

The Passionate Lie

The Education of Little Tree and the Art of Audience Manipulation

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Granpa said, "That's how the damn fool word-using gits folks all twisted up. When ye hear somebody using words agin' somebody, don't go by his words, fer they won't make no damn sense. Go by his tone, and ye'll know if he's mean and lying." Granpa was pretty much down on having too many words. Which was reasonable. (Carter 79)

How do you decide whom to trust? Whose opinion could sway you to one side or another in a debate? Do you put your faith in the vetting capacities of your family, political party, religious institution, closest friends, or favorite news site? Do you head to the internet to verify the claims of a new voice in crowd, or have you learned to trust your intuition as a visceral failsafe? How hard would you fight to defend the word of someone you have decided has made the cut? What would it take to convince you that your faith had been misplaced?

When *The Education of Little Tree* came out in 1976, it was embraced by a growing global audience that, in the years since, purchased more than a million copies, earned it the first American Booksellers Association Book of the Year (ABBY) Award, put it on the 1991 *New York Times* Bestseller List for Nonfiction, and incorporated it into the curriculum of thousands of classrooms. Written by Forrest Carter, the Cherokee author behind Clint Eastwood's popular movie *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, it was a poignant memoir of Carter's childhood in the Tennessee

mountains, raised by his simple-hearted Native grandparents to learn “The Way” of the Cherokee: a quasi-mystical relationship with Mother Earth that embraced love, moderation, and environmental sensitivity. Written as though the reader is seeing the world through the eyes of Little Tree as a child, the reader’s heart delights in his Disney-esque animal friends and adventures with his whiskey-making grandpa, winces at the cruel bigotry that Little Tree faces without the understanding of its true nature, and cries at his forcible removal to a brutal orphanage by cold-hearted “politicians” (Carter 171–182). True-hearted dogs caper foolishly until they die tragically (77), corrupt city-bred gangsters are tormented and driven away in a sadistically funny vignette (125–137), and only a select few understand how to be as pure and good as Little Tree and his kinfolk. Forrest Carter opened the door to the inner world of the fabled Native American and invited everyone in, so long as they embraced “The Way.” In the awkward post–Civil Rights Movement era, a time in which hippies and war hawks raged and segregation lines blurred, a pro-multicultural tale that seemed to not even understand the concept of exclusionary lines was a panacea to the reading public. This was real. This was the authentic voice of the Native American reminding everyone that we are all children of the earth.

In actuality, this was the voice of Asa Carter, a violent founder of a paramilitary Ku Klux Klan offshoot implicated in riots, bombings, and castrations of African-Americans attempting to assert their rights as first-class citizens. His chosen pen name, Forrest, is an homage to Nathaniel Bedford Forrest, one of the original founders of the Klan. His diatribes against Black and Jewish people spread from his Alabama radio program to his white supremacist magazine, to the pro-segregation, anti-Washington gubernatorial campaign speeches of governor George Wallace. Carter’s most infamous piece of writing is one he did not get official credit for: Wallace’s “Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever” speech that kicked off his defiance of the federal mandate to allow integration in Alabama’s schools and universities.

Let us send this message back to Washington...that from this day we are standing up, and the heel of tyranny does not fit the neck of an upright man, that we intend to take the offensive and carry our fight for freedom across

the nation...we give the word of a race of honor that we will tolerate their boot in our face no longer, and let those certain judges put that in their opium pipes of power and smoke it for what it is worth. Hear me, Southerners! You sons and daughters who have moved north and west throughout this nation, we call on you from your native soil...though you may live in the farthest reaches of this vast country, your heart has never left Dixieland. And you native sons and daughters of old New England's rock-ribbed patriotism, and you sturdy natives of the great Mid-West, and you descendants of the far West flaming spirit of pioneer freedom, we invite you to come and be with us, for you are of the Southern spirit, and the Southern philosophy, you are Southerners too and brothers with us in our fight. (from Governor Wallace's 1963 Inaugural Speech)

