

## **"Can you imagine, a real, live Indian right here in Walnut Grove?": American Indians in Television Adaptations of *Little House on the Prairie***

**Amy S. Fatzinger**

University of Arizona

Tucson, Arizona, USA

[fatzinge@email.arizona.edu](mailto:fatzinge@email.arizona.edu)

### **ABSTRACT**

Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House* novels have been adapted into two major television series: Michael Landon's well-known series, which aired from 1974-1983, and a more recent Disney adaptation, which aired as a miniseries in 2005. The premier movie, which preceded Landon's series, and the Disney miniseries both focus on the events in Wilder's 1935 novel, *Little House on the Prairie*, which covered the period from 1869-1871 during which the Ingalls family lived among the Osage in Kansas Indian Territory. Wilder's portrayal of the Osage in her novel is controversial, but she does also include some literary devices that allow for a slightly more complex reading of the relationships between Native and non-Native settlers on the Kansas prairie. While adaptations of novels sometimes revise problematic or controversial content to better suit the perspectives of modern viewing audiences, the adaptations of Wilder's novels alter the Native content in ways that do not move it beyond the realm of stereotypes. Both television adaptations present Native themes in ways that initially heighten the sense of fear associated with Native characters, then resolve the issues through happy endings and heavy-handed moral lessons that diminish the seriousness of the historic tensions between Native and non-Native residents of the frontier. The changes made to Native themes in the adaptations do, however, call attention to the challenges associated with adapting autobiographical and historical content and raise questions about how to prioritize more respectful portrayals of Native people when working with people's life stories.

### **KEYWORDS**

Little House on the Prairie, American Indian Studies, Pioneer Literature, Historical Fiction, Adaptation Studies, Television Studies

“Can you imagine, a real, live Indian right here in Walnut Grove?”

In *Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon reminds readers that in Adaptation Studies it is necessary to push beyond the usual tendency of contrasting a film to its source text and listing ways that it inevitably falls short of or deviates from the text; rather, she argues, “multiple versions of a story in fact exist laterally, not vertically: adaptations are derived from, ripped off from, but are not derivative or second-rate” (169). The more familiar (and beloved) the source text, though, the more difficult it can be to resist the temptation to find adaptations only a diminished version of the original, and Hutcheon acknowledges that “part of both the pleasure and the frustration of experiencing an adaptation is the familiarity bred through repetition and memory” (21). Few source texts could be as familiar to, and evoke such strong memories for, a viewing audience as Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *Little House* novels. As John Miller points out, the deep personal attachment readers feel toward Laura defies a logical explanation:

There are few American writers or historical figures who command the same sort of devotion and interest that Wilder does. People make pilgrimages to all of the historical sites associated with her. They read her books, not once or twice, but many times. Plausible explanations for her popularity can be suggested: the concrete, visual imagery contained in her books; her effective use of language; the simplicity of her moral vision; her emphasis on family values; nostalgia for frontier times; realization that these are basically true stories; and so forth. Still, the depth and continuity of Wilder’s appeal remain elusive. (Miller 24-5)

The personal attachments readers feel to Laura inadvertently ascribe a significant amount of power and authority to Wilder’s voice among both American and international readers. Her opinions, therefore, on subjects such as politics, women’s rights, Native issues and westward expansion of the American frontier are likely to influence her readers in both small and significant ways.

Despite the challenges of adapting stories beloved by generations of fans and the liberal deviations from the original stories, the *Little House on the Prairie* television series (aired from 1974 to 1983) acquired a fan base nearly as loyal as Wilder’s readers. Although fans of Wilder’s novels may have appreciated visual adaptations which closely followed the texts, Julie Sanders suggests that there may be important reasons for adaptations to deliberately part ways with the source text, including opportunities to de-marginalize oppressed characters, more responsibly address cultural contexts, or make political statements (98, 140). A timeline of more than a century extends from the time that actual events in Wilder’s life occurred, were recorded in the novels, and were recreated visually in both the original television series and a later 2005 Disney miniseries. Such a far-reaching timespan alone suggests good reason for rethinking portrayals of controversial subjects such as Native characters and themes, which have earned the novels some considerable contemporary criticism in juxtaposition to their otherwise near mythic status. Logic would suggest that portrayals of Native characters in Wilder’s texts would be the least well-rounded and that such portrayals would steadily improve in more recent iterations of the story. Such is not the case, however. The Native characters and themes in adaptations of the *Little House* story often continue to rely on old stereotypes, such as the “savage” and “noble savage,”<sup>1</sup> and tend to be oversimplified and more didactic than in Wilder’s texts. Such lost opportunities for revising problematic content pertaining to Native people in contemporary adaptations raise larger questions about how such portrayals might be improved upon, particularly in complex situations involving biographical and historical content.

---

[1] For a discussion of common stereotypes about American Indians and the development of the concepts of the “savage” and the “noble savage,” see Robert F. Berkhofer’s essay “*White Conceptions of Indians*” in the *Handbook of North American Indians*.

