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The "Contentious Celebration" of Christopher Columbus

by Lillian Heil

The quincentennial of Christopher Columbus has evolved into a "contentious celebration," according to BYU Today staff writer Krista Karony. She reports in the May, 1992, issue that scholars can't agree on his origins, physical characteristics, morals, or motivations. Because of the attention focused on the 500-year-celebration, many children's authors have felt the need, and/or been encouraged to relook at history and the part Christopher Columbus played in it; hence, many journals have published critiques of books and recommended bibliographies, lists of videos, tapes, and posters, all targeted to come out near the anniversary, October 12, 1992. The contentious part of the celebration stems from the controversial nature of many of the things that Columbus did. Heretofore, he has been portrayed, especially to children, as a great adventurer who, with bravery and courage, persuaded his reluctant crew to persist in the frightening voyage into the unknown and thus brought the peoples of the continents of the Americas into contact with the peoples of Europe. The catch is that the treatment of the native Americans by Columbus and those who followed him was exploitative and unjust. Many of the new books for children about Columbus do not dodge these issues, and neither do the reviewers and writers of journal articles on Columbus books. You may want to look at some of these lists and discussions.

William Bigelow, writing for the National Council of Teachers of English journal, Language Arts (February, 1992), entitles his article: "Once Upon a Genocide: Christopher Columbus in Children's Literature." He wants to know why Columbus books "show no passion or outrage at Columbus, at the social and economic system he represented, or at the school textbooks for hiding this inhumanity for so many years."

Lee Galda and Bernice Cullunan in "Celebrations 1992: Literature Across the Curriculum" in The Reading Teacher for May, 1992, urge teachers and librarians to have students look at these new books with an eye to critical thinking and questioning of the past views of history.

Barry Lopez, in his article "Columbus for the Imagination" in the November 10, 1991, issue of the New York Times Book Review, takes on authors and editors of current Columbus books for their lack of accuracy with such things as correct terminology for ship parts, matching correct dimensions of islands to the right island, and names of plants in the new world. You'll
want to check his article for mistakes he has picked up on in current Columbus books.

Richard Donahue has a very concise descriptive list of recent Columbus books in his July 5, 1991, article in Publisher’s Weekly entitled "The Fleets In: Kids Crave Columbus, Too."

For teachers and librarians who want to read about recent archaeological research locating the actual site of La Isabella (the community established on the north Haitian shore by Columbus on his second voyage), it is described and photographed in the January, 1992, issue of National Geographic.

The January/June, 1990, issue of Children’s Book Council (Children’s Book Council, 35-Scotland Road, Orange, NJ 07050; Telephone 1-800-666-7608) listed posters, bookmarks, and mobiles. A special combo of all their materials costs $70.00.

Two new films are scheduled for release. French star Gerard Depardieu will portray the explorer in Christopher Columbus, directed by Ridley Scott. Timothy Dalton plays the lead role in the other film, Christopher Columbus: The Discovery. It is directed by John Glen.

Professor Albert Cullum has written a children’s play about Columbus entitled Columbus: The Vision and the Voyage, A Classroom Drama. It is available from Fortress Publications, 97 Fort Place, Staten Island, New York 10301.

Those of you living near Provo, Utah, can see the exhibit on the Brigham Young University (BYU) campus entitled "Europe Encounters America." It is sponsored by the BYU Quincentennial Committee and opened April 17. It will be on display until the middle of October in the Ernest L. Wilkinson Art Gallery. It features the landing at what Columbus called San Salvador Island, scale models of Columbus’s three ships, and separate areas devoted to the culture of the Aztecs and other Mesoamerican civilizations.

Michael Tunnell rejoices in the healthy debate about Columbus in his article for Horn Book (March/April, 1992) entitled "Books in the Classroom: Columbus and Historical Perspective." He points out that controversy raises questions "about Columbus and history ought to be studied in the classroom. It is always helpful to have discussions about real questions and the relook at Columbus has generated a lot of questions."
The National Council for the Social Studies issued a list of seven guidelines for commemorating the quincentenary in *Social Education*, October, 1991. Teachers and librarians will find these guidelines helpful. They caution against treating the event romantically or trivially, but rather as an occasion to enhance our knowledge about 1492.

*Booklist* for October 15, 1991, suggests that librarians and teachers use their list to look at the "history of exploration from many points of view." They have a comprehensive annotated bibliography of adult books, children’s books, reference books, videos, filmstrips, and tapes.

The "contentious" nature of the celebration seems to have the potential for helping teachers (including parents) and librarians to have an opportunity to do some critical thinking with children. As many of the journal articles and reviewers of Columbus books have pointed out, the events preceding and following October 12, 1492, have been described and analyzed from many different viewpoints. Columbus’s mistreatment of the Indians, and his ineptitude as an administrator have not been glossed over. And as Mike Tunnell pointed out, the controversy over Columbus’s origins, physical characteristics, morals, and motivation provide teachers in all situations with real questions—the essential ingredient for motivating real thinking on the part of children.