The words above appear to bear no resemblance to the multicultural paeans presented in *The Education of Little Tree*, but both are the product of one man fully aware of the power of imagery, narrative, and audience inclusion. It is difficult to pare down the subject of Carter's fictional Native American autobiography to technique and manipulation, as there is so much more to investigate regarding both the text and its author. Many articles, academic and otherwise, focus on one of three things: the value of the story over the author, who or what is to blame for the success of the con, and what Carter's true intentions were in its writing. Although these are valuable aspects well worth covering, my focus rests less on the secrets of his motivations and more on how he made such successful use of techniques that form the fundamentals of training in my own field of heritage interpretation. I consider this topic a crucial one, even more so than the others, because it takes a deeper look into how an audience's search for identity and trust in authentic voice can be influenced and manipulated. Audience beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors have been proven susceptible to the impact of storytelling technique, and even after Forrest Carter was revealed to be Asa Carter there are both academics and many members of the public who insist that his stereotyped American Indian

message of environmental stewardship and multicultural harmony should be above suspicion. “The value of *The Education of Little Tree* is in its content and meaning, instead of the writer’s identity” (Chang 59). The quote above came from a 2014 article by a Taiwanese university which leaned on hackneyed, thirty-year-old descriptions of a universal “Native American” belief set to support Carter’s idyllic depictions of Cherokee–nature relationships. The popularity and impact of books like *Little Tree* are still international and present-day phenomena, and for good (as in effective) reason. As the venerable founder of modern heritage interpretation, Freeman Tilden proselytized the art of provocation and inspiration over dry, factual instruction:

The lifeblood of satisfying interpretation flows from the proper and ingenious use of exactly those devices of language that take the hearer or reader beyond the observed fact to, or at least toward, a certification of spirit...by exposing the soul of things— those truths that lie behind what you are showing your visitor. Nor yet by sermonizing; nor yet by lecturing; not by instruction but by provocation. (Tilden Kindle Loc. 966-7, 1120-2).

Tilden’s principles, however, rely on one crucial element: the audience must trust and believe in their guide. A talented, well-trained, and dishonest guide is a dangerous entity, and Asa Carter is a prime example of this. Carter was, in fact, a master at manipulating people’s sense of their own identity, facilitating their agreement with his beliefs by making his message as appealing to that identity as possible. Although academics such as Gina Caison and Michael Marker provide worthy insight into Carter’s possible intentions, and the responsibility of entities such as the public school system, the university publishing press, and celebrity endorsers such as Oprah Winfrey who promoted his fraudulent writing without effective vetting, what interests me most of all is how Carter demonstrates the ways in which the art of the storyteller and heritage interpreter is essentially an amoral toolbox. Its capacity for misuse is as strong as its capacity for positive change, and at the very least *The Education of Little Tree* provides excellent examples of how an unscrupulous storyteller can do so. The tale is practically textbook in its structure, and even as I reread it—aware of its true author—at several points I found myself

drawn into the story and emotionally affected exactly in the way the reader was intended to be affected. Dough Elliot, a veteran southern storyteller and national award-winning master interpreter, admitted to me that there are sections of *Little Tree* that can still make him cry even after multiple readings. The writing is not Shakespeare; it's simplistic and at times almost embarrassingly home-spun, but even that is an important factor in its overall effectiveness.

It would be impossible to understand much about the nature—and the danger—of *The Education of Little Tree* without a closer look at Carter's particular combination of educational background and racial belief set. He was what was typically called a "True Believer," which in the South stood for, among other things, an abiding belief that segregation between white and black people was of benefit to all. Tied to that was the corollary that whites were inherently superior, and that the federal government's forced integration of the southland was paving the way to the destruction of white civilization (Ricci). Asa Carter considered himself a soldier in the fight to prevent such a future, and he had a skill set that proved increasingly useful as he learned to hone and wield it. Born and raised in rural Alabama in 1925, and coming of age during the height of the Civil Rights movement, he developed a talent for word-crafting by studying journalism in college in Colorado. Returning to his home state and marrying his high school sweetheart, Carter's subsequent jobs revolved around his mission to defend the South from miscegenation and Jewish control. According to Marco Ricci's 2012 documentary, Carter first became a fiery radio personality whose anti-Semitic outbursts were outrageous enough to drive his Alabama listening audience to boycott his show.¹ His magazine *The Southerner*, a white supremacist screed, was also short-lived.