## OVERVIEW OF NATIVE CONTENT IN WILDER'S (1935) *LITTLE HOUSE ON THE PRAIRIE* NOVEL

When Mary enthusiastically exclaims, “Can you imagine, a real, live Indian right here in Walnut Grove?” in a 1977 television episode of *Little House on the Prairie* (“Injun Kid”), it would seem that the Ingalls family’s attitudes toward Native people have evolved considerably since they first appeared in Laura Ingalls Wilder’s 1935 novel of the same name. In the novel, Wilder’s depictions of Native characters are often associated with negative imagery and fear; Laura’s sister, Mary, and their mother, were particularly terrified by even the prospect of encountering Native people. Fans and critics alike will recall times that Native people—most likely Osage men—visited the Ingalls home, nights the family stayed awake in terror as they listened to the “Indian jamboree” nearby, and Laura problematically longing for a papoose of her own—the epitome of non-Native appropriation of Native culture—as the Ingalls family watches the long line of Osage people file past their “little house.”

In the novel *Little House on the Prairie*, however, Wilder does also employ some literary devices that add some more complex dimensions to her portrayal of Osage people. First, she emphasizes repeatedly that the Ingalls family is intentionally going to “Indian Territory”—the region of the Midwest designated by Congress for Native people who were removed to the west from their eastern homelands—suggesting that they should have found the Osage presence there somewhat less surprising. At the end of the novel, it is the Ingalls family who must leave the area because the land still belongs to the Osage. Wilder also frequently juxtaposes Ma’s negative comments about Native people against Pa’s opinions which are usually more accepting and similarly juxtaposes scenes in which Native men steal from the Ingalls family with Native men who make neighborly social calls to the Ingalls home. Apparently visits from the Osage or other Native neighbors occurred with such frequency that Wilder stops describing them in detail but still emphasizes the various personalities of the Native people she saw: “Indians often came to the house. Some were friendly, some were surly and cross” (Wilder 275). Unlike many pioneer women on the frontier, however, Ma apparently never meets any of her female Native neighbors. Though even “a woman who headed westward with trepidation regarding Native Americans could, and often did, become sympathetic to those very Indians” (Riley 133) especially after meeting local Native women, Wilder does not describe any such opportunities for Ma. As a result, perhaps, Ma’s opinion of Native people remains static, and she serves a foil against which other characters’ perspectives on Native people can be juxtaposed.

In addition to reinforcing the idea that the Ingalls family had made its way deliberately into Indian Territory and juxtaposing at least some of negative or frightening portrayals of Native characters with more positive images, Wilder also takes several approaches which stand out as highly unusual in the context of women’s frontier literature, in both fiction and non-fiction genres. First, the plot of *Little House on the Prairie* is driven by the child protagonist’s *desire* to see Native people—particularly a papoose. In most frontier narratives of the time, female protagonists take a position more akin to Ma’s—a position characterized by an absolute terror of encountering Native people. While Ma’s position on Native people is justifiably problematic for contemporary readers who demand more respectful treatment of ethnic issues in literature, it does more or less accurately express the sentiments of many housewives who felt forced into journeying west with their husbands. In journals women recorded, sometimes sheepishly, their initial reactions to the Native people they met on the trail or on their homesteads. Women, and men, too, were so paranoid about seeing Native people that they often imagined them where none existed. Families on the trail were frequently frightened by members of their own traveling party, children, deer, stray dogs, cattle, escaped piglets, tumbleweeds, a colt, and owls, all of which were mistaken for Native people by frontier travelers on one or more occasions (Riley 101-8). In some cases, reactions to false alarms were so extreme that men shot and destroyed their goods, livestock, and companions because they momentarily believed them to be Native people (Riley 112).

Wilder’s decision to offset that all-too-familiar perspective with Pa’s generally more tolerant point of

“Can you imagine, a real, live Indian right here in Walnut Grove?”

view, and Laura’s outright anticipation of meeting a Native person is most uncommon. But Wilder’s third unusual tactic pushes the issue even further. Wilder uses the voice of her protagonist to ask obvious but generally unspoken questions that ring throughout frontier literature. Laura first asks her mother why she does not like “Indians,” then follows up with her two most important questions, “This is Indian country, isn’t it? . . . . What did we come to their country for if you don’t like them?” (Wilder 46-7). Ma has no satisfactory reply to any of these questions. Wilder thus draws attention to the absurdity of pioneer families who deliberately went to Indian Territory, appropriated land from Native communities, and then lived in terror of encountering any Native people—even those who had the grace to sociably visit their non-Native neighbors under such circumstances.

Notably, Wilder appears to have gone out of her way to include Native characters in her story. The *Little House* series is based on events in her own life, though she often reordered or otherwise altered them to create continuity in her narrative. The events contained in *Little House on the Prairie* took place when she was about two years old, but the protagonist in the novel (who ages throughout the series) is about six. Wilder was so young when the events occurred, in fact, that she did not fully remember them all. Wilder’s correspondence reveals that she and her daughter Rose made a special effort (albeit with limited success) to research the Osage and fill in the gaps in the story, and Wilder appears to have specifically wanted to include Native people—and with some accuracy and cultural specificity—in her fictionalized life story. Beyond that, Wilder’s intentions regarding her Native characters are largely unknown. Her narrative point of view is strictly limited to the third-person perspective of her six-year-old protagonist, and both her established point of view and the conventions of Depression-Era children’s literature would have prevented her from stepping from behind her narrative curtain and offering a more mature or enlightened perspective—if she had wanted to. Inasmuch as she found some ways to avoid an oversimplified or didactic approach to Native issues, nevertheless there remain numerous problematic passages that raise concerns for contemporary readers.

