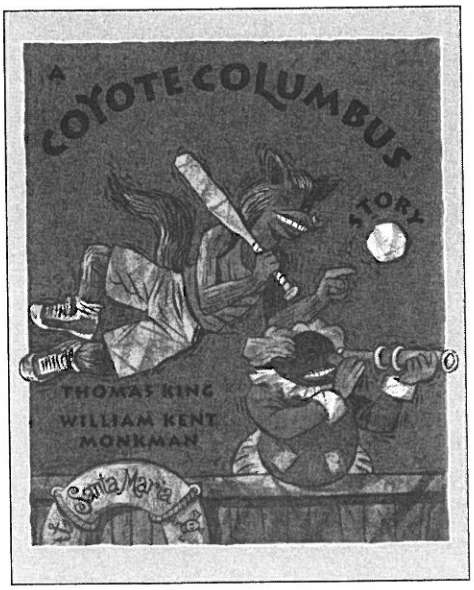
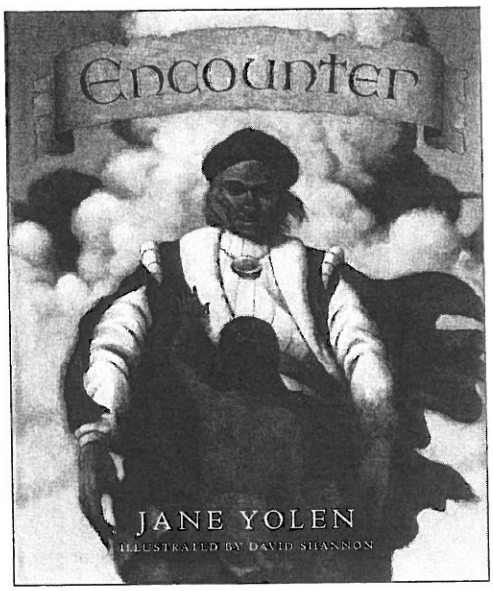
"Re-Encounter"

GOODBYE, COLUMBUS: TAKE TWO





King, Thomas (Cherokee), *A Coyote Columbus Story*, illustrated by William Kent Monkman (Cree). Douglas & McIntyre, 1992. Unpaginated, color illustrations, all grades; Taino
Yolen, Jane, *Encounter*, illustrated by David Shannon. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992. Unpaginated, color illustrations, grades 1-3; Taino

How do you explain Christopher Columbus? Without having your lesson rated R for extreme violence, how do you tell children honestly about this cultural "hero" whose own writings offer a clear picture of what he wanted to do—and did—about the people whose home he "claimed" for Spain? How, especially, do you explain him to children whose sense of time makes last month "long ago"?

In 1992, the Quincentennial of Columbus' failed voyage to Asia, two children's books were published that offer unusual explanations—unusual in that neither of them makes Columbus a hero. Both are meant for young readers who may already know a little about Columbus. There the resemblance ends. The books, *Encounter* and *A Coyote Columbus Story*, take very different approaches to the Columbus problem.

Encounter, a work of historical fiction, is written by well-known European-American author Jane Yolen and illustrated by David Shannon, also European-American. Twelve years after its publication by U.S. giant Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, *Encounter* enjoys great popularity with librarians and teachers, who can even purchase a curriculum guide to go with it. Schoolchildren are most likely to encounter it in early October.

On the other hand, Thomas King, who is Cherokee and Greek, tried for years to find a U.S. publisher for A *Coyote Columbus Story*. Eventually it found a home with Canadian publishing house Douglas and McIntyre. William Kent Monkman (Cree) illustrated the book. There is no curriculum guide for *A Coyote Columbus Story*. Schoolchildren in the U.S. are far less likely to encounter it than to encounter *Encounter*.

The author's note at the end of *Encounter* states,

> I thought it would interest readers to hear a Taino boy speak. We don't have an actual record of that, so I have recreated what he might have said—using historical records and the storyteller's imagination.

We'll get back to the storyteller's imagination in a minute. The story opens when the narrator, who is nameless throughout, dreams of three great-winged, toothed birds that arrive on the sea, bringing destruction. He wakes, walks to the shore and finds three ships anchored not far away: his nightmare birds. He knows they hold great danger, but the adults around him repeatedly dismiss his warnings—he is "but a child." He is thus helpless as his people welcome and try to please the pale, outlandish strangers who issue forth from the ships—whom young readers will recognize as Columbus and his crew. The strangers kidnap several villagers including the boy. Terrified, he makes a desperate dive from the ship and swims to an island, where he continues his fruitless efforts to warn the people of what he learned about the strangers in his dream.