He was, however, particularly effective at speechwriting. It was through this medium that Carter began to truly find his ability to manipulate the public toward his cause. He had the ability to arrive at a relatively peaceful, if tense, situation in which integration was proceeding, and within a few days of presenting scorching oratory, rile the local white community up to active protest and violence (Ricci). Carter's crowning achievement at the time, though, was to become Alabama candidate for governor George Wallace's *sub rosa*

¹ It is unclear why his anti-Semitism was considered more offensive than his other racist diatribes, but all sources found cite it as the basis for the boycott against him.

speech writer. Although not publicly acknowledged at the time, he was discovered to be the expressive mind behind Wallace's infamous 1956 inaugural "Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever" speech. Far from an odious diatribe against minorities, it was actually a beautiful piece of patriotic writing. Carter skillfully wove anti-Communist rhetoric with proud American pioneer and homesteader identities, calling all of the citizens of the United States to join their brothers in spirit, the True Christian Southerner, against the tyranny of Washington. Wallace, who had previously run, and lost, with the support of the NAACP won this second bid for governor on the segregation ticket, and Carter's passionate speeches were without doubt a beneficial factor in Wallace's campaign.

As times changed, though, and integration became an unavoidable fact of life, Wallace began to lose his taste for Carter's particular flavor of bigotry. He was dropped from the payroll, and Wallace went on to seek forgiveness from the black community. Carter saw this as a rank betrayal of the southern principals and, in 1970, he attempted an ill-fated run against Wallace as an Independent; Carter placed last with voters. As a founder of the paramilitary group "The Original Ku Klux Klan of the Confederacy" he came under investigation by the FBI. After being arrested for shooting some of his KKK compatriots over money he owed them, and his disappointing foray into politics, Asa Carter decided it was time for a change (Ricci). According to FBI records cited in the documentary *The Reconstruction of Asa Carter*, he provided the investigators with contact information, announced that he had the opportunity to make a lot of money for the first time in his life and didn't want to see it screwed up, and disappeared. From that point on, he ceased to be Asa Carter and became Forrest Carter.

I have fairly positive memories of reading *The Education of Little Tree* as a child, although I do remember some jarring notes. Similar in style to other popular children's books that indulge in a certain amount of escapism fantasy in order to make the attached morals more palatable to young brains, it was an enticing mix of drama and comfort, told from a child's perspective. I remember loving the descriptions of the wild animals Little Tree and his grandfather would meet in the forested mountains that embraced them as family; the lively and tragic characters that seem to pop up out of the woods like fairy creatures ready for a song, a tale, or a piece of sweet potato pie; the mouth-watering descriptions of

sweetened acorn fritters and pan-fried catfish. Even the jarring notes were not surprising: the inclusion of disturbing material into children's literature is a common practice, though the cartoonish depictions of African Americans struck me even as a child as less than respectful (Carter 115–118).

Use of the “authentic voice” is a crucial aspect of storytelling, giving authority and weight to the narrator's words. Carter wasn't a Cherokee, but he was raised near Cherokee territory in the Southern Appalachia area. It wasn't until I read Gina Caison's analysis of *Little Tree* as a Southern mountain folk memoir, as opposed to a Native American one, and heard strikingly similar tales from Southern storyteller Doug Elliott, that I understood how Asa Carter manufactured his “authentic voice” so well. He wove in stories from his actual youth with the stereotypical tales of Native Americans. “The Reconstruction of Asa Carter” mentioned his abiding love of dogs; *Little Tree*'s pack of mountain dogs invoke the most heartfelt passages in the book. Even those were sanitized, though, for a larger audience. In comparison with a verified autobiography of Scotch-Irish-Cherokee author Rickey “Butch” Walker, *Celtic Indian Boy of Appalachia: A Scots Irish Cherokee Childhood*, Carter's tales sound slick and sanitized. Walker was raised a generation after, but in the same region of Northern Alabama as Carter, and he doesn't sugarcoat the difficulties of a southern rural upbringing. *Little Tree* delights in feeling the earth mother through his bare feet and communes with the wildlife; Walker reminisces about children choking down tobacco juice to kill intestinal worms (Walker Kindle Loc. 1996).

