illustrations are an influential element in the final product. Illustrations literally show the power relationships between the characters and can linger in the memory to influence thinking for years to come. Illustrations in these books shape reader response by conferring importance and approval on the imperial enterprise. Many titles use the same archival reproductions: paintings, woodcuts, engravings, etc., dating from long ago and long after the event. They are presented to readers with no attribution or explanation of their origin. Since they are presented uncritically, in effect as elements in the historical record, they serve to perpetuate traditional attitudes toward Columbus and his exploits.

One frequent image is the young Columbus (Aller, 2003, p. 17; Gardeski, 2001, p. 8), shown as a Christ-like figure pouring over books and charts, a large crucifix on the wall, while (divine?) light streams down upon him from the window. Clearly his purpose is fixed and his mission approved from on high. The connection between Columbus's religious faith and purpose and readers' expected attitude is established. Another image of Columbus petitioning the Spanish Court echoes this image of Columbus as young, forward thinking, and blessed (Schaefer, 2002, p. 14; Alter, 2003, p. 15; Aller, 2003, p. 36).

The most frequently reproduced image shows Columbus landing on American shores, planting the Spanish banner, kneeling in thanks to God (Ansary, 1999, p. 19; Gardeski, 2001, p. 18; Kline, 2002, p. 18; Aller, 2003, p. 27; Bailey et al., 2008, p. 24). Columbus occupies center stage, richly clad in red. His eyes are cast heavenward, his sword at the ready as he claims the land for Spain. Crewmen gaze humbly toward him or toward the ground. Divine approval of his righteous mission could not be clearer. No natives appear to stake a counterclaim. Another popular image of this scene (Bailey et al., 2008, p. 24; Landau, 2012, p. 27) shows an armed Columbus standing resolutely while crewmen plant the cross; Native Americans approach tentatively, holding out gifts which Columbus makes no move to accept. At this point in history, Columbus and his men have been desperate to reach land, food, and water, but this image presents Columbus as cool conqueror, not supplicant. These images show his power as deriving equally from divine sanction and

military might. Readers are likely to take this Eurocentric version of events for granted as no alternate images appear.

Another frequently reproduced archival image shows Columbus bestowing hawks' bells as gifts on the natives. Here Columbus stands sternly in his red cloak, holding up a bell for them to admire. His companion stands ready with a sword for crowd control. Natives crouch under the bell, peering up in wonder. They are literally red-skinned. All are shorter than Columbus (Kline, 2002, p. 1; Molzahn, 2003, p. 34; Aloian, 2010, p. 11; Landau, 2012, p. 29; McCormick, 2005, pp. 1, 17, 21). This image clearly establishes Europeans' superior hierarchical position: Europeans bestow largess; natives receive. In his log, Columbus marveled at the natives' generosity in giving gifts, including gold, but also noted, "these people are very unskilled in arms... With fifty men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want" (qtd. in Cohen, 1969, pp. 58–59). Had he actually reached the rich cities of the Indies or the powerful Court of the Great Khan as planned, one wonders whether he would really have offered to trade glass and brass for gold as he did in the Bahamas.

Columbus's triumphal return to the Spanish Court is also reproduced often, completing his lionization. Several versions show Columbus standing proudly before the thrones presenting exotic spoils, including native captives (Molzahn, 2003, p. 36; Alter, 2003, p. 21; Aller, 2003, p. 35; Landau, 2012, p. 32). Several use the same image, showing scantily draped native figures wearing feather headdresses and kneeling submissively.

A final image to linger in the mind shows a tragic hero on his deathbed (Kline, 2002, p. 21; Alter, 2003, p. 26 and 27; Molzahn, 2003, p. 41), to the end unaware of the continental proportions of his discoveries. Though Columbus always believed he had reached the Indies, which was his goal, his failure to understand that he had stumbled upon a new hemisphere is presented as piteous. The ailing white-haired figure lies surrounded by sorrowful family and clergy (with crucifix), light streaming down upon him from an overhead window. The image in Adrianna Morganeli's account (2005, p. 26) includes a Native American bent in sorrow at the bedside. If there were any doubts about the sanctity of Columbus's mission, these images lay them to rest.

Other archival reproductions reprinted in picturebooks contribute to the longevity of the Columbus myth. Historic images of ships, seas, storms, and charts fire the imaginations of young readers. Portraits of kings, queens, and explorers attest to the power and importance of European rulers and brave men. When Native Americans are shown at all, they are usually crouching, kneeling, hiding, or bending. "Natives at Work," an archival image in Gardeski (2001, p. 22), shows Natives Americans kneeling or bending over the corn. One man walks toward the viewer carrying a basket, but his eyes are downcast; his demeanor, submissive. Taken as a whole these antique images lend heft to the historic tone of these books, discouraging questioning. They bolster stereotypical images of Columbus as heroic and visionary and of Native Americans as submissive and unresisting. They incidentally contradict Columbus's own account of Native Americans, which describes their proud bearing and intelligence (Cohen, 1969, pp. 55–56).

