



oklahomareads

Jingle Dancer by Cynthia Leitich Smith

When does a book feel as familiar as a favorite pair of moccasins or a well-worn Indian blanket? When its characters seem like family.

Such is the case with *Jingle Dancer*, a children's picture book written by Cynthia Leitich Smith. The characters seem drawn from the best that your family tree has to offer. At first read, the book's theme seems straightforward: dancing takes a family. But Leitich Smith had a deeper purpose for writing about Jenna, a fictional young Oklahoman of Muscogee and Ojibway heritage. "I wanted to show the importance of traditions passed down along female lines," says the author, a mixed-blood

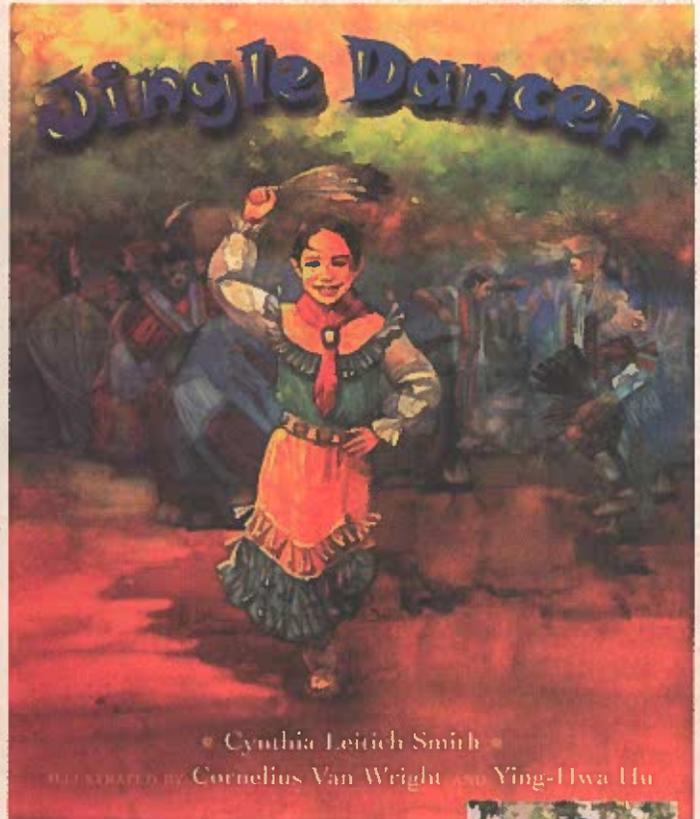
member of the Creek Nation.

Jingle dances typically celebrate the blessings of healing and prayer. Although historians believe that Ojibway women were the first jingle dancers, girls and women of many Native Nations now participate in these events. The jingles are shiny, metal triangular-shaped bells made by hand. Young girls like Jenna usually sew four rows of jingles on their dresses.

Jenna lives in an intertribal community, a middle-class neighborhood that stands out because of the rapport among its residents. Here, Jenna moves back and forth from the homes of friends and relatives with the assurance of a dancer.

Though initially jingle-less, Jenna practices her dance. Indoors, the living

room rug is her arena. Outdoors, the fall leaves crunch applause under her feet. Each bounce step brings her



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- "My absolute favorite achievement," recalls author Leitich Smith, "took place at age seven when I won a reading contest sponsored by the Mid-Continent Public Library of Grandview, Missouri. I was so shy then...moving into a new neighborhood. I also was an only child. I learned that books would always be there for me."
- The Oklahoma County Metropolitan Library System sponsors an annual summer reading program. Until then, consider signing your child up for a free reading incentive program (BookAdventure.org) supported by Sylvan Learning.
- Kids choose from a list of over 6,000 titles, read the books offline, then log back onto the website to take multiple choice quizzes. Quizzes are scored and accumulated points result in prizes.

closer to her goal. Along the way Jenna is welcomed at four different homes where she asks, "May I borrow enough jingles from your dress to make a row?" Each time the reply is, "Yes. Will you dance for me?"

Leitch Smith, however, has no such dancing aspirations. "I'm actually doing well to walk without tripping over my feet, so I fall into the category of powwow onlooker." But the Texas-based author manages an enviable balancing act. Along with writing *Jingle Dancer*, a 2001 Oklahoma Book Award finalist, she has penned other books, short stories, and articles. She is a permanent faculty member of the MFA program in the Writing for Children and Young Adults at Vermont College. She also speaks at schools and conventions. Her website (CynthiaLeitchSmith.com) is a real "page-clicker" and has been recognized as a Great Web Site for Kids by the Association for Library Services to children.

There is a driving force behind all of this author's activities. Leitch Smith holds fast to the belief that, "Native Americans are a people with a past, a present, and a future." Her work is living proof of that point. ♦

Lori Williams is a freelance writer who specializes in writing about international adoption and the special needs child. Lori resides in Bethany with her husband Dean and daughter Aurelia.



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