Examining Historical (Mis)Representations of Christopher Columbus within Children’s Literature

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Abstract
Effective teaching, while supplemented by best practice methods and assessments, is rooted in accurate, age-appropriate, and engaging content. As a foundation for history content, elementary educators rely strongly on textbooks and children’s literature, both fiction and non-fiction. While many researchers have examined the historical accuracy of textbook content, few have rigorously scrutinized the historical accuracy of children’s literature. Those projects that carried out such examination were more descriptive than comprehensive due to significantly smaller data pools. I investigate how children’s non-fiction and fiction books depict and historicize a meaningful and frequently taught history topic: Christopher Columbus’s accomplishments and misdeeds. Results from a comprehensive content analysis indicate that children’s books are engaging curricular supplements with age-appropriate readability yet frequently misrepresent history in eight consequential ways. Demonstrating a substantive disconnect between experts’ understandings of Columbus, these discouraging findings are due to the ways in which authors of children’s books recurrently omit relevant and contentious historical content in order to construct interesting, personalized narratives.

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I'm a big fan of Christopher Columbus. Not the man, the phenomenon. The moment when Columbus touched land in the Caribbean marks the beginning of one of the greatest shifts in human history: the appropriation of land and resources of two continents by the people of a third; the depopulation by accident or disease, or, some argue, by conscious policy, of tens of millions of people in North and South America; the abduction and wanton. What follows is a description of how we examine Columbus (the phenomenon) as a complicated historical and cultural symbol.

The first case is an elementary methods course where I ask students to consider how an alternative reading of the Columbian encounter troubles the traditional representation of Columbus as a hero. Christopher Columbus' reputation has not survived the scrutiny of history, and today we know that he was no more the discoverer of America than Pocahontas was the discoverer of Great Britain. Native Americans had built great civilizations with many millions of people long before Columbus wandered lost into the Caribbean.

Columbus' voyage has even less meaning for North Americans than for South Americans because Columbus never set foot on our continent, nor did he open it to European trade. Scandinavian Vikings already had settlements here in the eleventh century, and British fisherman...