At the book's end, the narrator, now an old man, slumps against a bright Caribbean shoreline, lamenting what has come to pass:

> But even those who saw the great canoes did not listen, for I was a child. So it was we lost our lands to the strangers from the sky. We gave our souls to their gods. We took their speech into our mouths, forgetting our own. Our sons and daughters became their sons and daughters, no longer true humans, no longer ours.

"So it was." But was it so? In a book with a Taino perspective on Columbus, the author's note would have been a perfect place to cite sources and back up the "storyteller's imagination" with bits of the historical record. For instance, a reader might wonder where the author got the idea that Taino elders would find a child's dream unimportant. Of course, in fiction the storyteller's imagination can have free reign. It's not impossible that an indigenous culture like the Taino would have disdained dreams, or would have taken the W.C Fields approach to children's concerns: "Go away, kid, you bother me!" But it seems just as likely, considering the value of dreams in other Native societies, that the boy's horrific vision would grab his elders' attention. (It probably would get his peers' attention, too, if this boy had any friends his own age. But he seems to be the only child in the community.)

To be sure, European cultures give children a lesser place in society. Western children's literature even has a somewhat subversive tradition for dealing with adults who dismiss or disrespect children—they often get some sort of comeuppance. This book embodies that tradition, with a vengeance: Taino adults rebuff the prescient child, and their whole culture (to hear the narrator tell it) disappears. Teachers and students who read *Encounter* will probably believe they are privy to the authentic Taino belief system, though it actually appears to be speculation with a distinctly Western flavor.

There is a more pressing reason for readers to know in what ways the book is based on authoritative sources such as contemporary Taino scholars or leaders. The author has affixed blame for the events lamented by the narrator: not only on Columbus, the man with the swords and guns and gold-hunger, but also on the Taino people themselves. They fail to heed the boy's warning, but also they become greedy for the swords, mirrors and guns and somehow do not notice for themselves how the strangers' faces change when they encounter gold. Especially given the genocide that followed, it seems unlikely that a Taino explanation of Columbus would be: "We brought it on ourselves."

If only my people had listened, young readers are told over and over: "May it be a warning to all the children and all the people in every land." They could have been saved if they had—what? At no point does this story suggest how the Taino people might have stopped the "pale strangers," only that they *should* have. One wonders what would have stopped Columbus or those who came after. Now *there's* a cogent question, but it's not in the *Encounter* curriculum guide.

Not only did the Taino ignore the narrator's warnings. To hear the Taino narrator tell it from his seat by the sea, they also actively surrendered their culture without much compelling cause. They "lost" their lands, "gave" their souls, "took" the foreign speech and "forgot" their own, "became" something other than true human beings.

Now, when someone mugs you at knifepoint and takes your billfold, you don't tell people, "I lost my wallet." You don't say you "gave the keys" to a carjacker with an Uzi. If the punishment for speaking your own language is having your tongue cut out, you don't say, "Oops, I forgot the old way to talk. De nada."

By the end of *Encounter*, the narrator must have witnessed and survived the horror that overtook his people and compelled the changes he describes. It seems unlikely—un-Taino—that he would say they brought it on themselves. Maybe that's the Taino point of view but more likely it is Imperialism 101, Lesson One: Blame the Victim.

First-hand descriptions of that horror are available today, in the translated writings of onetime priest Bartolomeo de las Casas, who (flawed though he may have been) decried the brutal treatment the Taino suffered at the hands of the Spanish. If Yolen has read any such accounts, it is not apparent in either the text or the author's notes.

The narrator recalls that the strangers "took five of our young men and many parrots with them. They took me." The author's note states:

> Columbus carried away ten young Taino men and women (or six, according to different sources) from the various islands they visited, carting them back to Spain as slaves. Later when the islands were colonized by the Spanish, the native religions, languages and lifestyles were changed forever.

"Took," "carried away" and "carted back" are not the words I would choose if it had happened to me, and it seems safe to say they do not represent the young Tainos' perspective on being ripped from their families and everything they knew. As is so often the case when European Americans write about Native-white relations, word choice matters, particularly when one purports to present a Native viewpoint.

"Visited" is another clue that *Encounter* has no actual Taino perspective. When someone comes into your home, claims it for his own, and makes off with your possessions and your children, that is not (and never was) a "visit." Even if they leave a coffee cake.

Finally, both author and illustrator use passive voice to describe the years after the events in *Encounter*. Islands *were* colonized; religions, languages and lifestyles *were* changed, artifacts (David Shannon notes) *were* melted and burned. As if there were no agents of the destruction. As if those things just kind of—happened.

