Guest Editorial: The Circle and the Square

When one flies over the Canadian and northern American prairies, the most obvious feature of the landscape below is the checkerboard patterns of the newly ploughed fields and the planted fields in various stages of growth. An immediate reaction is to marvel at the richness of the soil and the wealth of grain that will be harvested. But while the products that are being grown are evidence of the bounty of the earth, the carefully surveyed geometric patterns are evidence of the firm establishment of an English system of property ownership which had originated in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, and which had been brought to the "new" continent by the settlers.

Had it been possible to fly an airplane over this same landscape between one and two hundred years ago, a different geometrical pattern might have been visible. While much of the area would have been unmarked, here and there circles would have appeared, marks indicating the places where bands of Native people had made their encampments, particularly the large summer camps held during the times of the Sun Dance ceremonies.

Squares and circles — these two geometric figures perhaps symbolize the two cultural influences of North America. The square is an indication of private property, a notion which was a major motivation behind the European, and particularly English, exploration and settlement. The circle represented for the Plains Indians the nature of the world as they understood it, a rounded horizon bounded by the over-arching sky, a land which belonged to everyone and no one, a world which they shared with other natural and supernatural beings.

It could be said, figuratively speaking, that the history of North America during recent centuries has been dominated by an attempt to square the circle, or, to use the popular cliché, to fit round pegs into square holes. All that is symbolized by the checkerboard pattern of prairie landscapes has been dominant; English law, political structures, and religious beliefs have been superimposed on the land and the people. All that is symbolized by the circle — tribal organizational patterns, spiritual ideals, and artistic patterns — has been attacked as outmoded, primitive, and foolish. Squares have been imposed on circles, destroying the configurations of the latter or pushing them underground where they could neither be seen nor be effective.

However, just as there are fundamental differences between squares and circles, so too there are fundamental differences between the European and Native cultures we have used these figures to represent. In the area of Native Studies, the important fact of these differences is now being seen not as a stumbling block, but rather as a starting point in an attempt to enable the two cultures to understand one another and live side-by-side. More important, the understanding of these differences is being used to instill in Native people a sense of pride in their cultural heritage, a pride which has been discouraged for generations.

One of the great obstacles standing in the way of the development of this pride has been the fact that the media by which information about Native people has been disseminated have been controlled by non-Native peoples. And, whether well-intentioned or not, the non-Native picture that has prevailed for the last four centuries has been conditioned by dominant European philosophical, political, religious, and artistic beliefs. The ultimate result of all this has been the creation of a number of stereotypes which have largely determined the way that non-Native and, unfortunately, many Native people have viewed themselves.

In the literature about Native people that has been made available to children over the past century, this European point-of-view has prevailed. Only recently have Native accounts, written by such people as American Jamake Highwater and Canadians Maria Campbell and George Clutesi, been available. Of course, the erroneous portrayal of Native realities in earlier children's books is obvious. Hideous, bloodthirsty savages, children of the devil, lurk behind trees, ready to spring out on good, Christian whites, capture them, and torture them fiendishly. Nowadays, most people (although unfortunately not all) are able to recognize and dismiss the blatant falseness of such depictions.

However, even the best non-Native presenters of children's stories about Native people, while they have done extensive research and have strenuously avoided demeaning stereotypes, are not able to come as close as is desirable to the realities they are presenting. To make a case in point, Gerald McDermott's *Arrow to the sun,* while it makes excellent use of the author's meticulous research, is most largely influenced by Joseph Campbell's *The hero with a thousand faces,* a work by a Swarthmore College English Professor which is written within the tradition of European anthropological studies and which emphasizes the fundamental sameness of legends found all around the world. In other words, McDermott's organizing principle is non-Native rather than Native. He interprets the circle in terms of the square.

I think that *Arrow to the sun* is an excellent book, in fact, it may well be the best American picture book of the 1970s. (Incidentally, Native students who have studied the book with me respond very favorably to it.) However, the problem it poses is a subtle one and ultimately a more important one than

that posed by blatant stereotypes. The dominant forms of printed narrative — the novel and the short story — are European; they embody not only artistic styles, but also ways of perceiving reality which have dominated the Western world at least since the late Renaissance. Native life experiences and Native narratives emerge from a completely different system of perceiving reality. When a non-Native person writes a novel or an adaptation of a Native legend, he is using a form and a system of perception which ultimately cannot express the essences of the life experiences he is considering. Squares and circles are incompatible.

The question which arises, then, is how to evaluate the non-Native presentations of Native experiences. And evaluate them we must, for, until there is a sufficient number of Native authors producing books about the Native experience, these will be the main materials available for Native and non-Native children alike. (A related question is whether or not a Native writer using a European language and a European fictional genre is also limited by these in completely communicating his materials.) How much adaptation, how much extended explanation must the author give? How much can customs and beliefs unfamiliar to readers be compared to familiar customs and beliefs before they lose their original meanings? How is the non-Native writer to consider Material which is opposed to his own cultural and religious beliefs?

The essays which follow address these and other questions. Two Native writers and two non-Native writers consider the tasks they confront as writers and the nature of the cultural realities they depict. Several scholars carefully examine the novels and collections of adapted tales which have been published by leading Canadian authors and illustrators for children.

What is interesting to notice after reading the entire collection is that, while each of the contributors to this volume was free to choose the direction of his or her essay, and while, to my knowledge, none conferred with each other during the course of writing, each has, in the end, focussed on the issue considered above and symbolized by the figures of the circle and the square. A variety of viewpoints is expressed, not all of which I agree with. There is an overall theme, with many variations. There are, as yet, no final answers. This collection, it is hoped, will give focus to the continuing debate over who should depict Native experiences for young readers, and how. The issues raised and the arguments which ensue can only have positive results for those who write and teach children's literature in Canada. If the results include better teaching and writing, ultimately all Canadians will benefit. And what better results could there be for literary criticism and scholarship?

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