For those interested in adapting the *Little House* story into a visual narrative, then, there is much to work with; there are positive aspects to build upon and some more negative areas that could be addressed with increased sensitivity in adaptations. As Sanders suggests, the study of adaptations in an academic context has in part been spurred on by the recognized ability of adaptation to respond or write back to an informing original from a new or revised political and cultural position, and by the capacity of appropriations to highlight troubling gaps, absences, and silences within the canonical texts to which they refer. Many appropriations have a joint political and literary investment in giving voice to those characters or subject-positions they perceive to have been oppressed or repressed in the original. (98)

And yet, the adaptations of the *Little House* story have not fully taken advantage of opportunities to provide more well-rounded portrayals of Native characters and themes; on the contrary, they have often taken more simplified and didactic approaches to complex themes. Though Mary, perhaps is capable of imagining an Indian in Walnut Grove in 1977, adapters of the *Little House* story have yet to imagine a sophisticated and sensitive way to portray Native characters and themes in their visual narratives.

### **CREATION OF THE (1974-1983) TELEVISION SERIES AND PREMIER MOVIE**

Wilder, who never saw much value in television and never even owned a television set herself, would likely be surprised to see adaptations of her story replayed in syndication numerous times throughout the day in the United States alone. Roger Lea MacBride, the adopted son of Rose Wilder Lane and Libertarian candidate for the 1976 presidential race, became the literary executor of the *Little House* series upon Lane’s death in 1968. In a 1978 interview with William Anderson, MacBride explained that he had been careful “to refuse offers to bring it to the screen or to the movie screen by persons who didn’t understand what they were

all about” (Lytle). Eventually he decided to form a partnership with Ed Friendly, who was a Vice President of several networks, and together they produced a pilot episode based on the *Little House on the Prairie* text. MacBride believed Friendly was “a man of profound understanding of what the books are all about” but they were unable to sell their pilot episode to a network until they received help from Michael Landon (Lytle). Together they made a new pilot film, which they sold to NBC, and “as it was the biggest success that NBC had ever had,” NBC followed through with the television series (Lytle). Landon was already well known, especially from his role as Little Joe on *Bonanza*; his involvement initially helped garner attention for the pilot, but when NBC agreed to carry the series, “immediately thereafter Mr. Landon said he would like to make the series his way. And when he outlined ‘his way,’ it was to take the basic characters of the Wilder books and the basic setting in Walnut Grove, Minnesota, and create out of that cloth, the series of wholesome and appealing stories” (Lytle). MacBride and Friendly had had a different view in mind, wanting to adhere to the content of the texts as closely as possible, “concentrating on the real life adventures that Laura and her family had and to adapt them as best as could be done to television, and [they] thought that could be done quite faithfully, and in fact, have a saga treatment” (Lytle). As it turned out, “Mr. Landon didn’t see it that way.” MacBride recalled that Landon “didn’t think we could adapt it successfully” as a saga, and they disagreed on a variety of additional points, ranging from whether or not the family would be shown in their sod house by Plum Creek, to whether the Ingalls girls would attend school barefoot or wearing shoes (Lytle). According to MacBride,

These differences piled up until the point until we had to say to the network: really, you have to do it either our way or Mr. Landon’s way, but not both. And we knew, of course, in advance, what the answer would be, because a popular and very capable star, such as Mr. Landon is worth many millions of dollars to a network, whereas producers are highly expendable. And the result was that we were expended before the first series show ever appeared on the screen. (Lytle)

From the first, it was clear that the *Little House* show would be a reinterpretation, not a recounting, of Wilder’s stories. Even the target audience had changed; while Wilder envisioned a child audience for her novels, the target audience for Landon’s series was women in their forties. For this reason, according to Alison Arngrim (who played Nellie Oleson in Landon’s series), Landon (who played Charles Ingalls) was scheduled to take off his shirt about once every three episodes (Arngrim). Whether children or their mothers are the intended audience, however, the obligation to portray Native people and issues responsibly and respectfully remains the same.

The time span of more than one hundred years, which occurred between the actual events in Wilder’s life, when Wilder recorded them, and when they were revised for television is a significant factor in interpreting images of American Indians in both the texts and television shows. During the hundred-year span, the political relationship between Native Nations and the federal government underwent several major transitions, as did public sentiment toward Native people, which undoubtedly inspired—or might have inspired—changes to the presentation of Native people and themes in the adaptations of the *Little House* story. At the time the Ingalls family’s covered wagon arrived in Indian Territory in 1869, federal policy was in the Reservation Era, a time characterized by rigid assimilation policies for reservation residents, where both policies and boundaries were strictly enforced by federal agents. By the time Wilder wrote about her experiences in Indian Territory some 60 years later in 1934, policy had shifted several times and was entering the Reorganization era. As Wilder drafted the third novel in her series, *Little House on the Prairie*, the Indian Reorganization Act acknowledged the importance of maintaining, rather than eliminating Native cultures, but was couched in paternalistic approaches that prevented Native communities from being fully in control of their own affairs. In 1975, as the *Little House* television series was in its second of nine seasons, Congress passed the Self-Determination and

“Can you imagine, a real, live Indian right here in Walnut Grove?”

