

Advocating for a Decolonized Thanksgiving

By María Vega



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Thanksgiving is deeply ingrained in North American culture, often associated with family gatherings, delicious food, and expressions of gratitude.

But the history of Thanksgiving is also intertwined with colonialism, oppression, and violence against Indigenous peoples. It is crucial that children's librarians take steps to decolonize Thanksgiving and promote a more accurate and inclusive understanding of the holiday. The lived experiences and ongoing struggles of Indigenous peoples need to be acknowledged and honored.

Decolonizing Thanksgiving means recognizing and centering the perspectives, cultures, and histories of Indigenous peoples. Librarians need to critically examine the myths and narratives that have been perpetuated about the holiday and work to actively dismantle harmful stereotypes and biases in our materials, programs, and displays.

Children's librarians play a vital role in shaping the perspectives and attitudes of young people and have the power to create safe and welcoming spaces for all children in their communities. Here are some specific steps to decolonize Thanksgiving and celebrate Native American culture year-round.

Provide Access to Diverse and Authentic Materials

Librarians need to ensure that collections include a wide range of materials that reflect diverse experiences. Native American peoples should be portrayed as complex, with their own histories, cultures, and perspectives. Look for books that center and empower Native American voices and that celebrate Indigenous cultures and traditions. Include books that acknowledge the violent and complex history of colonization and avoid mythologizing or romanticizing this history.

Books should provide accurate information about the history of Thanksgiving and include the perspectives of Native American peoples. Evaluate collections to remove inaccurate and outdated material and books with stereotypes and caricatures. The American Indian Youth Literature Award and *American Indians in Children's Literature* blog are both outstanding resources for material selection.

Partner with Local Indigenous Communities

Invite Indigenous speakers and educators to share their perspectives, and provide a space for community members to engage in discussions and ask questions. Host storytelling sessions, art programs, or music programs where Indigenous community members share their own stories and traditions around Thanksgiving. This shows children that Native Americans have not disappeared but are valued members of their community.

Reexamine Library Programming and Displays

Take a critical look at programming and displays to ensure that they do not perpetuate harmful stereotypes or myths about Indigenous peoples. Create

inclusive and respectful programming and displays that feature books, artwork, and other resources by Native American creators. Display artwork that reflects Indigenous perspectives and Indigenous cultures in the present. Include Native American authors in book displays and programs year-round, not just in November, and use land acknowledgments in your programs.

Incorporate Native American Songs and Music into Programming

Use both traditional and modern music. NativeRadio.com is an excellent resource for streaming Native American music. Children can learn about the different instruments and styles used in Indigenous cultures or the music can be played as background music to an activity.

Partner with Knowledgeable Organizations

Many museums offer educational materials and resources that can supplement children's learning and promote a deeper understanding of the holiday. The National Museum of the American Indian (Washington, DC) and the Plimoth Patuxet Museums (Plymouth, MA) both offer virtual field trips and crafts centered around Native American Thanksgiving experiences, and

the latter has an online game that can be easily converted into a library program. The Abbe Museum in Bar Harbor, ME, has a Thanksgiving True or False game that challenges common Thanksgiving myths that would also make a fun library program.

The Native American Film Festival and the Red Nation International Film Festival showcase and celebrate the work of Native American filmmakers. Short films and documentary winners that are child friendly include *The Thunderbird* by Levi Judson Harris and *Angakusajaujuq—The Shaman's Apprentice* by Zacharias Kunuk. The library could host a Thanksgiving short film festival and encourage children to make their own short films.

There are many activities centered on Native American people, from creating thankful collages featuring diverse groups of people to having children design their own Wampum belt after studying traditional belt designs. The American Indian Youth Literature Award and other ALA youth media awards recognize outstanding books by Native authors and illustrators that are perfect for storytimes and programs.

Most importantly, don't limit coverage of Indigenous peoples to only one month a year. Take the time to learn about the festivals and holidays of local Native Americans and incorporate such materials and resources into displays, programs, and activities year-round. &

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