The Birchbark House Study Guide

The Birchbark House by Louise Erdrich

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

This young adult novel is the story of a year in the life of a young Ojibwa girl who, over the cycle of four full seasons, comes to a deeper understanding of life, herself, and the relationship between the two. As it chronicles the year's events, the narrative thematically explores the connection between human beings and nature, the effect of whites on indigenous culture, and the necessity of confronting fear.

A brief prologue describes how a group of canoeing fur traders abandons the sole survivor of a smallpox outbreak, a baby girl, because they're afraid of being infected with the disease that killed everybody else in her Ojibwa community. As he goes, however, one of the traders imagines that if anyone would come back to rescue the girl, it would be his strong-willed, fearless wife Tallow.

Several springs later, seven-year-old Omakayas and her family prepare to move into their summer home, a hand-built birchbark house. After the bark is harvested and the house constructed, Omakayas is sent on an errand to the home of eccentric elder Old Tallow, with whom Omakayas feels an unusual connection. On her way home, Omakayas has an encounter with a family of bears, but after an initial surge of fear and impulsively speaking as respectfully to the mother bear as she would to her grandmother, suddenly feels she's safe. The bears leave, and Omakayas returns home. As the summer progresses, she ponders the meaning of the encounter even as she rejoices at the return of her father from his hunting trip, and has friendly encounters with both a deer and a crow, the latter becoming a family pet.

As summer fades into fall, the family prepares to move from the birchbark house into their cabin in town, harvesting wild rice and other forms of food to get them through the winter. Meanwhile, Omakayas talks with her grandmother about her experience with the bears and discusses her grandmother's use of herbs as medicines. Her grandmother tells her to trust her instincts about both plants and animals. Meanwhile, Omakayas' father and his friends discuss the increasing presence and influence of the white man and consider the possibility of moving west.

Once winter arrives, Omakayas and her family join with the rest of the community to celebrate their coming together once again. Their party is interrupted by the arrival of an exhausted, ill white trader, who is taken into the home of another family. The community is shocked when the man dies in the night, and it is discovered that he had smallpox. Desperate efforts are made to prevent the disease from spreading, but it's too late - several people, including most of Omakayas' family, get sick, and die. Thanks to the intensive efforts of both Omakayas and her grandmother, almost everyone in the family survives, except for Omakayas' beloved baby brother. After his death, Omakayas sinks into depression, reviving only after the intervention of Old Tallow.

The following spring, Omakayas and her family travel into the bush for maple sugaring season. While there, Omakayas has another friendly encounter with the bears, and after healing her other brother, burned by scalding maple syrup, learns that like her

grandmother, she has abilities as a healer. Later in the spring, Omakayas is again visited by Old Tallow, who reveals what the reader has suspected all along - that Omakayas is the abandoned girl from the prologue, and that that's the reason she didn't get sick in the smallpox outbreak - . Having survived when her first family was killed, Tallow says, Omakayas was immune the second time it came into her life and was able to give her second family life - to return the favor they did by taking her in and giving her life after she'd been abandoned. After Old Tallow has gone, Omakayas goes into the woods, quietly celebrating her new awareness of her identity and becoming aware that the spirits of her animal friends and her baby brother are with her always.

Part 1, The Girl from Spirit Island

Part 1, The Girl from Spirit Island Summary

This young adult novel is the story of a year in the life of a young Ojibwa girl who, over the cycle of four full seasons, comes to a deeper understanding of life, herself, and the relationship between the two. As it chronicles the year's events, the narrative thematically explores the connection between human beings and nature, the effect of whites on indigenous culture, and the necessity of confronting fear.

A group of voyageurs (canoeing fur traders) discovers that the only person left alive in a native village, following an attack of smallpox, is a crying baby girl, well dressed, well fed, and evidently cared for. The voyageurs, worried that they too have contracted the disease, watch as the baby curls up against one of the dead bodies. Birds sing as the men turn away, get into the canoes, and paddle off to their next stop. One of them, Hat, thinks of his wife Tallow who, he thinks, is afraid of nothing ... unlike him.

