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# ***'It's Part of Me that I Want Them to Know About': Maintaining Distant New Zealand National Identity in Canada using New Zealand Picture Books***

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## **Abstract**

*The link between national identity and children's picture books has been established in several countries including Canada (e.g., Bainbridge; Pantaleo) and New Zealand (e.g., author; Hebley; McNeur). However, few, if any, studies have examined the use of picture books to maintain national identity in a diaspora. The study reported in this article describes two case studies of Canadian families in which the mother is an expatriate New Zealander, and in which New Zealand picture books play or have played a significant role in maintaining a link to the New Zealand heritage of the Canadian-born children. Findings are discussed in terms of the power of children's picture books as material culture in maintaining diasporic identity.*

## **Introduction**

In their edited volume of essays discussing current aspects of diaspora studies, Knott and McLoughlin refer to estimates that in 2008 there were around 214 million international migrants. The reasons for people to leave their country of origin and reside elsewhere are many and varied (Dufoix), but one challenge many such communities face is ensuring the next generation maintain links to the country of origin. Jamarani, for example, discusses the challenges faced by Iranian women living in Brisbane, Australia, in terms of ensuring their children maintained links to family in Iran. This article explores the role that children's picture books can play in maintaining national identity in a New Zealand diaspora in Canada from the perspective of a Canadian child with a New Zealand mother and a New Zealand mother resident in Canada with Canadian-born children.

National identity has been defined as the links we have to a particular geographical or politically defined region and the characteristics and values we share with those who also have links to that region (Fox, Jeffries). Current thinking about identity acknowledges that individuals have multiple identities including those relating to gender, ethnicity and age, and that these identities are constantly being revised as we interact with others (Jamarani). The link between national identity and children's literature has been explored by researchers across the world (e.g., Desai; MacKintosh; Williams). There have been several studies examining the relationship between national literature and national identity in New Zealand (e.g., Hebley; Jeffries; McNeur; Moore; Stiven) and in Canada (e.g., Bainbridge; Bainbridge, Oberg & Carbonaro; Johnston, Bainbridge, Mangat & Skogen; Pantaleo).

In New Zealand, Stiven surveyed 47 books in the New Zealand junior fiction category written between 1999 and 2003 and showed that New Zealand writers, 'rather than delocating their stories, were including aspects of national identity, both through settings and characters, and intrinsically through characters actions, attitudes and idiom' (p. 49). In her doctoral research examining the place of landscape in New Zealand children's fiction, Hebley surmises that because New Zealanders never live more than 130 km from the sea, seascapes are ever-present, and because New Zealand is on a fault line, volcanic or tectonic activity is a part of the national conscious.

A Masters thesis by McNeur analysed a random sample of 50 books from the 310 picture books published in New Zealand between 2000 and 2005, with the primary aim of gaining an understanding of how New Zealand culture was represented in New Zealand children's

literature published in that five year frame. Her analysis of text and illustration showed flora and fauna and Māori images and language were the most frequent elements found in the picture books contributing to 'the communication of a unique culture and setting' (p. 75). In her exploration of national identity through the visual imagery used in the *New Zealand School Journal*, Moore also shows that it is by reference to flora and fauna, and reference to Māori visual culture that a New Zealand setting is established.

Several studies in Canada have looked more specifically at how Canadian literature is used in classrooms and links to national identity. Bainbridge ('The Role of Canadian Children's Literature...') reported an action research study consisting of monthly meetings between a group of nine elementary and middle school teachers over a one-year period, in which the teachers discussed their use of Canadian literature in the classroom, and discussed the importance of including Canadian books in their classroom teaching. Amongst the findings reported by Bainbridge (p. 70) was that the use of these texts had an impact on the 'the development of Canadian children's identities and ways of thinking'.

A few years later, a case study by Bainbridge, Oberg and Carbonaro explored the beliefs of elementary teachers' use of and beliefs about Canadian children's picture books in the classroom via a web-based survey of twenty elementary teachers in a small urban school district, followed by interviews with seven of the participants. Their findings showed that eighteen of the twenty teachers reported the belief in the importance of using Canadian books in their classrooms. Many of their rationale reflected a belief in the importance of children understanding what it means to be Canadian, and that using such books reflecting familiar settings, characters and idiom could help in engaging the children.

