

Tears and Tomahawks: Liquidating Manliness in Captivity Narratives at Mid Century

The Indian captivity narrative has long been considered a staple of American literature. There are hundreds of them, starting in the seventeenth century. Indeed, there are hundreds specifically targeting a juvenile audience, and these do different cultural work in different time periods. Between 1945 and 1980, most of the 70 juvenile book-length accounts express a postwar anxiety about manliness. For unlike books published before and since, which usually feature captive girls, most mid-twentieth-century narratives follow a young white boy who has been captured and adopted; we watch him learn from his Indigenous mentors and mature, until finally, for reasons more contrived than plausible, he escapes and returns to the white settler community. Most of the white boys who are captured learn to balance control and aggression. They are exhorted, for instance, not to show emotion and especially not to cry. They are to shed blood, not tears.

But despite the exhortations, they still cry. My paper draws on more than a decade of research into hundreds of juvenile captivity narratives and will explore the functions of tears in novels by such authors as Conrad Richter, Elizabeth George Speare, and Eloise Jarvis McGraw, and in fictions based on such historical captives as Samuel Williams, Pierre Radisson, and the putative white captive Blue Jacket. . . . How is the injunction to avoid tears situated in the histories of sentimentality and of masculinities? How are Indigenous people stereotyped as stoic, as avoiding tears at all costs? Does the gender of the author make a difference? Does his or her attitude toward evangelism? What emotions do tears signal? What do textual contradictions hint at? What does it mean to shed “manly tears” or “tears of rage”? Can tears be a marker of manliness achieved? Or a disinfecting distraction from the implications of bodily contact? Can they subtly undermine midcentury gendering, rupturing the “antiefeminine ethic”? Can they point to the loss of an entire people, maybe even critique mainstream racism?