The narrator, a survivor of those terrible times, would know better than that. Taino children today know better. Colonization meant conquest, and conquest meant home invasion, rape, torture, kidnapping, enslavement, destruction of religious artifacts, murder, even mass murder in the name of the (supposedly) Christian god. Passive voice creates an aura of blamelessness, but someone melted and burned those artifacts. Someone forced the new gods, the new language, the alien lifestyles upon the Native peoples of the Caribbean and beyond. Someone maimed or killed those who didn't accept or escape. No laws protected the Taino from the Spanish, who possessed not only gold-lust, but greater firepower and no moral compunction about inflicting harm on brown-skinned human beings.

But nowhere in the narrator's reflection are the words "conquer" or "kill," nor is there evidence of resistance to colonization. Though the book makes it seem as if the Taino readily acquiesced, sheeplike, the record shows otherwise. Against enormous odds, they founded the tradition of Native resistance and survival in the Americas—the 500-year struggle to retain indigenous homelands, languages and cultures.

To be sure, *Encounter* critiques the Columbus myth of courage, adventure, and glory. It emphasizes the gold-lust that drove this cultural hero and his followers, and it even pokes fun at some of their egocentric interpretations of Native behavior. He is presented as a bad guy, but he's a bad guy who couldn't have done what he did without the compliance of none-too-admirable Native people. The "storyteller's imagination" in *Encounter* remains essentially European-American.

It is hard to imagine a picture book that successfully brings humor to the first contact between Europeans and the indigenous peoples, but Thomas King and Kent Monkman manage it with *A Coyote Columbus Story*. Laughing at outrageous situations is, after all, part of the indigenous tradition of survival.

This is a "very original creation story" of sorts. Like many tales from the indigenous oral traditions on which it is based, it is for an intergenerational audience. Anachronism and human-like animals abound. Its messages and lessons are multilayered, and it travels in a circle. The storyteller's

cadence and the grammatical shifts and slips that characterize some oral traditions make it a fun story to read aloud.

A Coyote Columbus Story is not set in a Taino world, but in an "American" world. Its grasslands and hardwood forests are inhabited by that mysterious sometimes-hero and Big Deal of continental story-telling traditions, Coyote. Coyote is a girl this time around, a girl who loves baseball and wants someone to play with her. But she is no ordinary girl. Tired of throwing, hitting and catching the ball all by herself, "she sang a song and she danced a dance and she thought hard, and pretty soon along came some beavers." The beavers didn't just "come along," of course, but they are only the first of Coyote's creations to refuse a ball game. Finally, she sings, dances, and thinks so hard her nose falls off, and "right away, along come some human beings." Pleased to join her at first, they soon realize that Coyote makes up the rules and she always wins. They stop playing ball with her. Coyote gets bored. "When Coyote gets bored," says the storyteller, "anything can happen. Stick around. Big trouble is going to come. I can tell you that." Readers can guess what sort of "big trouble" this means: "three ships and some people in funny-looking clothes carrying flags and boxes of junk."

Monkman's illustrations manage to make the Europeans menacing and ridiculous at the same time. Their skin tones are blue, green and purple, in contrast to Coyote's human beings, who are shades of brown. Columbus and crew dress in ensembles that include gym shoes, fishnet stockings, berets, neckties, pince-nez glasses, as well as thoroughly patched 15th-Century court attire. There's even an Elvis impersonator in pink high-heel pumps, while Columbus, with orange hair and purple face, looks like a really nasty clown.

Right away Columbus and his men poke around in the homes of Coyote's friends, and throw fits when they don't find what they want. They are looking for India and "things we can sell." Gold. Chocolate cake. Computer games. Music videos. Eventually they decide to sell the human beings. While Coyote laughs her nose off at this "bad idea full of bad manners," those Columbus men kidnap a bunch of her friends at gunpoint (take a close look at those guns) and she ends up swimming after the ships.

> Wait a minute, says Coyote. What about my friends you have locked up in your ships? You got to let them go. Tra-la-la-la-la, says Columbus, and that one goes back to Spain and sells the human beings to rich people like baseball players and dentists and babysitters and parents.