Part 1, The Girl from Spirit Island Analysis

The prologue introduces several key elements that will play important roles later in the narrative - in other words, that foreshadow moments later in the book where the metaphoric and thematic significance of those elements become clear. First, there is the portrayal of smallpox as having the power to decimate communities, smallpox being (throughout the narrative) a metaphor for the destructive influence of whites on native life. Then there is the survival of the little girl which, like the presence of smallpox, foreshadows key components of the journey of transformation undertaken by the book's central character, Omakayas (who, as the final chapter of the book reveals, is in fact the infant referred to here). There is also the reference to the singing birds, which foreshadows the later reference (also in the book's final chapter) to how the birds connect powerfully with Omakayas' experiences of emerging identity and spirit. Then there is the reference to the character of Tallow, who plays a significant role in the narrative throughout the book, and to a fundamental component of her personality. Her reputed fearlessness, juxtaposed with the reaction of the voyageurs to the apparent presence of smallpox, can be seen as introducing one of the book's primary thematic considerations - specifically, its contemplations of the nature of fear and of people's reactions to it.

Part 2, Neebin (Summer), Chapters 1 and 2

Part 2, Neebin (Summer), Chapters 1 and 2 Summary

"The Birchbark House" As eight-year-old Omakayas (a name that translates as "Little Frog", given to her because she always seems to be jumping about) explores a quiet swamp, she is called by her grandmother (Nokomis), who wants her help peeling the birchbark that will be used in constructing a summer house for their family. Happy to help, Omakayas runs to join her. She listens as Nokomis prays for forgiveness from the spirit of the tree, and watches as she finds exactly the right spot to start, makes a couple of initial cuts, and peels the bark in long sheets. As Omakayas and Nokomis sew the sheets of birchbark together into a house, narration describes the rest of Omakayas' family - loving Mama, beautiful older sister Angeline, selfish younger brother Pinch, and happy baby Neewo. The father of the children, Deydey, is a trapper, usually away catching animals for fur.

Some time later, Omakayas is awakened by the noise of an approaching thunderstorm and struggles to not be frightened of the spirits she believes such storms bring. The next morning, after the storm has passed, the air is fresh and clean. Omakayas realizes her mother will probably want her help doing the stinky, messy job of preserving a moose hide. She makes an effort to sneak away, but her attempt to crawl under the walls of the house fails, and she gets stuck. Both Mama and Angeline laugh at her, and Omakayas feels "all of last night's thunder in her heart". After breakfast, however, Mama realizes that she needs her scissors, and Omakayas is sent by her mother to fetch the scissors from Old Tallow, happy to get out of working on the moose hide after all.

"Old Tallow" Sharp-tongued, solitary Old Tallow seems to respect Omakayas and her family. Omakayas makes her way carefully past Old Tallow's angry guard dogs (including a particularly vicious yellow dog) and finds Tallow, whom she respectfully calls Auntie, sitting on her steps with the scissors, almost as though she knew Omakayas was coming. After a brief, almost friendly, conversation, Old Tallow gives Omakayas both the scissors and a piece of maple sugar candy, and Omakayas leaves. On her way home, Omakayas decides to keep the candy for herself - that way, arguments over which of the children got most of the candy could be avoided. She also reflects on her complicated feelings for Angeline - how angry she is that Angeline laughed at her, how much she longs for her respect and love, and how much she (Omakayas) enjoys it when they play together. She is suddenly interrupted by the unexpected arrival of a pair of bear cubs, who are at first as frightened of her as she is of them. When she offers them some berries, however, they become friendly, and Omakayas imagines herself taking her two new pets home. But then the mother bear shows up and pins Omakayas to the ground. Omakayas realizes her only hope of surviving is to remain absolutely still, which she does, speaking to the bear as if she was a grandmother, apologizing and

explaining that she means no harm. The bear sniffs her all over, seems to realize that she poses no threat, and leads the cubs away.

Part 2, Neebin (Summer), Chapters 1 and 2 Analysis

These two chapters mark the beginning of the journey of transformation experienced by the book's protagonist, Omakayas, portrayed here as innocent and playful, instinctive and emotional - in other words, a fairly typical child of her age. In this sense, she is an archetypal (universal) character, someone whose essential identity can be related to by just about any child, irrespective of race. That said, it's not just her character that has an universal aspect - several of her experiences also have significant archetypal elements, since a large number of cultures, ethnic communities and/or spiritual belief systems tell stories of adventurous, curious children facing challenging experiences and coming to greater understanding of themselves and of the world. While some of the specifics of Omakayas' experiences (her apparent connection with animals, her seemingly magical healing abilities) make her something of a fairy tale character, ultimately her story and experience of awakening to the joys and sorrows of life is a distillation of that of every child, Ojibwa or not.