Other picturebooks use contemporary artwork, only to reproduce traditional patterns in a modern idiom. Illustrators still depict Columbus as brave, determined, and forward-looking (Lowe et al., 1992; Gleiter et al., 1995). Updated versions of the historic images show the young student/dreamer at his desk, though without the religious symbols (Spencer, 1993, p. 4; Bauer and Dubois, 2009, n.p.); at Court before the elderly royal advisors (Gleiter et al., 1995, p. 18); landing on the island (Abnett, 2007, p. 11; Wade, 2007, p. 12; Bauer and Dubois, 2009, n.p.); and returning to Court vindicated, parading his captives and spoils

(Aller, 2003, pp. 34–35; Krensky and Green, 2003, pp. 46–47). In Abnett’s and Bauer and Dubois’s landing scenes there are no Native Americans in sight. In others, natives peer out from the shadows behind the greenery (Wade, 2003, p. 22; Wade, 2007, p. 12; Yolen and Shannon, 1992, n.p.). Like the archival reproductions, these images show Columbus as powerful and triumphant, while Native Americans look on passively, cautiously, often hiding, or accepting gifts submissively. As in the older images, they are voiceless and do not confront the reader.

Even when a text offers some honest acknowledgement of wrongs Columbus committed, illustrations may contradict that acknowledgement. Krensky and Green, for example, offer frank criticism of Columbus’s claim to San Salvador: “He says it now belongs to Spain. But the island really belongs to the people who live there” (2003, p. 33). Yet the facing illustration of the climactic arrival scene shows a benevolent, triumphant Columbus, his men and ships occupying center stage, while natives are shown from behind, gazing passively at the Europeans from the protection of the shrubbery. Thus the contemporary artwork often merely reproduces the native stereotyping of the historic images. These stereotypes variously depict Native Americans as exotic (Aller, 2003, p. 28), savage and primitive (Macdonald and Antram, 2004, pp. 26–27), noble, possessing mystical knowledge (Yolen and Shannon, 1992), at one with nature (Lowe et al., 1992), and as nonthreatening relicts of the past. Such images reinforce stereotypes of Native Americans that persist to this day (Sheyhshe, 2008, p. 94).

There are some exceptions. Bauer and Dubois’s account, for example, while no more forthcoming about Columbus’s motives and actions than others, does show natives on a par with the Europeans, that is, minus the submissive postures. The landing scene in Bauer and Dubois’s picturebook shows a boyish Columbus kneeling in joy. Natives do not crouch or hide timidly in the bushes, or humbly accept European gifts (2009, n.p.). Rather, readers see them proudly showing the Europeans around their villages. In Markle and Akib’s account, natives meet Columbus’s entourage face-to-face and eye-to-eye, both sides standing (equally) tall and both sides exchanging gifts (Markle and Akib, 2008, p. 26). Akib’s image of the triumphant return to the Spanish Court shows the captive natives standing, facing the monarchs with no hint of submission (pp. 40–41). These images contradict the Eurocentric perspective of Native Americans prevalent in most other titles, which depict them as voiceless beings who blend into the scenery.

Some authors take a more original and comic approach, using a cartoon-like style that trivializes the history (the spoonful of sugar approach?). Smith’s unpagged account (1992), told from a poor sailor’s point of view, portrays Columbus as an ill-tempered employer, fixated on finding gold. Natives do not appear till the shipwreck incident, when a few peek out from behind palm trees. One hugs a tree. Smith’s narrator sides with the common sailor and ridicules Columbus, but does nothing to inform readers of the very serious impacts of his actions. Kurtz and Billin-Frye’s tale of Columbus’s discovery of the pumpkin ends with a grinning Native American offering a pumpkin to a grinning Columbus, both looking equally foolish (Kurtz and Billin-Frye, 2007, n.p.). Macdonald and Antram’s account is the most irreverent (2004). Its cynical humor trivializes the expedition and scoffs at values like bravery and perseverance. It mocks Columbus, his crew, and the Tainos equally. “Handy Hints” include such tips as: “Take some Taino people back to Europe with you to show the king and queen” accompanied by a farcical illustration of natives with ludicrous big noses, grass skirts, and pot bellies (p. 25). This mocking style tips Columbus off his pedestal, but also trivializes his actions (including his enslaving natives) and does nothing to suggest their disastrous impacts. In stark contrast, native illustrator William Kent Monkman in *A Coyote Columbus Story*, who also uses humor to mock his cast of characters, avoids native stereotypes while uniquely showing the explorer’s contempt for indigenous peoples and his destructive impact on their world (King, 2007).