One thing that both Walker and Carter have in common is their adroit use of one of the most powerful tools a storyteller possesses: repetition. Walker's gritty personal stories, whether they encompassed violent confrontations or childhood memories of hidden spots of beauty in the mountains, ended with a variation on the refrain of “such was the life of a young Celtic Indian boy growing up in the mountains of Southern Appalachia” (Walker Kindle Loc. 714) no less than forty-nine times throughout his book. By doing so he wove his life experiences into a thematic narrative, paving the way for his readers to follow his life as easily as they would a work of fiction. Carter, as we'll soon see, was equally aware of the power of repetition, particularly its ability to convince people that the repeated statement, purely through the virtue of its repetition, should be accepted as truth. We are still in the process of learning how it manages to “hack” the human brain

with such effectiveness. Master storyteller Susan Strauss, in her 2015 National Association for Interpretation Conference workshop, explained the visual and musical elements of the art. The flow of the language, the rhythm of the words, the sound effects, the changes in vocal tone, and—most important of all—the use of repetition with slight variations, all function together to influence the audience’s brains. According to Strauss, repetition of a concept causes the neural pathways in the brain to go through the process of myelination, where that particular pathway’s linings are thickened with each enforcement of the concept. Ultimately, if the brain hears something often enough, it believes the information to be true and stores it as such. The thalamus, however, will act to block what it considers unnecessary information, so the repetition must be mixed with little surprises and variations in order to “wake the brain up” and trick it into re-engaging. Considering how important the successful passage of information is to cultures that depend on oral histories, the ability to make your words stick in the minds of others would be a vital one.

Carter understood the force behind the musical, rhythmic cadences of a well-told story. Repetition has value in itself, but it also contributes to the evocative “song” that stays in the reader’s mind after the book has been finished. Carter not only uses the structure and repetition of a song or poem, he weaves the music of nature into Little Tree’s experiences in the old Cherokee mountainside and scatters maudlin poems full of fictive Cherokee animal names throughout the chapters:

They now have sensed him coming / The forest
and the wood-wind / Father mountain makes
him welcome with his song. / They have no fear
of Little Tree / They know his heart is kindness
And they sing, ‘Little tree is not alone.’ / Even
silly little Lay-nah...Awi usdi the little deer /
And Min-e-lee the quail-hen / Even Kagu the
crow takes up the song ‘Brave is the heart of
Little Tree / And kindness is his strength / And
Little Tree will never be alone.’” Granma sang
and rocked slowly back and forth. And I could
hear the wind talking, and Lay-nah, the spring
branch, singing about me and telling all my
brothers. I knew I was Little Tree, and I was

happy that they loved me and wanted me. And
so I slept, and I did not cry. (Carter 5)

Carter's most distinctive use of repetition comes with the phrase "which is." Appearing at the end of homely presented life lessons, some variation of "Which is true/reasonable/likely/right/sensible" is written more than two dozen times, often as its own, childish ungrammatical sentence. Its simplicity and sing-song quality suits the innocent façade of the youthful narrator and his simple-hearted grandfather. Those qualities are brought into poignant relief when juxtaposed with scenes of bigotry, torment (as when Little Tree is brutally whipped by a sadistic Christian schoolmaster), and death. The reader is never given a moment to forget that his guide in this tale is an innocent victim, raised by wise, but also innocent, victims who are at the mercy of a cruel world of politicians. The word "politicians," by the way, appears in this children's book thirty times as examples of corruption, ignorance, and danger, particularly of the federal sort.