Other important narrative elements in this section include the introduction of Omakayas' relationships with her various siblings - her love/hate relationship with Angeline, her mostly resentful relationship with Pinch, her increasing adoration of Neewo. As Omakayas herself evolves, her relationships with her siblings also evolve, each challenged by confrontation and suffering but ultimately transforming into one of respect and joy. Then there is her relationship with Tallow, important for several reasons. First, astute readers will realize almost immediately, although the narrative doesn't make it explicitly clear until the final chapter, that Omakayas is in fact the girl on the island from the prologue. The relationship with Tallow is also important because it manifests one of the narrative's key themes, the necessity for confronting fear. Finally, there is Omakayas' encounter with the bears, which foreshadows two other occasions in the narrative when the encounter is repeated (Chapters six and twelve), with all three encounters functioning to both deepen Omakayas' experience with nature and, in doing so, develop another of the book's central themes - the relationship between human beings and the natural world.

Part 2, Neebin (Summer), Chapters 3 and 4

Part 2, Neebin (Summer), Chapters 3 and 4 Summary

"The Return" When she arrives back at the birchbark house, Omakayas settles right down to work on the moose hide, suggesting that Angeline could go to the river instead. Both Angeline and Mama are surprised, since they know how much Omakayas hates the work, but Mama agrees and Angeline goes. Omakayas uses the working time to think about what happened with the bear, becoming more and more convinced that she and the bear somehow managed to communicate. She also experiences a spell of dizziness that has, in the past, suggested the arrival of a special insight. After the dizziness has passed, she believes that a bond has been created between her and the bears. At the end of the day, Mama and Nokomis compliment Omakayas on how much work she did and how well she did it. Mama has a growing belief that there's something special about her daughter and that it's time to send her on a spiritual quest. Nokomis, however, believes that Omakayas is still too young.

Omakayas feels close to Neewo, and he usually plays happily with her, and she is excited when she is given a chance to tend him on her own. Mama, however, believes she is too young to take care of him, a concern that seems to be justified when, while Neewo and Omakayas are alone together, Neewo starts crying, violently and hysterically. Omakayas tries everything she knows to calm him, but realizes he needs to be let out of his tightly bound cradle board and, even though she knows Mama would disapprove, lets him out. He is immediately happier, and they play together for some time, Omakayas even gives him what's left of the maple sugar she got from Old Tallow. Eventually, however, she puts him back in the cradle board and Mama returns, unaware that anything unusual has gone on.

One night, later in the summer, Omakayas is suddenly awakened by a surge of excitement, realizing that her father, Deydey, has come home. She notices his makasins (moccasins) next to those of her mother and happily goes back to sleep, realizing that good times are coming.

"Andeg" Life changes for the family when Deydey is home - everyone is more serious and works harder, and they're happy the physically powerful Deydey is there and also a little afraid of him and his exacting standards. Deydey is particularly pleased with how well the corn crop is doing, but particularly angry that the crows are eating so much of it. He gives Omakayas and Angeline the job of scaring them away. Omakayas uses a pair of sticks to make noise, while Angeline is given one of Deydey's old, tattered shirts. On their way to the fields, the girls encounter a deer on the path, a deer given the name One Horn because of his lack of a set of paired antlers. The deer steps out onto the path in front of them, looks at them kindly and gently, then suddenly disappears. Hurried along by their impatient father, the girls then go to the field where, for a while, they

successfully chase away the flocks of birds. At one point they trap and kill several, but Omakayas takes pity on a young and wounded crow and puts him inside her coat to take home. The caught birds are roasted for dinner, and as the family eats, Deydey describes the girls as "hunters", and they bask in his pride. Later, he tells a scary story about how he scared away a pair of ghosts hungry for humans, ripping his shirt (the one used by Angeline in the corn field) in the process. The story leads him to the distribution of the gifts he brought home for his family, his gift for Omakayas coming as both a disappointment and a surprise - having heard how well she did scraping the moose hide, he gives her a scraping tool made from the end of his rifle, destroyed during the fight with the ghosts. Omakayas wants to cry out that she doesn't like scraping hides, but realizes she has to accept her father's gift. Meanwhile, she become startled by what looks to be her father's moving makasin, but then realizes that she had put her crow nearby. Sure enough, the crow jumps out of the makasin, triggering laughter in the whole family.