Educational Assistance Act that marked the beginning of the Self-Determination era. The Disney adaptation of *Little House* was released in 2005, a time in which Native people’s rights to autonomy and self-governance were more fully recognized than they had been for centuries.

With each version of the *Little House* story emerging in such different political climates, there is reason to expect changes, and even improvements, in the treatment of Native themes. Yet Sanders raises a point of no small significance when working with an adaptation that “uses as its raw material not literary or artistic matters but the ‘real’ matter of facts, of historic events and personalities. What happens, then, to the appropriation process when what is being ‘taken over’ for fictional purpose really exists or existed?” (138). The challenge of adapting autobiographical material, historical facts, or even historical fiction, presents some special considerations, even in terms of simply adding and deleting content which is a process inherent to adapting a text into a visual narrative. Retouching a life story, or recontextualizing moments in history, in order to present a more respectful approach to Native content—while remaining true to the subject’s life experiences and story—is undoubtedly a delicate business. But both Landon’s and Disney’s television adaptations added substantial Native content that had no foundation in Wilder’s novels or life story. Yet they did not manage to move the issues beyond stereotypical representations.

Landon’s series went on to air 183 episodes over nine seasons. In the first episode, “Harvest of Friends,” the Ingalls family settled in Walnut Grove, Minnesota, where the Ingallses remained for the majority of the show’s run. Thus the show became the story of a nineteenth-century town, rather than the story of the frontier experience or of a pioneering family who firmly believed in self-reliance. As the show shifted the focus of the *Little House* story from the frontier experience to a well-established town, there is little room for a Native presence after the premier movie. As in many frontier women’s narratives, the Native people simply recede into the shadows with little or no explanation about what happened to them. Only thirteen of the 183 television episodes contain any references to Native people at all. Native issues are the central focus in only four episodes, while in the other nine Natives are off-handedly mentioned as part of a story from bygone days, used as mascots, or non-Native characters on the show pretend to be Indians. In almost every example, the Native characters are either assisted by or outsmarted by non-Native characters, which reinforces stereotypes about Native people as sidekicks and/or unintelligent people. For the sake of continuity, the discussion of Native themes that follows will be limited to the time the Ingalls spent in Kansas Indian Territory from 1869-1871, which is reflected in the novel *Little House on the Prairie*, the premier movie which preceded Landon’s television series, and the entire 2005 Disney miniseries.

### **NATIVE CONTENT IN THE PREMIER MOVIE (1974)**

Like Wilder’s novel, the premier movie begins with the Ingalls family’s preparations for leaving the Big Woods of Wisconsin and ends with their departure from Indian Territory. In between the two wagon trips, many of the basic events from the narrative are included. The family arrives in a seemingly vacant territory after an uneventful wagon trip; Pa and Ma build a log house; Pa encounters a wolf pack while out riding on the prairie; some Native people visit the house when Pa is away; Pa helps some cowboys round up stray cattle in exchange for a cow and her calf; and their neighbor Mr. Edwards makes Christmas special for the Ingalls girls. A prairie fire nearly burns down the Ingalls home; the terrified family listens to the drumming and “war cries” coming from the Osage camp; the Osage leave; and eventually the family receives word that they must leave because they settled three miles over the line into Indian Territory. As much as the events in the premier movie are similar to those in Wilder’s novel, the framework for making the trip in the first place is quite different. In the text, for example, it is Pa’s irritability at having neighbors too close that moves him westward, along with his foot that is always “itching” to head west no matter what the conditions. Though it is unclear



if Indian Territory is open for settlement, Indian Territory is the specific destination mentioned repeatedly, and the family clearly expects to encounter Native people. In the premier movie however, Pa's justification for moving west is that they were barely able to sustain themselves in Wisconsin: they had been scraping by on a "hand-to-mouth" basis. This contrasts sharply with the abundance of foodstuffs described in detail in *Little House in the Big Woods*. In Wilder's novels, as the Ingalls's move west, they never achieve the same abundance they had in Wisconsin, which in itself challenges rather than perpetuates the usual mythology associated with westward expansion. By suggesting that Pa must move his family west in hopes of *survival* rather than for purely adventurous reasons in the premier movie, however, Pa downplays the Ingallses' responsibility for participating in the process of westward expansion.

In the premier movie, the adjustment in the Ingalls' motivation for going to Indian Territory is compounded by the fact that "Indian Territory" is not emphasized as the family's destination to the extent that it is in the novel. Rather, the family seems to expect only the one hundred and sixty acres "free and clear from the government" that will enable Pa to be "beholden to no man." As the family leaves their home in the Big Woods of Wisconsin amidst good-byes from their relatives, Laura's voiceover explains, "though it made me sad, I thought it was a fine thing to go where there had never been a road before." The Ingallses discount the presence of Native people altogether and there is just one mention of Native people along the way, as Laura again looks forward to seeing them as she did in the text.

