

Knots on a Counting Rope

By Bill Martin Jr.

Ages 8-12

Pages 30

1966 & 1987 Henry Holt & Co., Inc.

Isbn: 0-8050-0571-4

Rating: Recommended – 2

By Marlette Grant-Jackson

Overview:

Boy-Strength-of-Blue-Horses, with the help of his grandfather, is learning to tell his life story by hearing the details of his life. Each time the story is told a knot is tied into his rope to count the number of times the story has been told, by the time there is no room left for a knot “Boy” should himself be able to tell the story. Born blind and weak, “Boy”, has learned how he got his name, and the strengths in the things that he has already accomplished, training his colt, managing to navigate the trails surrounding his home with his horse, and finishing a horse race.

Passages to consider:

Written and Illustrated in 1966 this book gives a positive portrayal of Native American people. Even with some of the Stereotypical items present, the book discusses a topic not seen in Native American children’s books, how to cope with a disability. The book shows positive interaction between a young boy and his grandfather, through a story written in dialog form, and through the beautiful illustrations. It shows how through the love and patience of a grandfather a young boy is able to work through his disability rather than overcome or pretend it doesn’t exist. Even in the last few paragraphs the grandfather is teaching the boy to be independent.

“I always feel strong

When you are with me, Grandfather.

I will not always be with you, Boy.

No, Grandfather,

Don’t ever leave me.

What will I do without you?

You will never be alone, Boy.

My love, like the strength of blue horses,

Will always surround you.”

Some of the stereotypical items presented are:

“in-touch with Nature” sayings

1) “... when a wild storm came out of the mountains...

... crying,

“Boy-eeeeeeeee! Boy-eeeeeeeee!”

.... And your mother said,

“I hear it in the wounded wind.

A boy child will be born tonight.”

- 2) *“...and you raised your arms
to the great blue horses,
and I said,
“see how the horses speak to him
They are his brothers from...”*

Collective and shared Native American representation in the artwork.

- 1) Through out the book you see lots of Silver and Turquoise
- 2) Feathers
- 3) Headbands
- 4) Blankets
- 5) Mixed tribal ceremonial wear (p.26)

The story seems to be set in the Arizona area with the mesa's in the background but on page 26 we see a buffalo headdress.

Discussion topics:

Boy-Strength-of-blue-horses, do you think this is his real name?

Could his real name be in a Native language and translated into English it turns out to be Boy-Strength-of-blue-horses?

Why could the horses have looked blue?

Why would the boy's grandfather want him to learn the story himself?

What is the significant of the story?

What has the little boy accomplished?

Why are his accomplishments important?

Do you think you could have done all the things “Boy” has done if you were blind?

Discussion of other reviews:

I read this book the first time knowing that it had received a horrendous review from another organization. I had to re-read the book, for I didn't see or hear any thing out of the ordinary. There were a few stereotypical errors that I could see but nothing to get the book on a discard list. Only after reading the book twice and discussing with my colleagues the appropriateness, language, and illustrations presented in the book did I read the other review. The harshness of the review was overwhelming. As an “educated” Native American person I find that being critical of reading material and movies is almost second nature, I discuss every movie (Native or non-Native) with my children, what I am trying to teach them are critical thinking skills.

Credentials:

As a Yurok & Karuk and mother of three children I have gotten an education to increase the success of our Native Students. I have a degree in Native American Studies with an emphasis on Education, and a minor in American Indian Education. I am also the Curriculum Resource Coordinator of the Indian Teacher & Educational Personnel Program at Humboldt State University.