Just as a song or poem takes the reader through a journey of beauty and pain, another characteristic example of repetition and musicality in *Little Tree* was the most evocative: "She's coming alive!" Little Tree's grandpa cries this as he shares the first of many mountaintop sunrises with the little boy, and the phrase is repeated twenty-two times throughout the book. "She" is the mother earth, and the simple evocation brings the reader into the imagined Native American world of glorifying the resilience and power of nature. It is the most religious statement in a book laced with poisonous caricatures of petty and dishonest people who claim to be Christians, and in which Little Tree's family farcically attempts to parse out the rules and lessons of Christianity to no avail. It's a highly effective maneuver on Carter's part, as the exaltations in the face of nature's beauty carry a feel familiar to Bible readers, which allows them to associate their own Christian faith with these simple, unknowing children of God, as opposed to the false piety of the money-grubbers who claim Christianity while ripping off and abusing Little Tree (Carter 84–88, 183–198).

Two other important facets of heritage interpretation are the use of drama and humor. This isn't surprising; Tilden points out that "a dull performance has a dull audience; and while we must be chary of that word 'entertainment,' and be sure we restrict ours to the very highest kind, we cannot forget that people are with us mainly seeking enjoyment, not instruction" (Kindle Loc. 939–941).

Tilden also reminds us that the best writers understand how to condense ideas with the skill of “poets and advertising men” (Kindle Loc. 947). It would appear that Carter feels the same. His readers are plunged from humor to drama and back again in a constant roller-coaster throughout the book, from laughing while Ol’ Rippit the dog gets bumfoozled while a fox runs him in circles, to crying while Ol’ Ringer the dog is found near death after getting lost searching for Little Tree alone on the mountain. From sickening moments of abuse Little Tree received at the hands and belt of a sadistic reverend—“The shirt soaked up some of the blood. Most of the blood had run down my legs into my shoes, as I didn’t have any underwearing to catch it. This made my feet sticky” (Carter 192)—to his Grandpa’s saving humor on his own deathbed—“Grandpa raised up his head and hollered – weak, ‘Ye damn idjit; ye’re gittin’ Red Eagle snuff all over the bed sheets!’” (Carter 212). Countless book reviewers on sites such as Goodreads and Amazon cite *The Education of Little Tree’s* ability to make them laugh and cry in equal measure even today.

In addition to drama and humor, the country which this stalwart white supremacist hoped to enthrall had another fixation for Asa Carter to exploit. Carter wrote *Little Tree* during a time when the United States was going through a tumultuous cha-cha of multiculturalism, where, frequently, zealous attempts to embrace the country’s ethnic variety were intermingled with conservative backlash or cynical opportunism. In 1992, one year after the *New York Times* had published an exposé of *Little Tree*, indigenous scholar and professor of educational studies Michael Marker used the public education magazine *Phi Delta Kappan* to lambast its profession for allowing “a continued diet of feel-good New Age pseudocultural pap [that] will only produce a generation of ethnocentric ignoramuses ill-prepared to deal with the complexities of a bewildering modern world” (227). He makes several strong points regarding pre-packaged learning materials that cripple teachers’ abilities to see past their own comfort levels and recognize the book for a false and stereotyped depiction of twentieth-century Native Americans: “*The Education of Little Tree* shows Indian people in the way white middle-class society wants to see them. The teachers thought it was the genuine article because it worked for them within the context of their constrained environment” (227). The University of New Mexico, the second publisher for *Little Tree* that ushered in its success in paperback format, should have had the resources to vet the book and its

author, but failed to do so. In Ricci's documentary, the university claims to be just as much a victim of Carter as the readers, and I will admit to agreement with Marker over this specious claim. Although I also agree with his plea for teachers to critically critique and question their mandated classroom materials, his 1990s post-exposé era criticisms lack the context of *Little Tree's* 1976 introduction, where resources to do so were much less available.