As in the text, the Ingallses build a home in Indian Territory and Laura asks Ma why they came to Indian Territory if she does not like Indians. This time, Ma is a bit more responsive. She laughs and says mildly, "I suppose it does seem pretty foolish, coming to Indian Territory and hoping not to see an Indian." Once settled in, it is not long before the Ingalls family receives its first visit from their Osage neighbors. As soon as Pa leaves the house one day, two presumably Osage men arrive and enter the house. The men are dressed in full buckskin and have masses of thick black hair, inconsistent with Osage clothing and hairstyles of the time. Rather than entering, eating Ma's cornbread, and leaving peaceably as they do in the "Indians in the House" chapter of the novel, the Osage in the premier movie are considerably more frightening. One tears up a feather pillow and maliciously sends feathers fluttering all over the house, while the other approaches Ma and fingers her hair. Ma, clearly terrified, thrusts a box of tobacco at them, but her demise seems imminent until she reaches behind her and hands them a cutting board with a piece of cornbread on it. They take the bread, and Ma's knife, too, before leaving. When Pa goes to town shortly after this event, Ma observes Native people watching the Ingalls house from a distance and that night her behavior mirrors that of other pioneer women who were nearly frightened senseless by Native peoples' presence. Again, the fear in the scene is exaggerated as compared to the text as Ma rocks slowly in her chair, clutching a rifle balanced across its arms and singing a hymn in a voice wavering with fear. When horses whinny outside the door, Ma, appearing half-crazed and shaking with fear, cocks the gun and aims it at the door, and continues to aim it even as Pa enters. Only then does she finally collapse in his arms.

As much as the sense of fear is exaggerated in the premiere movie, the exaggeration helps to make the family's realization that their fears are unfounded all the more poignant. The next visit from the Osage occurs when Pa is at home. In the text, it is a fairly uneventful incident; an Osage man arrives at the house, he and Pa exchange greetings in the form of Hollywood "hows," and eat together before the man leaves without further incident. Pa surmises that the man was Osage, and that he was "no common trash"; they later learn he is Soldat du Chêne. In the premier movie, Pa hospitably invites the man into the house and they both smoke from Pa's pipe (a conjuring of the proverbial peace pipe). Laura is fascinated, but not afraid, and she asks whether Soldat du Chêne's necklace is a bear claw. Miraculously, Soldat du Chêne seems to understand her English, though he supposedly speaks only French. Instead of being too terrified to function, Ma understands his French and tries to interpret. As Soldat du Chêne leaves, he slowly unties his bear claw and ties it around Laura's neck,

“Can you imagine, a real, live Indian right here in Walnut Grove?”

gently touching her cheek. Soldat du Chêne’s loving gesture makes him worthy of Laura’s and Pa’s sympathy for him because, as the family discusses, he will soon have to move west with the rest of the Indians. Mary is glad the Indians must leave, but Laura declares, “It’s not fair! They were here first.”

From the time she receives the necklace (which does not appear in the text), Laura wears it proudly, although Ma wishes she “wouldn’t wear that dirty thing.” Laura and Pa think the necklace is a “sign of a good hunter and it will bring protection and good luck.” Laura considers herself practically an Indian because of it—an idea that Ma clearly disapproves of. Ma remains jittery about Indians, particularly when the drumming begins in the nearby Osage community that lasts day and night. When little Carrie begins to sing along, “Boom! Boom!” Ma shouts at her hysterically. As in the text, the Ingalls family spends several days and nights in terror, listening to the drums and cries from the Osage camp. When the drumming stops, Soldat du Chêne comes by the Ingalls house to personally explain via an interpreter (after convincing Pa to stop aiming a gun at him) what has transpired between the Osage and the other Native Nations. He indicates that the other Natives in the area had wanted to kill the white men, but Soldat du Chêne had convinced them that they would be killed by soldiers if they killed their white neighbors. Ma absurdly declares that it must have been the bear claw that brought them good luck in deterring the massacre. As Ma thanks Soldat du Chêne for saving their lives, it is clear that her opinion of him has changed and she no longer fears him. It is somewhat difficult to determine, however, whether she has gained a newfound respect for Native people in general or a new inclination to believe in chiefs’ lucky bear claw amulets. While the invention of the bear claw necklace in the premiere movie is distracting in its absurdity, the changes to this scene in the premiere movie are significant to Ma’s character development. In the novel, the conversation between Soldat du Chêne takes place away from the Ingalls home, and when Pa recounts it to the family, Ma’s reaction is not noted. Situating this scene in the Ingalls home in the premiere movie affords Ma’s character an opportunity to express her gratitude to Soldat du Chêne and suggests she is able to change her heretofore rigid opinions about Native people (or at least one of them) in a manner never achieved in the novel.