On a larger scale (1,010 returned surveys) Pantaleo also surveyed Canadian teachers' use of Canadian children's literature in the classroom, with a focus on how children's literature was used across the curriculum. Nearly all respondents reported that they believed it was important to use Canadian children's literature in the classroom. Like the respondents in Bainbridge's research they explained this in terms of the importance of children using literature which reflected Canadian identity in terms of setting, geography, language.

While this is a substantial body of research examining links between national identity and children's literature, and the importance of picture books which reflect local identity in educational settings, very few studies have examined how parents view the link between national identity and children's picture books. One exception is a study by Daly in which a set of 13 picture books were given to six New Zealand families to be incorporated into their daily reading routine over a one-month period. The primary purpose of this study was to examine how parents reacted to Māori loanwords embedded in the English language text; however, during interviews with parents, many commented on the importance of the picture books in terms of the developing national identity of their young children (aged 3 years to 7 years). Neither are there many, if any, studies which examine the use of picture books to maintain national identity in a diaspora community.

Thus the purpose of this study was to explore the role of picture books in the New Zealand diaspora in Canada for developing and/or maintaining links to New Zealand.

## **Methodology**

After ethical approval was obtained through the author's institution, two adults known to the author were approached and invited to participate in the research. They were informed of the purpose of the research, the data collection process, and the ways in which the data would be analysed and used.

## ***Participants***

Steve (a pseudonym) is a young Canadian male who has dual Canadian and New Zealand citizenship due to his mother being a pakeha New Zealander (a New Zealander of European descent). At the time of the study he resided in New Zealand where he was completing postgraduate studies. During his childhood, he had travelled to New Zealand for a few weeks when he was 7 years of age, and then returned to work as a teacher when he was 24 years old. Five years later he returned to commence postgraduate research.

Pygmy Owl (a pseudonym) is a New Zealand mother in her 40s who has lived in Canada for the last 20 years, and who has two Canadian-born children, and a British husband. Pygmy Owl and her family travel back to New Zealand frequently.

Steve was interviewed using a semi-structured interview format (see appendix for questions). The face-to-face interview lasted 34 minutes and after transcription it was sent to him to allow for amendments and further comments before analysis. Pygmy Owl was interviewed (20 mins) using a very similar set of questions (see appendix) in an audio-recorded interview conducted by Skype, and the transcription of this interview was also sent to Pygmy Owl for approval before analysis occurred.

## Results

Answers to the questions in the semi-structured interviews for each participant will now be outlined before themes are discussed.

### *Steve*

Steve reported that four picture books (see appendix for details) which his aunt sent him after a visit to his New Zealand extended family when he was seven, are the books which stand out in his memory. He remembers his mother reading these to him and reading them himself. He said

*I think they stood out for me mostly because they were stories that gave me ... especially the pictures ... gave me kind of a window into this place that I really didn't know very well but it was where my mum was from and my grandparents lived (p. 2).*

He reported remembering the pictures, and in particular he noticed the school bus sign hanging on the bus, and the pictures of the landscape and flora and fauna. He also remembered the fact that the kiwi in one of the stories had a Māori name (*Kahu*) and he discussed this with his mother. He felt this (an animal having an indigenous name) just would not have happened in a Canadian storybook. Of the four books his aunt sent (one about a kiwi, one about a kea (another native bird), one about a pig and one about a red deer), it was the books about the kiwi and kea which stood out for Steve. In the kea story, he was deeply impressed by the fact that the bird in the story interacted with people. At the time he thought this was just made up, but he vividly remembers interacting with a kea in the Southern Alps in his later time in New Zealand as an adult, and feeling an immediate connection with the bird because of the story. In all four books there was some interaction between wildlife and human which as a little boy he was really interested in:

*One of the things that stood out for me about these stories was this interaction with animals ... because it was something that just didn't happen. I grew up on a farm ... so I was living in proximity to wild animals and there was just not even a ghost of a chance of establishing a relationship with any of them unless, maybe possibly you could with a baby deer, if you found one that didn't have its mother (p. 4).*

Steve discussed the importance of the illustrations in the books in terms of the insight they gave him to the New Zealand environment which was very different to the Canadian prairie he had grown up on:

*The pictures were very important because that was what allowed me to visualise this place that I'd never ... you know ... 'cos even though I'd been to New Zealand at age seven, I didn't go to places like that ... you know, in this picture ... where he got the native bush and the swamp and stuff ... I'd never seen that kind of thing...I remember feeling like ... 'Wow!' ... it looked like jungle to me and 'My mother grew up in a place where there's jungle!' ... You know it's just something that really amazed me at the time (p. 6).*