Part 2, Neebin (Summer), Chapters 3 and 4 Analysis

Two of the book's three central themes are each explored in this section, as manifestations and/or components of Omakayas' coming of age, her journey of transformation. Her contemplations of the encounter with the bears, the discussions with her grandmother about herbs, and her pity for and friendship with the crow (who, as the next chapter reveals, is given the name "Andeg", the title of this chapter), all manifest the novel's thematic consideration of the relationship between human beings and nature. Another manifestation of this theme, the girls' encounter with One Horn, also foreshadows the deer's reappearance later in the narrative (Chapter 11) when another aspect of that relationship appears. Finally, there is the relationship between Omakayas and Neewo which, in the instinctive understanding that seems to exist between the two of them, also indicates a connection with nature, here manifested in Omakayas' instincts about her brother. Meanwhile, the novel's thematic examination of fear and the need to confront and/or manage it also manifests in several ways. The relationship of Deydey to his family is tinged with fear, but it is the sort earned and defined by respect, as opposed to any sort of malicious domination and control on Deydey's part. Then there is his story of the encounter with the ghosts seems, on some level, to be an instruction to his family on how fear must be confronted with courage and power. Note the contrast between the different methods of confronting fear enacted by Omakayas in her encounters with the bears and with One Horn and the confrontation enacted by Deydey. All these elements move Omakayas further along on her journey of transformation, her coming of age ... her evolution into the spiritually enlightened young woman/child she becomes at the novel's conclusion.

In addition to than the previously discussed appearance of One Horn, there is one other important piece of foreshadowing in this section. This is the reference to Omakayas' spiritual quest. This foreshadows the point later in the novel (Chapter 11) when Nokomis realizes that the time has become right for Omakayas to go on her quest, and sends her on it. Note that in both cases (here when the quest is mentioned and later when the

quest is actually made) the quest is inner and spiritual, rather than external and physical.

Finally, for consideration of the various chapter titles, see "Topics for Discussion - Briefly discuss ways in which the titles of the various chapters ..."

Part 3, Dagwaging (Fall), Chapters 5 and 6

Part 3, Dagwaging (Fall), Chapters 5 and 6 Summary

"Fishtail's Pipe" As fall approaches, the family prepares for winter - scraping hides, making clothing and makasins, storing food, and for Deydey, traveling yet again. Omakayas' bird, now given the name Andeg (which means crow in the Ojibwa language), becomes a family pet, but remains closest to Omakayas. One day, Omakayas and Angeline hide and listen as Deydey visits with two friends, the fat and jolly Albert La Pautre and the proud and handsome Fishtail, who owns (and cares for) a beautifully carved pipe. After the men smoke a couple of rounds of tobacco, and after teasing Albert about another of his strange dreams, the men discuss the presence of white men in the area, and how they seem to be taking over. They discuss the possibility of moving west to get away from them, commenting that the west is where the spirits of the dead go. After a while, and as Omakayas and Angeline watch from the bushes, the men fall thoughtfully silent.

"Pinch" Pinch is left alone to watch over an abundant harvest of berries that are to be dried and preserved for winter, but is unable to resist eating plenty of them himself. When Mama returns and angrily asks what happened, Pinch blames Andeg. Mama loses her temper and throws a stick at Andeg, who flies off. The remorseful Mama sends Omakayas after him and is about to follow, but stops for a moment when Pinch moans that his stomach hurts. Realizing his lie, Mama tells him that the only cure is "enduring the consequences of [his] greed." With that she sets off in search of Omakayas, becoming in turns frightened when she sees two young bears approach her daughter, surprised when Omakayas speaks to them as friends, and amazed when the bears' mother trundles by all three without paying any attention. Meanwhile, Andeg returns to camp, with narration commenting that he never completely trusted Mama again but was a great help to the family while they were in town preparing the cabin for winter - he chased away, narration comments, all the mice.