My contribution to all this questioning and new perspectives was to do two small investigations. First, I noted the discrepancy between many authors who stated that Columbus had kept two set of figures as to distance covered on the first voyage, and the statement by Delno and Jean West in their *Christopher Columbus: The Great Adventure and How We Know About It* (page 55) where they say that "it is a myth that Columbus tried to keep two sets of figures, one set for himself and one set that he showed the sailors."

I wrote to ask Dr. West what the evidence was behind his statement since the Robert Fuson translation of the log (used by scholars including Dr. West) mentions at least 10 times the differences in actual distance Columbus thought he had traveled and what he had told the crew. West’s answer made very good sense. First, the log Las Casas abridged was not the original but a copy. Las Casas was unfamiliar with the sea and Columbus didn’t spell well and his poor grammar sometimes made his meaning unclear. Scholars have found his abridged version to be highly unreliable. West’s other compelling argument was that Columbus couldn’t have fooled other captains, masters, and pilots of the three ships. They were all well-trained, experienced seamen and navigators, and on several occasions, the pilots of all three vessels compared their calculations. Even ordinary sailors could calculate time and distance in a rough way.
The more acceptable explanation is that Las Casas misinterpreted the log. It was common practice to calculate distance by scientific methods and then translate them into terms sailors could understand.

My second investigation relates to the groups of sailors who tried to reenact the actual voyage in replicas of the Nina, and an AP newsfeature writer, Sid Moody (See his book listed in accompanying "Annotated Bibliography"), who made the voyage in a modern sailing vessel with modern equipment. (His journey was described in an article on January 26, 1992, of the Herald in Provo, Utah). In the book by Dyson (see "Annotated Bibliography"), Captain Coin (a sea captain and scholar who has a new theory about Columbus's route to the new world) theorized that Columbus had actually sailed south from the Canaries and then west to catch the easterly trade winds. This group made it easily in their Nina replica, although they started in June rather than August. In the voyage described by Mark (see "Annotated Bibliography"), the ship went south because of a storm and had nothing but trouble. They battled a hurricane, bad water, and starvation, and didn’t arrive until Christmas, instead of October 12. Mark’s summary of their journey was that Columbus had incredibly good luck to have such consistent winds and no bad storms. Moody described all his modern equipment and navigational tables, and marveled that Columbus made four voyages with only a compass and some very simple equipment, calling him a mariner "with an oceanic sixth sense amounting to genius." Moody also thought Columbus had a lot of luck. He pointed out that

if, as many think, the island of San Salvador was his first landfall, he was headed for treacherous reefs if he had missed San Salvador. These reefs arise suddenly out of hundreds of fathoms of water and account for the fact that prudent Bahamians don’t sail at night.

These reports of luck and sailing skill, added to the new emphasis on Columbus’s belief that he was guided by God, make me wonder if he didn’t also have some help from heavenly winds, and protection from harm as did the children of Lehi (I Nephi 18:8) and the Jaredites (Ether 6:8). For non-Mormons, these are peoples who report in the Book of Mormon that they received help from God to get their boats from the waters near Palestine to the Americas. Those who subscribe to the Ensign (magazine published by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) may also be interested to know that Delamar Jensen has written an article in the October issue of this magazine about the spiritual aspect of Christopher Columbus’s life.

So, there you have a multitude of sources for Columbus books, but in case you run out of time to look them all up, I have included an annotated list on some of the new perspectives about the momentous events before and after 1492. Happy Quincentennial Year and a Thoughtful celebration.
Annotated Bibliography


The life of Christopher Columbus is told in direct, simple language. The illustrations fill in the details of clothes, homes and types of ships used.


The story of Columbus is told from his childhood, to the point where he received the support of the Spanish monarchy. The unusual aspect of this book is that actors, in period costume, were photographed on location in Spain to illustrate the text.


This book describes not only the political events leading to Columbus’s voyage, but also the culture including education, art (look to Italy), games (chess), the food (no desserts), the health situation (grim), punishments (terrible), maps (no North or South America), ships (incredibly small), and sailors (overworked), with boldface inserts showing how Columbus fit into this picture of the world in 1492.


This log is not as complete as the one done by the Roops, but focuses on dramatic moments and highlights them with Sabuda’s linoleum cut prints. I especially enjoyed the ones of the meteor and of a storm at sea.


Excerpts were selected from the log translated by Robert Fuson to give a feeling for the events that took place on the first voyage of Columbus. The log starts in May of 1492, and ends on the 15th of March, 1493, when Columbus returned to Spain.