Revisionism/Balance

A fair number of books for older children, outside the scope of this study, provide frank information about atrocities Columbus and his followers committed in the Americas. But revisionist history has made few inroads into picturebooks. Many of the books in this sample, especially for younger children, are simply glowing tributes. In many cases revision consists only of hinting at Columbus's character flaws, such as greed (Abnett, 2007, p. 12) or craftiness (Aller, 2003, p. 24; Wade, 2007, p. 25). Others "reveal" well-known facts: Columbus was not the first to "discover" America (Wyatt, 2008, p. 4) or first to believe the earth is round (Landau, 2012, p. 14).

Some, especially the longer, more fact-filled books, glorify Columbus, but also note his cruel treatment of Native Americans. Book reviewers often refer to these titles approvingly as "balanced." For example, a review of Krensky and Green's biography (2003, 1991), which contains only two sentences critical of Columbus in 48 pages, states, "Krensky takes a middle ground in the hero-anti-hero controversy" (Phelan, 1991, p. 709). A better term would be "mixed message," in that such authors send contradictory messages; they acknowledge wrongs, but in their accounts those wrongs do not tarnish Columbus's reputation.

Aloian's *Columbus Day* (2010) is a good example of "balanced" treatment for a very young audience. Along with the standard tale of discovery, it acknowledges the "mistreatment" Columbus and the Spaniards meted out to Native Americans, forcing them into slavery and Christianity (pp. 12–13). Yet fully half the book is devoted to ways of celebrating Columbus Day. There is a description of *Día de la Raza*, but also the ditty "In fourteen hundred ninety-two," a Columbus crossword puzzle, and a poem-writing exercise. Finally readers are invited to conduct their own research on Columbus, illustrated by a student tracing his ocean route on a map (pp. 25–31). There are no suggested activities for learning about how the native islanders lived or vanished.

Macdonald and Antram's comic treatment (2004) provides a different sort of balance—all characters are ridiculed equally. Columbus is portrayed as obstinate and pitiable, not as a conquering hero. Caribs are shown as cartoon cannibals, complete with bubbling vat illustrated in gory detail (p. 26). One "Handy Hint" advises readers to "pity the Carib and Taino people" since "thousands" died of European diseases, but makes an offensive joke of those deaths by using the common cold as the disease example (p. 27). The ludicrous illustration of a native blowing his very large nose is sure to amuse but hardly inform readers; actually it was much deadlier European diseases like smallpox that decimated native populations (Crosby, 1972, p. 42). Like Smith's title (1992), Macdonald and Antram's account takes the common sailor's perspective, but its humor is demeaning. Along with factual descriptions of the state of navigation and the primitive conditions aboard ship, it offers readers outrageous advice, for example, on how to finance a voyage: try flattery, inherit, be enterprising, or be warlike (p. 25). The message is that readers should act on self-interest, avoid risk-taking and discomfort, and treat non-Europeans with contempt.

An example of a longer "balanced" or "mixed message" title is Morganelli's account (2005). This author gives a fuller account of Spanish activity in the Americas. She sets her story within the medieval European trade milieu and includes the later impact of the conquistadors. She devotes two pages to "Native Life" (pp. 22–23) and relates that the Spaniards forced Native Americans into slavery and conversion to Christianity (pp. 24–25). She is one of few to mention Carib resistance to Columbus's landing at Santa Cruz (p. 24). Her introduction tells us that Columbus's arrival in the "New World" brought "new opportunity" for Europeans but "new hardships" (p. 4) for the natives. However, this same word, "hardships", is used to describe the inconveniences of life aboard ship (p. 16), in effect equating the two hardships. Morganelli also

explains that the “Taino and Carib were enemies” (p. 24), that Caribs “attacked the Taino villages... and took the Taino as slaves” (p. 23). This detail works to minimize the seriousness of Columbus’s instituting slavery there, since Caribs also took slaves. This text relates that Columbus sent back “gold nuggets and Taino slaves” on his second voyage (p. 18), omitting that he enslaved thousands more on the islands to mine for gold on pain of death (Davidson, 1997, p. 445). On the destruction of La Navidad, this text explains euphemistically that natives killed the settlers “In revenge” because the settlers “mistreated” them (p. 20). Morganelli describes three later voyages (pp. 18–19), but says little about what Columbus did ashore. The section titled “Columbus’ Legacy” is devoted exclusively to the exchange of foods and animals between continents. A caption informs us that a small Carib community survives today in a “land reserve” (p. 30). Thus, in subtle ways, through euphemisms and omissions, this text tells us that while Columbus was not a saint, he was not so terrible either: after all, the Caribs took slaves also; they were warlike by nature; and anyway, some few survived the hardship and mistreatment, and the world was enriched by the exchange.