A short time later, the family travels to harvest wild rice, another source of food over the winter. As they travel by canoe, Pinch repeatedly tries to steal a feather from Andeg's tail, and they each tell him to stop, all becoming quite surprised when Andeg himself mimics their words and tells him to stop! At the rice harvest, Omakayas and her siblings are excited to see their cousins, particularly the tomboyish Two Strike Girl. She and Omakayas spend the day together, harvesting, weaving mats from the rice stalks, and "dancing the rice", stomping the grains to get the husks off the kernels. "Although the family did not return with as much rice as they needed," narration comments, "Omakayas and Two Strike Girl became such good friends that, ever after, they called each other sister."

Part 3, Dagwaging (Fall), Chapters 5 and 6 Analysis

The first point to note about this section is its opening statement of the third of the book's major themes, that being the influence of whites on the Ojibwa people in particular and, by implication, on indigenous American natives in general. This statement comes in the conversation between Deydey and his friends, which refers to that influence and its dangers in clear, direct terms, said influence being generally portrayed as both imminent and destructive. The conversation foreshadows the actual appearance of a white man and a manifestation of white capacity for destruction later in the narrative - specifically, in C

chapter eleven when the white voyageur appears at the winter dance and brings smallpox into the community. At this point, it's important to note that this particular theme was indirectly explored in the prologue, the smallpox that killed the Ojibwa community having been introduced into that community by whites (smallpox being a disease that originated with, and brought to native communities by, whites). It's also important to note that the conversation between Deydey and his friends also relates to the novel's thematic consideration of fear, in that the three men are fearful of the growing influence of whites. The theme of fear is also explored in Mama's witnessing of Omakayas' encounter with the bears, which ties two of the book's themes together in an interesting way. Specifically, Omakayas' comfortable relationship with the bears that Mama fears suggests, on some level, that fear can be successfully conquered if one is connected with, and respectful of, nature, in the way Omakayas is.

Meanwhile, both the story of Pinch and the berries and the story of Pinch and Andeg on the canoe trip function on a couple of notable levels. First, both deepen the tension between Pinch and Omakayas, one of the novel's key sources of conflict. At the same time, however, both also serve as ironic foreshadowing of an incident later in the novel when Pinch is actually able to communicate better with Andeg than Omakayas, said communication eventually turning into an opportunity for brother and sister to become closer (chapter twelve). The incident of the berries, in turn, leads Omakayas into another encounter with the bears, an encounter that manifests the novel's thematic consideration of the relationship between humans and nature and, at the same time, moves Omakayas further along on her journey of transformation - specifically, her awakening to her personal understanding of, and insight into, that relationship. The incident of the canoe trip, on the other hand, foreshadows the incident later in the novel (Chapter 14) when Andeg uses the same words in confrontation with Albert La Pautre which, at that point, leads Omakayas to hope that Andeg may not have gone back to the wild as thoroughly as she fears he has.

Part 3, Dagwaging (Fall), Chapters 7 and 8

Part 3, Dagwaging (Fall), Chapters 7 and 8 Summary

"The Move" After Deydey departs on another trapping expedition, the rest of the family prepares even more intensely for the move into town for winter. As the food stores come together, Mama buries them carefully in a cache (covered pit) behind the house in town. When the cache is fully stocked, Nokomis prays for the blessing of the spirits on both the cache and the family as they face winter. After a final night in the birchbark house, the family makes the move into town. As Nokomis packs a collection of small bundles and bags, she notices that Omakayas is watching her closely. As the two walk into town together, Nokomis asks whether the bundles "speak" to Omakayas. She says they don't, but then asks whether they speak to Nokomis, who says that they do, the herbs and medicines they contain telling her how they should best be used. Nokomis then asks Omakayas about whether the bears speak to her (Nokomis has been told by Mama about Omakayas' encounter with the bears). When Omakayas says that they do talk to her, Nokomis urges her, earnestly and with great feeling, to listen. That night, the first in the cabin, Omakayas watches the fire for a while, and then goes to sleep, waking in the middle of the night to wrap herself in her blanket. The cold is suddenly, particularly harsh.