While the bear claw necklace and Ma’s interactions with Soldat du Chêne are scenes added to the storyline in the premiere movie adaptation, Landon was more inclined to cut Native content than add to it. Most of the scenes in the novel in which the Osage are portrayed negatively, and those that add to the complexity of the issues in the texts are omitted from Landon’s adaptation. Laura’s quest to see a papoose is left out of the premiere movie entirely, for example, and there is no visit to the nearby camp to collect beads. There is little attempt to juxtapose various positive and negative perspectives about Native people or the frontier in the premier movie, and Mr. and Mrs. Scott’s characters are omitted so Pa and Ma have no opportunities to counter their narrow ideas about the only good Native people being dead ones. Ma only reminds Laura once about wearing her sunbonnet so that her skin will not get “brown and leathery,” but there is no association between the bonnet, dark skin, and Native people as there is in the novel. Significantly, there is also no long line of Osage leaving the area to emphasize the significant Native presence in the area nor the magnitude of their removal.

After the good luck from Laura’s bear claw necklace apparently saves the family from massacre, things quiet down on the prairie and the farm starts to bear fruitful. Soon, however, soldiers arrive to inform Pa that he will have to move on. Pa blinks back tears as he declares that he never would have settled there if that “blasted politician” had not said that all of Kansas was open to settlement. The sense of adventure prevails though, as the family drives away in the loaded wagon and Laura’s voiceover repeats the lines from the opening of the movie about the “rivers to cross and hills to climb” and her rejoicing at the prospect of seeing the “fair land.”

Overall, the additions and deletions to the *Little House on the Prairie* premier movie result in a notable simplification of the Native themes as compared to those in the text. The message in the premier movie is that Indians seem frightening and different from white people at first, but they turn out to be good people once you get to know them. They might even be inclined to give away a powerful object to a child, and even someone



whose fears are as out of control as Ma's are can quickly overcome her prejudices. The message in Landon's interpretation is not an entirely negative one, but it is rather different from Wilder's experience and probably shows more of a romanticized view of how cultural collisions on the frontier *could* have concluded instead of what actually happened in many frontier homes. The messages about Native people are not only simplified, but viewers need not search very hard for them as the music and lighting let the audience know how to think about each situation. In the premier movie, the importance of overcoming prejudices is difficult to miss, but the trade-off for tying up all the loose ends and emphasizing a clear moral, perhaps, is the implication that cultural encounters on the frontier usually went fairly smoothly.

### **NATIVE CONTENT IN THE DISNEY TELEVISION MINISERIES (2005)**

Disney introduced its adaptation of the *Little House* story in spring of 2005. Aired as a five-part miniseries, the Disney interpretation of *Little House on the Prairie* brought still another perspective to the original story and dramatic changes to the presentation of Native themes in particular. Disney's version of the story replicates the events in Wilder's story to a remarkable extent, and at times, even dialogue among the characters is copied verbatim from the text. Disney's depiction of the events, however, is significantly more action-packed, and most scenes have an added element of danger or suspense. Like Landon's adaptation, the Disney adaptation also contains new scenes about the Osage that were not in the novel.

Disney's story of the Ingalls family's trip to Indian Territory opens just before the family decides to leave the Big Woods. In this version, many people mill about in the snowy woods, and a hunter almost shoots Laura when he mistakes her for game, suggesting that the Big Woods are overcrowded. Pa, moreover, is tired of "working for the man," and when Ma sees her husband belittled by his boss, *she* proposes the trip to Kansas. Pa is delighted and tells his family excitedly that they will be "going to where no one has been," and there will be "land, as far as the eye can see!" As in Landon's adaptation, there is no discussion about the fact that Native people already live there, and there is no repeated emphasis on the place name, "Indian Territory." The Ingallses' journey is considerably more exciting than in Wilder's original story, and the family narrowly escapes several catastrophes. The family reaches the place where Pa wants to build a house, and as they climb out of the wagon and hold hands in a thankful prayer, and Native people ominously watch from a nearby hilltop.

As the Ingallses settle into their new home on the prairie, the events from Wilder's narrative are inflated dramatically. When Pa and Mr. Edwards meet for the first time, for example, they mistake each other for Native people and nearly shoot each other. Later, Pa nearly falls off of the top of the house as he stretches the wagon cover across to make a temporary roof. The drama continues as Pa almost succumbs to the poisonous gases at the bottom of the well (instead of pulling himself out hand-over-hand as he does in the text). In another modified scene, when Pa goes to help the cowboys round up the cattle, Laura goes along and serves as a cook for the cowboys. When Pa encounters the wolf pack, instead of simply managing to escape as he did in the original narrative and in Landon's premier movie, this time the wolves attack him. In the scene from the book in which Pa investigates what turns out to be a panther screaming in the night, only in the Disney interpretation does the panther attack Pa— and Soldat du Chêne arrives in time to shoot the panther and save Pa's life. The Ingallses' fear of massacre is also intensified as in the Disney version they, along with Mr. Edwards take shelter at the Scotts' house for several days. Unlike any such scene in the texts, the petrified neighbors all barricade themselves inside the Scotts' home to wait out the anticipated attack from the Osage. Inside the house Mrs. Scott succumbs to a fit of hysteria in which she first aims a gun at Pa, and then shoots a hole in the roof as her husband tries to wrest the gun away from her.

