

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Birchbark House

by
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Book Information

Louise Erdrich, The Birchbark House
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Book Level: 6.1
Interest Level: MG

Omakayas, a seven-year-old Native American girl of the Ojibwa tribe, lives through the joys of summer and the perils of winter on an island in Lake Superior in 1847.

Award: ABC (Assoc. of Booksellers for Children) Choice; ALA Notable/Best Books; Booklist Editors' Choice; Horn Book Fanfare; Jane Addams Book Award/Honor Books; Jefferson Cup Award/Honor; National Book Award/ Honors; Native American Youth Services Literature Awards; NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts; Parent's Choice Award/Honor Book; Parent's Guide Book Award/ Honor Book; Publishers Weekly Best Book; State Award; Young Reader's Choice Award/Nominee

Topics: Common Core State Stds Appendix B Titles, CCSS Grade Band 4-5; Natural Environments, Islands; People, Native American; Power Lessons AR, Grade 7; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 3-5; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8; Recommended Reading, Children's Literature Choice; Recommended Reading, Coop. Children's Book Center; Recommended Reading, IRA/CBC Choice; Recommended Reading, NCSS/CBC Notable Social Studies; Recommended Reading, NY Publ. Library Best Books for the Teen Age; Recommended Reading, NY Public Library 100 Best Titles; Seasons/Weather, Summer; Seasons/Weather, Winter

Main Characters

Albert LaPautre a friend and partner of Deydey
Andeg Omakayas's pet crow
Angeline Omakayas's pretty older sister
Deydey Omakayas's father, Mikwam
Fishtail a friend and partner of Deydey
Little Pinch Omakayas's lively younger brother who tries her patience
Neewo Omakayas's adored baby brother
Nokomis Omakayas's grandmother
Old Tallow a reclusive older woman who lives in town
Omakayas a seven-year-old Ojibwa girl
Ten Snow Angeline's favorite friend
Two Strike Girl Omakayas's cousin
Yellow Kettle Omakayas's mother

Vocabulary

cache a place for hiding supplies or valuables; a hidden supply of goods or valuables
clan a group of families who are related; a tribe or group of people who share a common background; an extended family
fragrant having a pleasing smell; sweet-smelling
harsh strict or severe; extremely unpleasant; not pleasing to the senses; mean, nasty, or cruel; brutal or tough; bitter; rough
pitiful sad; sorrowful; worthy of sympathy; miserable; pathetic

Synopsis

Although white settlers are beginning to enter the area where Omakayas and her family live, daily life is much as it has always been for their people. At the end of each winter, Grandma finds a birchbark tree from which to make the family's home. One day Omakayas encounters bear cubs and then their mother. She promises the mother bear that she will never harm the cubs, and the bear seems to decide she is not a threat and leaves. Omakayas returns home and works hard at scraping a moose hide while she tries to understand what has happened to her.

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The summer passes quickly as Omakayas tends the corn patch and takes care of her adored brother Neewo. One day when Omakayas and Angeline try to keep crows from the cornfield, Omakayas brings a baby crow home in her carrying sack. The bird becomes a family pet.

In the fall, the family goes to the rice camp to harvest wild rice and then begins to prepare food for the winter. Soon snow begins to fall, and it is time to leave the birchbark house and return to their cabin at the edge of the village.

In the early winter, families gather at the dance lodge for ceremonial dances. An ill visitor to the lodge brings smallpox to the people, and during the harsh winter, Omakayas's family all become ill. Only Omakayas does not suffer from the disease, which takes both her baby brother and her sister's good friend. Omakayas is grief stricken.

In the spring, the family moves to their sugaring place in the sugar bush and collects sap to make maple syrup. Pinch's feet are badly burned in an accident, but Omakayas is able to heal them. Later, Old Tallow explains that she rescued Omakayas from an island where all her people had died, and she gave her to Mama and Deydey to raise. As summer comes again and the family returns to a birchbark house, Omakayas begins to think about her future and the gift of healing.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Literary Analysis

One repeated theme in the story was the white settlers moving onto Ojibwa lands. Though Omakayas didn't come into contact with white settlers, how did they indirectly impact her life?

Some ways in which the white settlers impacted Omakayas were by forcing her people to move west, by spreading diseases such as smallpox, by opening schools and teaching Ojibwa children to read and write, and by introducing different items through trade, such as Mama's scissors.

Literary Analysis

The genre of THE BIRCHBARK HOUSE is historical fiction. What is the difference between history and historical fiction? What parts of the story may be considered history and what parts are fiction? Find examples in the book.

While history includes specific dates and facts that can be documented, historical fiction attempts to add a personal story to these times and places. Examples of history might include parts of the maps provided inside the book covers and general information about the native people. Historical fiction would include Omakayas's thoughts and details of her daily experiences.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Dialog

Understanding Characterization

Recognizing Feelings

Recognizing Cause and Effect