The illustrations also reminded him of aspects of his New Zealand family such as the way they dressed, and the fact that they lived on a farm and went hunting. During his visit to New Zealand as a 7 year old, Steve's uncle had shot a bird:

*It was one incident that happened and whenever I read this other book afterwards and they had a picture of the man shooting the deer I always thought about that. I think that's why they reminded me because I knew that they shot animals and so ... and probably in a setting just like that ... and he even looks a bit like my cousin, [name]. And so it was very much a link back to those memories and those people ... not just the memory of the shooting ... but just that setting as well, of the farm ... (p. 10).*

He remembers his mother reading the books to him as well as reading them to himself. He guesses that his mother may have been drawn to these books because she would have something to offer when reading them, and that there was a special connection with his mother through the books:

*she could answer questions I had and that kind of thing ... 'cos I always had questions as kids do. But that's the one that sticks out in my memory is asking about the name ... the name Kahu ... and Rewi ... you know, what ... because I'd never encountered names like that and I didn't know how to say them either. And I remember her telling me how to say them (p. 8).*

As a boy growing up in Canada, Steve remembers being very aware of his New Zealand heritage. He remembers his mother being quite explicit about this:

*I can't quote her but she would say things to the effect of ... 'you should know something about New Zealand because it's part of your family history and I'm from there and it's part of you' ... basically, that was something that she said in various ways through our lives ... not in a pointed sort of dramatic way but just by-the-by she would mention it when it was appropriate, I guess. And I'm pretty sure that was said in relation to these books at some point, as well. 'It's good that you know a little bit about New Zealand and about things that go on in New Zealand' (p. 11).*

### **Pygmy Owl**

Pygmy Owl provides a parental perspective on the place of picture books in maintaining her Canadian born children's link to New Zealand. She reported having a set of between 15 and 20 picture books (see appendix) which she read to her two children aged 6 and 9 years at the time of the study over the past several years. All of the books had been given to them by family members:

*I think one reason the kids like some of them is ... every single one of these books was given to us by a relative, so you always think of the relative when you're reading the book, ... her grandmother gave her 'Hinemoa te Toa' ... we remember who ... gave all of them to us (p. 2).*

Other reasons she suggested to explain her children enjoying these books were their interest in New Zealand English words, and the pictures. She reported that she loved reading New Zealand picture books to her children because of her love for New Zealand, but also

because of the access it gave her children to aspects of New Zealand culture such as the ubiquity of the beach and going to the beach, as well as New Zealand English dialect words and the fact that this would help them not to feel out of place on their frequent visits:

*[I choose to read these books]...Because I love New Zealand and I want them to know about it, and because some of them are just independently great books right. It's important to me that they learn the language, so all those dialect words, and you know some of them like, you know they have 'rubbish' and 'biscuits' and 'lollies' and stuff I try to use those words with my kids anyway but sometimes, particularly [son's name] now he's getting older will laugh at me and say 'hahaha, you're s'posed to say cookies' or whatever so for me it validates it when they hear it in a book, but also...because it's important to me, it's who I am, it's part of me that I want them to know about and I want them to not feel out of place when they go to visit um, yeah, I want them to know about the New Zealand culture (p. 3).*

She later said she believed New Zealanders had a particularly strong connection to their home country, in her opinion, perhaps more so than other countries:

*I think New Zealanders really care about New Zealand more than some other nationalities. I mean [husband's name] left home on purpose whereas I didn't, I wouldn't be living outside New Zealand if I didn't have to for work right. I would love to be living back there so I'm trying my best to keep it up (p. 5).*

Pigmy Owl said it was difficult to tell which concepts her children met through picture books and which they had met during their visits to New Zealand, although two examples she could be sure they had met through picture books because they hadn't actually seen them on visits were knowledge of the kiwi bird and *weta* (a New Zealand native insect). However, she provided several examples of aspects of New Zealand culture which reading the books had allowed her to discuss with her children:

*For example on Monday, we were just reading she went to the dental nurse it would never have entered my mind to just tell my kids 'did you know that when I was a kid in school there was a dental nurse and that she was attached to the school' but they've never heard of that right, only because it came up in the book did I have the opportunity to teach them about that (p. 4).*

With regard to how much the reading of these books allowed her children to be aware of her children's New Zealand heritage, Pigmy Owl said she thought they contributed a great deal, but she was unsure whether they saw the New Zealand heritage as being theirs or their mother's.