Because the Disney adaptation does follow the text closely in terms of the basic events—albeit a dramatized presentation of them—most of the Ingallses' encounters with Native people from the text are

“Can you imagine, a real, live Indian right here in Walnut Grove?”

included. Conversations between Laura and her parents juxtapose ideas about Native people and their expected removal, and Mrs. Scott's character offers extensive negative opinions on Native people. Mrs. Scott declares, for example, that “treaties or no treaties, the land belongs to the folks who'll farm it” and “why bother with treaties? Just kill them.” In one scene Mary contradicts Mrs. Scott, repeating a line she heard her father say, that some Indians are good and some are not, just like all men. The scene in which the Osages file past the Ingalls home is also included in the Disney version, though they appear to be leaving the area permanently, not for a hunt. Laura's interest in seeing a papoose, and later, her desire to have a papoose, however, are omitted. Ma's character is also revised to the extent that she embodies the pioneer spirit and even initiates the trip to Kansas. None of the female characters in the Disney adaptation wear sunbonnets, which is notable as a pioneer “woman's pale complexion often signified privilege, shelter, protection, and confinements; it was also an external indicator that she did not belong to one of the darker-skinned races” (Romines 58-9). Ma and the girls are either bare-headed or they wear straw hats and thus risk “getting to look like Indians” (Wilder 122). As in the text, Ma first encounters Native visitors while Pa is away, and although there are three Native people instead of only two, she handles the situation with aplomb, and later defends Laura's interest in wanting to learn more about her Native neighbors.

In addition to the changes in Ma's character that impact the overall presentation of Native themes, there are several significant Native scenes added to the Disney version. The added scenes fit into one of two categories: scenes that add to the hype of the story (e.g., drama, fear, or excitement); and scenes that play upon stereotypes of Native people as exotically spiritual in a manner that is reminiscent of Disney's version of *Pocahontas*. The narrative offers a viewpoint that extends beyond Laura's limited scope of vision and knowledge in the texts and occasionally shows scenes in the Osage camp. The glimpses of men singing, drumming, and dancing, however, usually contribute more fear to the story than a balancing of perspectives. There are, for example, no conversations between Native characters that help viewers to relate to their position, and the shots of the Osage camp while usually vibrantly colorful are also accompanied by frightening music. When Pa and Mr. Edwards, in this version of the story, spy on the Osage camp, their fear only increases. A specific scene added to the Disney adaptation that significantly adds to the frightening portrayal of Native people is the destruction of Mr. Edwards's cabin. While he is sleeping soundly one night, several Native men enter his home and drag him out by his feet before setting fire to his cabin and touching him with a coup stick. It is the torching of Mr. Edwards's cabin that prompts the neighbors to create the makeshift fort in the Scotts' home. While in the Scotts' home, Laura also has a nightmare about nearly being clubbed to death by a Native man.

Alongside these events, which heighten the drama of Disney's *Little House on the Prairie*, are several other Native scenes which did not occur in Wilder's novel: Jack, the family's brindle bulldog in the novel, for example, is transformed into a “spirit dog,” and Laura finds nearby Native children to play with. When the entire family is stricken with malaria (“fever and ague” in the text), Dr. Tann nurses them back to health. Dr. Tann informs Laura that her dog is a “spirit dog” because it has two different colored eyes, and he assures her that a spirit dog is a good source of protection because local Native people fear such dogs. Dr. Tann's prediction proves accurate when, in another invented scene, Laura encounters an Osage man while alone and he raises his toothed club as if to strike her, then turns away when he sees her dog. Early in the miniseries, Laura encounters a young Native boy while out playing alone, and watches him, fascinated, until he suddenly vanishes into thin air. During this scene, and other scenes involving “mystical” encounters with Native people, the frightening, intense music is replaced with what sounds like an angelic children's choir singing “hey-ya, hey-ya; hey-ya, hey-ya” repeatedly. The next time Laura sees the boy, he is accompanied by three friends. Laura soon sees him a third time, and this time she follows him and his friends to the Osage camp, where she sees women picking berries and working with quills—and this is where her spirit dog saves her from being clubbed by a mounted Osage man. Each of these scenes are exclusive to the Disney adaptation of the

*Little House* story, yet none serve to de-marginalize oppressed characters, more responsibly address cultural contexts, or make political statements (Sanders 98, 140).

In slight variation to the original story, it is Dr. Tann who brings word to the Scott fort that Soldat du Chêne and the Osage convinced the other tribes to cease plans to massacre the citizens. Pa decides to search for Soldat du Chêne to personally thank him and encounters a small party of Osage instead. One man who speaks English tells Pa that he wants to be remembered as the “last of the Osage to agree with du Chêne” and delivers a speech that explains why the Osage, not whites, have a justified presence on the land. Nevertheless, the Scotts soon arrive with word that the Native people will be leaving the area for good, and Ma and Mrs. Scott head indoors to celebrate over tea. In a rearrangement of scenes, the visit Laura, Mary, and Pa make to the nearby Native camp to collect beads is positioned here after the Osage’s final removal, apparently making the process of appropriation complete.