By the time of Marker's article, multiculturalism had been a factor in education for almost two decades. In 1971, the year of Carter's abysmal failure in a campaign for Alabama governor, the wildly popular children's show *Sesame Street*, with its groundbreaking integrated cast, had been running for two years. It had also survived an attempted ban in Mississippi in response to its showing children of different races together. The *Keep America Beautiful* organization's emotional anti-littering commercial, featuring "Iron Eyes" Cody as a Native American in stereotypical regalia crying as a white woman throws trash at his feet, debuted the same year. "Iron Eyes" turned out to be a second-generation Italian-American actor whose claim to Cherokee heritage was debunked by journalist Angela Aleiss's 1996 *New Orleans Picayune* exposé, but in 1971 he was considered the real deal. Coca Cola, one of the most successful mass marketing global presences, released their "I'd Like to Teach the World to Sing (in Perfect Harmony)" commercial, a zeitgeist juggernaut of an extremely catchy tune and a crowd of international young people singing about world peace and "The real thing." For clarity, various ethnicities are shown wearing traditional costumes. Coca-Cola and *Sesame Street* emphasized inclusion of all races, opening pathways between majority and minority identities. For a generation searching for a sense of identity and connection beyond black and white lines, not to mention a new environmental awareness spawned by Rachel Carson's 1962 ecological distress signal *Silent Spring*, the allure of a Native American-flavored return to the earth ideology makes sense. After centuries of dispersal and oppression, though, the ability to fact-check information on Native Americans was limited. The average grade-school teacher, let alone the average reader, would not have had a Cherokee-English dictionary with which to learn that 'Mon-o-La' was not a real Cherokee word for the 'earth.'

What does this have to do with Carter and his alter-ego Little Tree? As previously mentioned, Carter was an intelligent and cunning man whose career choices displayed a desire for power and

influence over others. For someone of Carter's skill set and motivations, it would not be much of a jump in logic for him to realize that his previously successful attack methods were no longer viable in this earnest, ignorant country's attempt to reconfigure itself as a multicultural haven. He already had proven his ability to write rhetoric that invoked strong reactions; all he had to do was adapt it to his new audience. As a college-educated member of the Ku Klux Klan, he would have very likely been familiar with the success of the first movie blockbuster, 1915's *Birth of a Nation*, in the recruitment of new Klan members. Its portrayal of the recently freed slaves as barbaric black predators, aided and abetted by corrupt white northerners, was extremely effective in engaging the imaginations and outrage of an unprecedentedly large audience. By 1973, Carter already had a relationship with Hollywood, having sold those rights to his confederate sympathizer novel *The Outlaw Josey Wales* for an unprecedented \$35,000 and seen Clint Eastwood play his leading role. *The Education of Little Tree* allowed him to not only leave behind a messy past, but as a "real" Native American, he could claim a unique moral voice on a global stage.

Had he not passed away in 1979, there is no doubt that Carter would have continued using that voice; he'd been working on a sequel and a screenplay to *Little Tree* at the time. His Alabama burial had two acts: the first was for Forrest Carter, complete with photographers and journalists. The second was for Asa Carter. Only his wife and sons, all of whom had been claimed by Carter as nephews, were present at both. It wasn't until 1991 that his widow admitted the truth, and even today his strange story of transition from white supremacist to Cherokee sage sparks heated debates as to what was real, what could be trusted, and what lessons could those he duped take away from the experience. In the course of researching and presenting Carter's story, the question that has repeatedly come up is this: does it really matter whether his intentions were to atone, or not? After their own exposé, the *New York Times* Bestseller List merely switched *The Education of Little Tree* from non-fiction to fiction, where it remained at the top of the list. If the message is a positive one, shouldn't the story of *Little Tree* stand on its own, separate from its creator's past?

My hope in analyzing Carter's work actually has little to do with any of these questions. We may never know what exactly his intentions were, which is exactly why a story like *Little Tree* should never get a free pass. If readers decide that a positive message supersedes the veracity of its creation, their ability to tell when

they're being manipulated becomes atrophied. When a story hits every emotional button, fits every superficial note of familiarity and authenticity, it should be questioned just as strongly, if not more so, than one that sounds too messy and complicated. True stories and the lessons they may contain are, in fact, messy and complicated, and to attempt to simplify them into beautiful, childlike parables reminds me of a quote popularly ascribed to the chef Julia Child: "It's so beautifully arranged on the plate—you know someone's fingers have been all over it." Asa Carter beautifully arranged a series of lies interwoven with truths, and the world showed him, *and people like him*, just how much it enjoyed the dish. Parsing out a few of the key ways in which he sweetened the meal is a step to prevent others from using the same tactics unquestioned in the future, and to create a more welcoming space for authentic voices to share their own, messier, more complicated experiences and lessons. That should always be worth the sacrifice of a pretty story.

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