Only one picturebook in this study, by a native author and illustrator, runs completely counter to the observations on the books above, as it is told from an indigenous perspective. Thomas King’s *A Coyote Columbus Story* (2007, unpagged) is not a biography, revisionist or otherwise. Written in the form of a contemporary folktale, it offers an invitation to experience an alternative method of approaching the truth. It is a hybrid genre that mixes fact with fiction, past with present, humor with tragedy. Columbus’s voyage, discovery, and exploits are not celebrated here but are rather observed in amazement by the humans and animals already living there. Rather than reciting facts, King presents Columbus comically as a bizarre creature from elsewhere, while exposing his true motives—conquest and gold. Creator Coyote sees the explorers’ values as unfathomable: they “act as if they have no relations,” thus painting Europeans as the uncivilized ones: they actually decide to sell people. Mocking racial profiling, illustrator Monkman paints Columbus’s skin purple. He challenges both historic and contemporary images of Columbus by showing native people’s disgust at his outrageous and disruptive behaviors. The humans scold Coyote for not taking Columbus seriously, complaining, “you keep messing it up.” Neither they nor Coyote are perfect and they don’t achieve a happy ending. King’s native characters contradict all the stereotypes. They are not noble, savage, submissive, or trapped in the past, but play ball, paint their toenails, and go skydiving. Coyote promises, ineffectually, to get rid of Columbus, when “You’ll see, everything will be balanced again” (n.p.). Yet King shows the impossibility of the balanced approach because Columbus lacked respect for the balance of nature and the balance of power. King’s tale demonstrates that facts do not necessarily make history, that truth can be even more meaningfully conveyed in imaginative fiction.

Conclusion: The Message

The last two decades have seen little change in the Columbus myth in picturebooks. While some authors attempt to present a balanced view, they begin and end with the assumption that Columbus is and must remain a hero. After acknowledging that recently “people have criticized him for his cruel treatment of Native Americans” (p. 10), Alter (2003) enunciates the balanced approach explicitly: “Christopher Columbus was probably not as noble as the legends have told us. And he was probably not as cruel and mean as he has sometimes been portrayed. Columbus may have been a poor leader, but he was a great explorer” (2003, p. 11). Such accounts concede that Columbus was not perfect, but always tip in his favor, minimizing the evils of slavery, torture, and imperialism and their effects on indigenous peoples and their environment. While extolling bold exploration and imperial expansion, the underlying ideology in these books condones conquest and exploitation of the weak by the strong.

Balance, by definition, presupposes valid points on each side. History may tell a more lopsided story, depending on the values of the tellers. However, if the scales are always rigged to tip toward a non-negotiable given, it follows that many inconvenient facts must be explained away or minimized to maintain balance. The “given” in the “balanced” books examined here is that truth must lie somewhere in the middle—but closer to Europe than America. These authors provide some negative information about Columbus, but subtly direct readers to discount that information. Readers learn that Columbus did things they’ve been taught to regard as wrong, such as enslaving others, but are led to conclude that these wrongs are not so bad. It is hard to conclude that more information is worse than less, but examples like these make it tempting to do so. Readers learn that exploration is good and conquest follows naturally when undertaken by the powerful. The facts that the indigenous peoples were not Christian, wore no clothes, and had less effective weapons stilled any pangs of conscience at the time and seem to continue to do so. Techniques such as omission, selection, euphemism, and Eurocentric perspective, as seen above, make inconvenient facts easier to ignore.

Columbus was a historical figure whose voyages had a tremendous impact on world history. Evidence about what happened on those voyages has been available since Columbus and his contemporaries wrote their own accounts. If children need to learn about Columbus, they are entitled to know the full story. More accurate accounts would explain the European milieu and economic forces that produced Columbus, but also describe with equal attention the indigenous worlds he overturned. They would not, for example, treat the enslavement of Native Americans with any less seriousness than the enslavement of Africans. Like Liestman’s (1991) text, they would present Columbus as an important historic figure without the adulation, and without the premise that, on balance, Columbus must be found to be a worthy hero for children to admire. Also, as King’s Coyote tale demonstrates, biographies and histories are not the only ways to convey historical understanding. King’s fanciful story turns the Columbus myth on its head and rejects the ideological assumptions underlying it. In the other texts examined here, however, the economic and imperialistic underpinnings of Columbus’s undertaking are not questioned and stereotypical views of Native Americans are reinforced. The impression that they are Other, and in the past, is not questioned. This ideological stance clears the way for the conclusion that Europeans had to prevail because they are us and our country was waiting to be born.

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