Predictably, however, soldiers visit Pa and inform him that the family must move on because he has settled three miles over the line into Indian Territory. The ensuing scenes reinforce the idea that the Ingallses are blameless, that they settled in Indian Territory by mistake, and that they would have filed a land claim with the homestead office but it had not yet opened. In this version of the story, Pa does not accept his family’s fate quietly—he is furious that the government is “making an example” of him and initially refuses to leave unless he is thrown off the land. Eventually Pa decides to leave before the soldiers literally drive him away, and Ma reassures him that all is well, since she did after all, fall in love with a man with “wanderlust.” Ma tells Pa, “We’ll go and find another home. If we get kicked off of that one we’ll find another after that,” and Pa agrees, declaring that he’ll build an even bigger house next time. The series ends as the family drives off in their wagon, with Laura, who placed a bead from the Osage camp on the windowsill of her family’s empty home before leaving, looking forward to a new adventure.

The especially frightening images associated with Native people in the Disney adaptation, and the addition of the mystical elements, reinforce stereotypes rather than diminish them. Ma’s makeover as a friend to her Native neighbors makes her a likeable character but raises questions about manipulating the personality of a historic figure to rid her of prejudices. The overall portrayal of Native themes in the Disney adaptation does not advance in sophistication beyond that of the novel as would be expected, given Disney’s apparent willingness to add and modify content from the source texts; the seventy-years’ worth of progression in both federal policy and public sentiment toward Native people since the time the texts were written; and the importance of portraying Native people accurately, respectfully, and responsibly.

The adaptations of the *Little House* story serve as examples of the challenges of representing Native people and issues in both text and visual narratives. Whereas the original story is criticized for its inclusion of negative language about Native people, even removing such language and replacing it with didactic messages about the importance of positive multicultural experiences, as in Landon’s adaptation, does not necessarily result in messages about Native people and the frontier that are more positive overall, nor does creating a frontier town in which the Native presence has already been eliminated. Similarly, adding mystical elements and showing more Native people without contextualizing the images, as in the Disney adaptation, do not help to create a more balanced understanding of the events. The adaptations present the Native themes in ways that leave little room for interpretation or discussion and weaken the likelihood that the audience will leave the show with increased understandings of either Native people or the Frontier. In this sense, to use Hutcheon’s terms, it is possible to readily see the adaptations laterally in relation to the source material rather than vertically (169), as there is no significant progression from worse to better (or vice versa), at least in the portrayal of Native themes. The challenge to “imagine a real live Indian right here in Walnut Grove” demands strategies beyond magic necklaces and spirit dogs, and beyond disingenuously altering historic figures’ perspectives on Native people in order to simplify the story or render it more comfortable for contemporary

“Can you imagine, a real, live Indian right here in Walnut Grove?”

viewers. The *Little House* story, therefore, continues to challenge adapters to find ways to contextualize Native content in more responsible, and respectful ways; when children are in the audience, the stakes for telling the story with care are at their highest.

## WORKS CITED

- Arngrim, Allison. Interview with Patrick Loubatière. *Little House on the Prairie*. Dir. and Prod. Michael Landon. Collector's edition DVD special feature, Season 5 Disc 3. DVD.
- Berkhofer, Robert F. “White Conceptions of Indians.” *Handbook of North American Indians*. Ed. Wilcomb E. Washburn and William C. Sturtevant. Vol 4. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1988. 522-547. Print.
- Cunningham, David L. Dir. *Little House on the Prairie*. Walt Disney Productions and Buena Vista Home Entertainment, 2005. DVD.
- Hutcheon, Linda, and Siobhan O’Flynn. *A Theory of Adaptation*. New York: Routledge, 2013. Print.
- Lytle, Bob, Dir. and Prod. *Ingalls of DeSmet*. South Dakota Public Television, 1978. VHS.
- Landon, Michael, Dir. and Prod. “Premiere Movie.” (1974). *Little House on the Prairie* television series. Time Life Video, 1992. DVD.
- Miller, John. “Approaching Laura Ingalls Wilder: Challenges and Opportunities.” Ed. Dwight M. Miller. *Laura Ingalls Wilder and the American Frontier: Five Perspectives*. New York: UP of America, 2002. 29-44. Print.
- Pocahontas*. Dir. Eric Goldberg and Michael Gabriel. Perf. Mel Gibson and Irene Bedard. Walt Disney Video, 1995. DVD.
- Riley, Glenda. *Confronting Race: Women and Indians on the Frontier, 1815-1915*. 1984. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 2004. Print.
- Romines, Ann. *Constructing the Little House: Gender, Culture, and Laura Ingalls Wilder*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1997. Print.
- Sanders, Julie. *Adaptation and Appropriation*. New York: Routledge, 2006. Print.
- Wilder, Laura Ingalls. *Little House on the Prairie*. New York: Harper, 1935. Print.

## AUTHOR BIO:

**Amy Fatzinger** is an assistant professor in American Indian Studies at the University of Arizona where she primarily teaches courses in Native literature and film.

## REFERENCE CITATION:

### MLA:

Fatzinger, Amy. “‘Can you imagine, a real, live Indian right here in Walnut Grove?’: American Indians in Television Adaptations of *Little House on the Prairie*.” *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*. 2.1 (2015). Web and Print.

### APA:

Fatzinger, A. (2015). “Can you imagine, a real, live Indian right here in Walnut Grove?:” American Indians in television adaptations of *Little House on the Prairie*. *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*. 2(1). <http://journaldialogue.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/A-Fatzinger.pdf>



All papers in *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy* are published under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-Share-Alike License. For details please go to: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/us/>.