## **Discussion**

Several themes emerge from these two case studies of the role of picture books in relation to national identity amongst the New Zealand diaspora, one from the perspective of a Canadian child with an expatriate New Zealand mother, and one from the perspective of an expatriate New Zealand mother with Canadian children. These themes include the importance attached to their New Zealand identity identified by both mothers (albeit one by report); the links the books provided to extended family living in New Zealand; and the opportunities the books provided for the New Zealand mothers to share their national identity with their children. There is also the issue of the two time periods involved. Steve's aunt was sending picture books to him in the early 1980s and Pigmy Owl's family were sending her children picture books in the 2010s. These areas will now be discussed in turn.

### ***Importance of New Zealand identity***

Both New Zealand mothers in this research appeared to attach a great deal of importance to their New Zealand national identity and feel it was important that their children know something of it. It is possible that this attachment was unique to the two mothers by chance. However, a recent survey of 3,027 New Zealanders based overseas concerning their national identity conducted by Kea New Zealand, an association of New Zealanders living around the world, showed that the respondents 'remain confident about their country and strongly committed to its destiny even while living and working overseas' (Kea New Zealand). Whether this is a characteristic unique to New Zealanders living abroad is unknown.

### ***Links to extended families***

Another topic discussed by both Steve and Pygmy Owl was the fact that books had been given to them or their children by relatives and friends in New Zealand, and this provided a link to these family members. Pygmy Owl mentioned always thinking of the person who had given them the book when they were read, and Steve clearly remembered that it was his aunt who had given him the New Zealand picture books which he had been fascinated by. He remembers being able to 'see' people like his extended family depicted in the illustrations of the picture books. The Kea New Zealand survey of New Zealand identity showed that 85% of the respondents cited visiting family and friends as the main reason for their last visit to New Zealand. Thus it would seem that keeping strong links to family in New Zealand is a strong part of the identity of the New Zealanders diaspora. As was discussed earlier, the need for a diaspora community to maintain links to family and relatives is a concern for many, including the Iranian community based in Australia described by Jamarani.

### ***Picture books used as an opportunity to share national identity***

Both mothers (one by report and one directly) felt it important that their children know about their New Zealand heritage and seemed to use picture books as a key way to share this with their children. There is much literature discussing the power of picture books in providing opportunity for sharing (e.g., Bainbridge and Pantaleo); however, it would appear there are few, if any, studies which show parents in a diaspora using picture books as a means of sharing their national identity with their children.

Some of the themes identified by both participants with regard to what they (Steve) or their children (Pygmy Owl) learned about New Zealand identity from the picture books do align with themes from other studies of New Zealand picture books and national identity. For example, Steve mentioned the importance of the New Zealand environment and New Zealand flora and fauna, and this was also mentioned by Pygmy Owl whose children learned about kiwi, weta and beach-going. Hebley (1998) mentions the importance of the seaside in her study of the role of landscape in New Zealand children's fiction published between 1970 and 1989, and in her study of the visual imagery used in the *New Zealand School Journal*, Moore (2007) also established that flora and fauna were central to the establishment of a New Zealand setting. The importance of New Zealand flora and fauna in relation to New Zealand national identity was also discussed by the six children's literature experts selecting picture books to be included in the New Zealand Picture Book Collection (NZPBC, author).

The importance of Māori culture in the New Zealand national identity, evident in Steve's comment about the naming of the characters in his picture books with Māori names, has been established by many previous pieces of research examining national identity and New Zealand picture books (Daly; Moore; McNeur). And the use of New Zealand idiomatic words and phrases, identified as being very important by Pygmy Owl, has also been discussed by several studies of New Zealand picture books including Stiven who established that the New Zealand authors in the 47 junior fiction titles were locating their stories in New Zealand by the use of idiom among other things. Similarly, McNeur established that the use of language was an

important aspect of the way in which the authors of the 50 books she examined, established New Zealand identity.