The author sailed with Luis Coin, sea captain and scholar, on a replica of the Nina to recreate the voyage of Christopher Columbus. They followed a route that Dr. Coin theorized Columbus had followed: south and then west— contrary to the record in Columbus’s log. Coin believes Columbus purposely falsified it to avoid trouble with the Portuguese if their ships were caught in Portuguese waters. Coin also believes Columbus had a map from a Portuguese sailor who had already found land across the Atlantic. Coin’s group left Spain on June 9, 1991. It does not say when they arrived in San Salvador.


This is a fictionalized, and very funny elaboration of the fact that the only colonizing idea that Columbus took to the new world, which was joyously accepted by the native inhabitants, was the use of the pig for food.


With her usual sense of humor, Jean Fritz focuses on the determined vision that drove Christopher Columbus to make his voyage across the uncharted Atlantic Ocean.


Fritz and De Paola combine their considerable talents to present Columbus’s great adventure in a pop up book. In only six scenes, these two present the motivation and the major events in Columbus’s first voyage. The favorite page of a young relative was the one where he could move one of the boats. He just wished that he could have moved all three boats. (A goal for a future pop up book?)


Haskins’s biography is concise and interesting. He gives more details about brothers and sisters than other biographers, and does not avoid the controversial nature of Columbus’s use of the Indians as slaves.

This is straightforward description of the four voyages with some special information about sailing and about the Arawak and Carib Indian tribes.


An easy-to-read book that has a straightforward, simple style. It pretty much avoids any problems Columbus had in the New World other than mentioning that he forced some Indians to return to Spain with him.


Levinson gives the reader a detailed account of events leading up to the four voyages made by Columbus. Levinson does not omit the injustices and cruelties of the Spanish sailors and soldiers against the Indians. The last chapter summarizes the world-wide results of these voyages. The author has included a copy of Isabella and Ferdinand’s agreement with Columbus, their letter of introduction, and the names of the crew members in each of the first three ships to the new land.


The adventure is briefly told, plus there is a short history of the celebration of Columbus Day. At the end is a question about changing the events of the celebration to include an acknowledgement of the mistreatment of the Indians.


The bigger picture of peoples who have come to the Americas is described in this book putting the voyage of Columbus into proper perspective as one of the groups who have landed on the shores of the Americas.


In contrast to the Dyson account of sailing replica of the Nina to San Salvador, this book tells of the adventures of a group who tried to duplicated Columbus’s voyage, but had nothing but actual life threatening trouble. They early encountered a storm which drove them off course.
Even though they were trying to sail due west from the Canary Islands (as Columbus said he did in his journal) they did in fact sail far south of there. The wind died, they were hit by a hurricane, their water went bad, their food spoiled, and instead of arriving in October, they limped in on December 25. They were convinced that Columbus had a better boat, more experienced sailors, and an incredible amount of good luck.


This is a joyous, bouncy celebration type of book. It’s done in rhyme and illustrated with colorful watercolors that show the ships from a variety of unusual perspectives. My only objection is the people, drawn in a comic art style with huge noses. The comic book style fit the mood of the book, but I couldn’t see any logical reason for the big noses.


Meltzer helps us understand the culture in which Columbus grew up. He shows how the thinking of his day influenced Columbus to think of non-Christians as inferiors and pushed him to pursue his quest for gold at whatever cost to human life. Meltzer shows how the voyage of Columbus ushered in an age of colonialism and exploitation of both the people and the environment.


An account of Columbus’s voyage as told by a cabin boy. Two cabin boys accounts have been written, but Schlein’s seems to be generally accepted as having the better quality writing.


Sis captures the feeling of a determined child—now grown into a man—who pursues his dream. The illustrations are like stylized paintings and give the reader a feeling of actually being there in 1492.


Ventura describes each European country and the Indian tribes of the Americas from the viewpoint of children living in each culture in 1492. Then he brings the two traditions—native American and European—
together with the voyage of Columbus and its aftermath. His book ends with a poignant quote from an Indian Chief, Eagle Wing, who said, "Our only sin was this: We had what the white man wanted."


The strength of this book is that in addition to a biography, the Wests have carefully highlighted controversies about Columbus and explained how they arose and what most scholars now think are possible answers to the puzzles.


The Yue’s focus first on the clues Columbus collected to convince him that a journey west to find the orient was a feasible bit of seamanship. Then, they describe the ships and its parts and the instruments they used to guide them.


Yolen tells the symbolic story of a Taino Indian boy whose dream warns him against the white men who will come like birds with wings to their shores. No one listens to his cry of "Do not welcome them." At the end of the book, she also tells of the old man who is mourning what has happened to his people.