

# THE LAST WORD

## Join the Diversity Discussion

Debbie Reese

The darling baby pictured here is Amelia, the youngest child in my family at Nambe Pueblo, a federally recognized tribal nation, located in northern New Mexico. Nana Kaa—and children like her—are the future. Nana Kaa is Amelia's Tewa name. She is going to grow up knowing three languages: Tewa, Spanish, and English (Tewa is the language we speak at Nambe).

For her baby shower, her parents asked friends and family to buy books for her. I wanted to give her books that reflect who she is, but I didn't have much to choose from. There are, unfortunately, more picturebooks that stereotype American Indians and Mexican Americans than there are ones that accurately reflect who we are in today's increasingly diverse society.

"Diverse" is the word people are currently using to address the whiteness that characterizes children's literature. Prior to that, the buzzword was "multicultural." In the 1960s, the Council on Interracial Books for Children drew attention to that whiteness and to misrepresentations of marginalized populations, but we can go all the way back to the 1700s and the experience of William Apess, a Pequot man raised

by a white family. In his autobiography, he wrote of being afraid of Indians because of the sensational one-sided stories he heard about them!



My point in sharing this history is that a lot of people have been pushing against stereotypes, as well as calling for better books, for more than three hundred years. Sadly, little progress has been made.

So here, my Last Word is a call to action.

Speaking up about stereotypes is uncomfortable, but it is necessary. People have to unlearn what they think they know, in order to look for, and then embrace, the reality of who Native people were, and who we are, too. Asking your bookseller or library for books by writers who belong to marginalized populations is also important because it raises everyone's awareness.

Join me. Let's work together so that children like Nana Kaa and her classmates—be they Native, Mexican American, or white—will have lots and lots of choices in the books they read.



*Debbie Reese is Publisher of American Indians in Children's Literature. A former professor and schoolteacher, her articles and book chapters have been published in journals and books used in education, library science, and English courses in universities in the United States and Canada.*

Got a great, lighthearted essay? A funny story about children and libraries? Books and babies? Pets and picture books? A not-so-serious look at the world of children's librarianship? Send your Last Word to Sharon Verbeten at [CALeditor@yahoo.com](mailto:CALeditor@yahoo.com).