### ***Time period***

As well as providing adult and child perspectives on the use of picture books in the New Zealand diaspora, Steve and Pigmy Owl also provided a contrast in the eras about which they were reporting. Steve was being given picture books by his aunt in the early 1980s and Pigmy Owl's family were sending her children picture books in the 2000s. This difference in time is highly significant in terms of New Zealand national identity which is to some extent reflected in New Zealand children's literature publishing. The 1970s and the 1980s was a particularly important time in New Zealand's recent history and the developing New Zealand national identity with regard to several issues: The Waitangi Tribunal was set up in 1975 to investigate breaches of the treaty signed by the British crown and many (but not all) New Zealand Māori tribes in 1840; there was a significant debate between different factions of New Zealand society in regard to the 1981 tour of New Zealand by the South African rugby team; the governance of New Zealand schools was devolved to a large extent to school communities; and previously close economic ties to Britain were weakened and closer economic ties within New Zealand's geographic region were established. These changes and developments were to have an impact on the development of a more distinct and confident New Zealand national identity and this must have been reflected in the children's literature published. Margaret Mahy surveys the publication of New Zealand children's literature, from the 8 books in 1936 to the 907 books published in the last six months of 1998 and notes the explosion of picture books published by Māori authors including Patricia Grace and Witi Ihimaera in the 1980s and new group of prolific junior fiction writers in the same period (Mahy). The picture books described by Steve were probably some of the few available in the late 70s, and mostly reflected the flora and fauna of New Zealand. By comparison, the picture books sent to Pigmy Owl's children reflect a much broader view of New Zealand society, including Māori communities in contemporary society (with links to mythology) such as the community in *Whale Rider* by Witi Ihimaera who are struggling to find a new leader for their community; the theme of fairness and social justice evident in *The Christmas Caravan* by Robin Beck in which the protagonist lives with his mother in a caravan; and the relationship between a young boy and his uncle full of humour and colloquial New Zealand idiom in *Uncle Glenn and Me* by Glenn Colqhoun.

### **Conclusion**

This study presents two cases in which picture books have been used by the New Zealand diaspora in Canada to maintain links to New Zealand. The similarity in findings from two differing perspectives (that of the child who has been read to and the mother who is doing the reading), and from two different eras (Steve was being read to during the late 1980s and Pigmy Owl is reading New Zealand picture books to her children in the 2010s) does give some indication of the validity of the finding that children's picture books have been and can be used to develop/maintain national identity in a diaspora. This underlines the power of picture books as a means of connecting, a means of learning language and cultural concepts, a means of giving us windows into worlds other than where we live, and to which we have special familial connections. Philip Crang discusses how diasporic identities may be developed and maintained 'through the production, circulation and consumption of material things'. The two case studies presented in this article are examples of the role that picture books as material culture can and do play for the New Zealand diaspora in Canada. A survey of a larger number of families about their use of picture books in maintaining diasporic identity in communities other than New Zealanders based in Canada would be a natural extension to this study.



Morreillon (2003) discusses the candle and mirror effect of children's literature; the fact that by reading a book (or having one read to you), you may be given the opportunity to see into a world which you do not know, or you may see your own way of being reflected. In the reading of New Zealand picture books to children of the New Zealand diaspora in Canada, this dichotomy is somewhat blurred, for while the children may not be very familiar with New Zealand, they do have some connection to it; and while they are seeing aspects of their own identity being reflected in the stories, they are aspects they may not have experienced firsthand. In a sense in this instance, the children's picture books in the present study are candles which enable the children to look in the mirror of their inherited national identity.

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## Appendix

### *Questions for Steve*

Can you tell me about the New Zealand picture books you had read to you as a child?

What titles can you remember?

Which ones were most powerful for you?

Why do you think these ones were powerful?

Where did these books come from? [presents/libraries]

Why do you think your parent chose to read New Zealand picture books to you when there are so many other children's picture books around?

When you visited New Zealand, do you remember any moments where you recognised items/language/feelings/concepts from picture books which had been read to you?

Can you specify any of these items/language/feelings/concepts?

How can you be sure this recognition linked to the books rather than the influence of daily exposure to a New Zealand parent?

To what extent do you think the reading of these books to you as a child contributed to your awareness of your New Zealand heritage?

### *Questions for Pygmy Owl*

Can you tell me about the New Zealand picture books you read to your children?

What titles?

Which ones were/are most powerful for your children?

Why do you think these ones are powerful?

Where did these books come from? [presents/libraries]

Why do you choose to read New Zealand picture books to your children when there are so many other children's picture books around?

When your children visit New Zealand, do they recognise items/language/feelings/ concepts from picture books which had been read to them?

Can you specify any of these items/language/feelings/concepts?

How can you be sure this recognition linked to the books rather than the influence of daily exposure to a New Zealand parent?

To what extent do you think the reading of these books by you to your children contributes to their awareness of their New Zealand heritage?

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