

Children's Book Review

Tingle, Tim with Bridges, Jeanne Rorex (Illustrator) (2006). *Crossing Bok Chitto: A Choctaw tale of friendship and freedom*. El Paso, TX: Cinco Puntos Press. 42 pp., ISBN: 0-938317-77-6 (hc), \$17.95 (Ages 5-9).

Reviewed by June Harris, Texas A & M University, U. S. A.

Crossing Bok Chitto begins this way:

There is a river called Bok Chitto that cuts through Mississippi. In the days before the War Between the States, in the days before the Trail of Tears, Bok Chitto was a boundary. On one side of the river lived the Choctaws, a nation of Indian people. On the other side lived the plantation owners and their slaves. If a slave escaped and made his way across Bok Chitto, the slave was free. The slave owner could not follow. That was the law.

Martha Tom is a young Choctaw girl who has been told that she must never cross Bok Chitto. On the day that the story begins, her mother sends her to pick blackberries for a wedding. Failing to find blackberries on her side of the river, however, she decides to go across the river to look for them. She crosses by means of a stone path that the Choctaws have built across the river, just beneath the surface.

On the other side, Martha stumbles onto a forbidden church service being held by slaves. She also encounters a young man, Little Mo, and his father. The father sends Little Mo to take Martha back to the river, telling him that if he is careful, he won't be seen by the plantation owners, that there is a way to move among them that is almost as if they were invisible: "Not too fast, not too slow, eyes to the ground, away you go!" It works: they get to the river and Martha shows Little Mo the crossing stones.

Martha and Little Mo become friends, and time passes. Then one day Little Mo learns that 20 slaves have been sold, and among them is his own mother. His father counsels patience and endurance, but Little Mo encourages the family to cross Bok Chitto, using his father's mantra: "Not too fast, not too slow...."

His father agrees to try. The family makes it past the guards to the river. Little Mo—whose name is actually Moses—hurries ahead to ask for help from the Choctaws, and Martha Tom's mother agrees. As the guards raise their guns to shoot, the Choctaw women in white robes, carrying candles, begin a walk across the water. The guards see them as angels. There are no shots, and the family disappears into the fog.

Author Tim Tingle is a member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, and illustrator Jeanne Rorex Bridges is of Cherokee ancestry. Tingle is better known, perhaps, for his storytelling and presentations at folklore festivals. His first book, *The Choctaw Way*, was based on interviews and talks with elders of the Choctaw tribe, and he has indicated that *Crossing Bok Chitto* began as an outgrowth of those talks.

Tingle's beginning sentences, mentioning the Civil War and The Trail of Tears, were undoubtedly chosen to make the connection between the disenfranchisements of both Black Americans and Native Americans. Before the Civil War ended slavery in the United States, the Native Americans in the southern United States had been forcibly uprooted from their homes and moved to Oklahoma. Thus, the connection between the groups as victims of the U. S. policy is established early. That fact would be lost on children of either group unless a knowledgeable adult made the connection for them. However, children do not have to understand political considerations to appreciate a story of kindness and friendship. The story would certainly resonate with young readers who can make the connections between those who need help and those who are able to give it.

If there are any villains in this story, they would be the nameless and faceless plantation owners and the guards they employ to keep the slaves in line, but that villainy is very much minimized in the telling of the tale. The emphasis in this book is on friendship and support. The use of the "Not too fast, not too slow..." chant that renders the Black family "invisible" to the guards might, in an adult work, be termed "magical realism," though that term seems pretentious for a work meant for children. The mantra works; the family escapes. One would doubt that children would question the use of a bit of "magic" to aid the family.

This book has considerable value as a work for children in several ways. For one thing, the tribal connection is very clear. Works of fiction for children which deal with Native Americans have traditionally fallen into a "generic Indian" category although Native Americans tend to identify with their tribal affiliations, not just "Indian." This book clearly connects with the Choctaw heritage. Further, the artist seems to have made the dress and customs appropriate for the time and place. Additionally, the book brings up an event in history (even though obliquely)—the Trail of Tears—that is very often skipped over in teaching U. S. history. Children need to know that the government of the United States made mistakes in the past, so they may understand that it is possible the government will make mistakes in the future. We cannot begin too early to educate students about national obligations to all U.S. citizens.

The artwork in this book is luminous. Jeanne Rorex Bridges is well known as a Native American artist, and *Crossing Bok Chitto* is her first book illustration. She has created characters whose faces clearly show their heritage and their

feelings. This is a beautifully illustrated book, in which the sharp edges of the illustrations delineate the tale with clarity and vision.

Tom Tingle writes, "We Choctaws live by our stories." This book is a wonderful retelling of one of those stories.