In this story, Native people have a rich and dynamic culture well before the Europeans show up. They have good times. They make choices—skydiving, wrestling, other bits of anachronism—that get the point across to the contemporary young reader: Significant things happened in the Americas before 1492. It's easy then to see the Europeans as intruders. Native people in that time and place viewed their own dress as the norm, not as exotic. By drawing the Native characters in contemporary casual dress, Monkman invites the reader to think, "These are just like people I know. They wear blue jeans and baseball caps." When Columbus and his crew arrive, we immediately distinguish them from the first people by their bizarre skin and hair colorings and their outlandish outfits. We see them more-or-less through the eyes of the people who saw them come ashore. The presence of Coyote, and the way this character is presented, also reflect a Native view of the world. Note: I don't say "the" Native view, because Coyote operates differently from culture to culture. In this case, Coyote is the one who is supposed to fix up the world, but instead gets it bent out of shape.

> You're supposed to fix up this world, cry those beavers and moose and turtles. You're supposed to make it right. But you keep messing it up, too. Yes, says those human beings, you better watch out or this world is going to get bent. Everything is okay, says Coyote. I made a mistake but I'll take it back. I'll take Christopher Columbus back. You'll see, everything will be balanced again.

It's not fair to overanalyze comedy; it takes the fun out. Even so, the reader should note the skillful juxtaposition of humor and pathos here. The genuinely (if briefly) remorseful Coyote sings, dances, and thinks really hard—but of course she cannot call back Columbus.

Someone could argue that if I'm taking *Encounter* to task for giving the aftermath of 1492 a passive voice, I can't give *Coyote Columbus* a pass. After all, Thomas King doesn't mention conquest or killing either. But he's still telling the story from a Native perspective. By making this a Coyote story, King

provides a context (familiar in many Native traditions) in which all manner of things might happen. Coyote seems to be without ill will, but somehow things just go from bad to worse once she gets an idea. Everything changes, goes out of balance, for the animals and the humans who had been having a pretty good time before those ill-favored strangers showed up. King does not make Columbus the *only* bad guy, which is historically accurate. When that one is gone, along comes that Jacques Cartier, and he is going to be trouble, too, just in a different part of the continent.

It is hard for the very young to make sense of history. For a young child who imagines that Grandma was born when dinosaurs still walked the earth, the history lessons that must accompany any discussion of the October 12 U.S. "holiday" can be puzzling indeed. Maybe it is time we dropped it altogether. If there were no October 12 commemorative day, we could undoubtedly find another Italian or Italian American whose past is not so checkered to honor with a day away from work and school. Then teachers would not be in the untenable position of having to explain Columbus to children who are not ready to read what he (or de las Casas) actually wrote. There would be no need for children's books to remake colonization and genocide as bloodless events that occurred in the passive voice. No doubt the debate would continue over whether or not the Taino share blame for what happened, but the people debating it would be (we hope) less impressionable and better informed by primary sources (or translations thereof) than are the six-year-olds who are today treated to the myth of courageous, heroic Columbus.

Do we want the *whole* truth in a book for young children? Maybe not. But how useful to their understanding of history is a story that ultimately blames the Taino for what happened to them at the hands of the Europeans? It may take courage to mess with the Columbus myth at all. But by making him a greedy, scary figure, and then making the Taino complicit in their own destruction, *Encounter* ultimately undoes whatever good it purports to do.

The storytelling and illustrations in *A Coyote Columbus Story* clearly hail from an alternative reality. Children are not likely to come away believing in tipis at the seashore, any more than they believe that moose wore swim trunks or Columbus was purple. But more significantly, no child is going to set this book down with the idea in mind that Native people's greed and indifference caused their own downfall. Nor are they likely to imagine that Native people just let themselves be overrun, or that they have ceased to be true human beings. *A Coyote Columbus Story* is no finger-pointing lament. None of its characters slouches in defeat with body parts morphing into thin air, as does the narrator at the end of *Encounter*. The reader sees indignation, not stoicism, on the faces of the people being kidnapped. When the people disguise themselves as animals, and when they head for Penticton, there is the Native refusal to be colonized. The People may have put a good distance between themselves and that baseball-loving, singing-and-dancing Coyote, but they have not ceased to exist. They are not tragic. Look at them shaking their fists and scowling at Coyote. (And look at that moose shinnying down a tree.)

In most Native traditions, Coyote is an ambiguous figure, present from the beginning. What he—or she—accomplishes for good seems to be mostly by accident, although not always. Coyote is also self-absorbed, greedy, foolish, destructive, and perfectly capable of provoking a Columbus-size disaster. Coyote will do as Coyote does, but in King's story, they, the Native people, are not set up to take the blame for Columbus and what came after. "Those Columbus people" are responsible for their own bad manners.

None of the Taino are willing participants, as in fact they were not.—*Jean Paine Mendoza*

Source

A BROKEN FLUTE

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