

Learning Task 1

Resource Analysis: *A Promise is a Promise* by Michael Kusugak with Robert Munsch

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Executive Summary

A Promise is a Promise (1988) is an illustrated children's book written by Michael Kusugak with Robert Munsch and is illustrated by Vladyana Krykorka. The book is based on Inuit stories that are told to children to discourage them from traveling alone near the ocean to prevent them from the possibility of falling into the freezing waters. In these stories, Inuit parents warn their children of monsters called Qallupilluit. The book tells the story of a fictional Inuit girl named Allashua who resides in the Northwest Territories of Canada. In the story, Allashua's mother makes her promise to go fishing in the lake and not go to the ocean. She explains to her that if she goes to the ocean the Qallupilluit will take her. Allashua decides not to follow her promise and goes to the ocean anyway. This book follows a familiar arc of teaching a lesson to children similar to fables in Western Education.

A Promise is a Promise was created by author Michael Kusugak, who is an Inuit man from Nunavut. Therefore, this story accurately represents the stories of Inuit people and their culture while using authentic language such as Qallupilluit and the name Allashua. The book's final page explains the history and significance of the story in Inuit culture, it states that "the Inuit traditionally spend a lot of time on the sea ice, so the Qallupilluit were clearly invented as a means to help keep small children away from dangerous crevices" (Kusugak, 1988). Furthermore, the moral of this story surrounds the importance of being true to one's word, which aligns with the core indigenous value of honesty (Little Bear, 2000).

The creation process of this children's book is of interest. At first, the story was written by Michael Kusugak, who is a friend of popular children's author Robert Munsch. The two of them became close when Munsch stayed with Kusugak's family while on tour in the Northwest

Territories. It was here where Robert Munsch first learned about the story of the Qallupilluit. When Munsch brought the idea for the book to his publisher, he was told changes had to be made for the book to go to print. On his website, Munsch states, “I changed it around a lot and sent it back to Michael and he changed it around a lot and sent it back to me... finally it turned into this story called *A Promise Is a Promise*” (The Official Website of Robert Munsch, n.d.).

When analyzing this book, it is important to consider the fact that this children’s book is co-written by an Indigenous and Non-Indigenous (white) man. While Robert Munsch used his popularity as a children’s author to amplify the voices of Inuit people and their stories, this collaboration begs the question of if it is his story to tell. Tiffany Johnstone (2020) in a chapter entitled, *To Help Find Your Way Home: Michael Kusugak’s Reimagining of Fear and Danger in the Canadian Arctic*, outlines how this collaboration is potentially problematic. She explores the sensitivity surrounding this collaboration and highlights that the illustrator of the novel was also non-Indigenous. Johnstone states that her illustrations “veer into sentimental and stereotypical territory” (p. 125). However, on Robert Munsch’s website, it says that she created these illustrations based on real Inuit photographs she was given as inspiration (n.d.). Furthermore, the illustrator continued to work with Kusugak for several more of his books (Michael Kusugak the Storyteller, n.d.). Johnstone states that “Kusugak’s intentional and complex negotiation with his indigenous perspective, which, as is evident in the publication history of *A Promise Is a Promise*, is still at risk of being seen as of secondary importance to the perspectives of his non-indigenous collaborators.” By this, she is referring to the cover of the story, which reads “Story Robert Munsch & Michael Kusugak,” in earlier editions, but later in the 30 Anniversary edition the cover reads “Story by Michael Kusugak with Robert Munsch.” In critically analyzing this text

we believe this small, but significant change to the cover is an act of reconciliation and recognition of whose story this is.

Classroom Application

With our critical analysis in mind, we would still argue to use this resource in schools. Although Robert Munsch is a white author, we believe he took steps of reconciliation in changing whose name is first on the cover of the story, and he used his popularity as a children's author to amplify the voices of Indigenous people. The content within the story is accurate to Inuit people and their culture, and the story shares the importance of honesty and keeping promises in Indigenous culture. While we seriously considered denying using this resource in our classrooms, we believe that to dismiss this resource would be to also dismiss Michael Kusugak's authentic Indigenous story.

This story could be used in the elementary setting to teach Indigenous ways of thinking and knowing, and teach through storytelling the importance of being honest, truthful, and keeping your promises. *A Promise is a Promise* is a warning to children and could be tied into learning outcomes in elementary classrooms about safety and awareness. When teaching with this resource in elementary classrooms we would practice sitting together in a circle and sharing our thoughts and feelings about the story and how we could apply it to our lives. Furthermore, this children's book could be utilized in older grades to practice critical analysis of a text. This text is an important resource to consider particularly the relationship between its co-authors and the story. While this is a good resource, Kusugak has also written several other books which we would also recommend.