"First Snow" The next morning, the family wakes to discover that fresh, clean, white snow has fallen. Omakayas and Angeline walk into town, eager to see old friends. Angeline is also curious about what goes on at the church and school for the white children, but she has been warned by Nokomis not to spend too much time with them. As they arrive at the school, the girls are surprised to see Fishtail coming out, and carrying a book. They urge each other on to ask what he was doing, and he tells them he wants to learn to read the white man's writing so that he can read their treaties and make sure no one is getting cheated. Later, as more snow falls, Fishtail's wife Ten Snow makes Angeline a new dress, narration commenting that young men are starting to become more interested in Angeline and that the older women of the town are taking particular care with the men she actually spends time with. Meanwhile, Old Tallow returns from a hunting trip with a pair of fat beavers, their fur to be used for trade and their meat to be used for food. As Mama prepares the beavers for cooking, Omakayos tends the fire. She realizes that Tallow is looking at her the way she looks at her dogs, but also realizes what's behind that look and isn't bothered. When the meat from the beavers is finally prepared, Tallow eats two full bowls. Just as Pinch is about to ask for a second, Deydey arrives, just in time for his favorite meal. That night, Nokomis sleeps up in the attic with the children (rather than downstairs with Deydey and Mama), and Omakayas listens as Nokomis talks in her sleep, "sometimes arguing and sometimes pleasant as she dreamed old times and went visiting to places that only she remembered".

Part 3, Dagwaging (Fall), Chapters 7 and 8 Analysis

Two of the narrative's main themes are developed in this section. First, the discussion between Omakayas and Nokomis can be seen as a further exploration of the book's thematic consideration of the relationship between humans and nature. The discussion also foreshadows incidents later in the narrative, when Omakayas comes to realize that herbs and animals do "speak" to her (chapter twelve). Finally, the discussion marks another step along Omakayas' journey of transformation, in that she realizes that what she has been experiencing is, on some level, an important part of both her heritage (i.e. her past) and her identity (i.e., her present).

The book's examination of the relationship between whites and natives is also explored in this section - specifically, in the introduction of the white school and its appeal to natives. Here again, narrative circumstances (the warning to Angeline, Fishtail's desire to not be cheated) seem to suggest the thematic perspective that whites are not to be trusted, that the influence and presence of whites in general are to be regarded, on some level, as a moral, legal and economic equivalent to smallpox.

"First Snow" contains some important elements of foreshadowing. These include the appearance of both Ten Snow and Angeline's dress, with both having significant impact on the development of Angeline's character, and indirectly of Omakayas' character. That impact begins in the following chapter. Another important piece of foreshadowing is the reference to Omakayas' awareness of being watched by Old Tallow, a foreshadowing of the narrative's later revelation (chapter fourteen) of their previous relationship. Also in terms of foreshadowing, there is the reference at the end of "The Move" to the cold feeling particularly sharp, a metaphoric foreshadowing of the profoundly troubling winter experiences about to challenge Omakayas and her family.

Part 4, Biboon (Winter), Chapters 9 and 10

Part 4, Biboon (Winter), Chapters 9 and 10 Summary

"The Blue Ferns" As the family settles into the cabin for the winter, their routine is sometimes broken up by visits from Deydey's friends,who continue to speak about moving west to escape the increasing white presence, and from Old Tallow,who wears an eccentric, colorful, very warm coat. There are also visits from Ten Snow,who spends hours at a time doing beadwork with Angeline. One particular project of Ten Snow's garners a lot of admiration - a specially beaded bandolier bag for her husband, Fishtail, decorated in an intricate pattern of spring ferns beaded in blue. "The beads were so perfect and the repeated pattern so compelling that the ferns seemed to move like little waves." Omakayas desperately wants to join the two older girls, but Angeline teases her about being unable to sit still. Ten Snow sees how hurt Omakayas is by her sister's remarks, and offers her a small beadwork kit as a present. Omakayas thanks her, and after some consideration, decides to use her kit to make a pair of winter makasins for Neewo. She quickly becomes frustrated that her beadwork isn't perfect, but surprising encouragement from Angeline helps her be patient.

One day, when Pinch is out with the men, Nokomis tells Omakayas and the other women a story of her mysterious encounter with the spirit of her long dead grandmother, an encounter that ends with the spirit being reunited with her beloved husband (Nokomis' grandfather) and the two of them disappearing forever. After the story is finished, Omakayas is frightened, but the other women are very moved, although Mama soon gets them laughing and joking again.

"The Visitor" The crowded, playful joy of the community dance,at which Angeline is wearing the pretty new dress made for her by Ten Snow, is interrupted by the arrival of an exhausted white voyageur on his way home from a long trapping expedition. After being allowed to sit by the fire at the dance, he is later taken into the home of another family. The community is stunned when the man dies in the night, their shock turning to fear when they realize the man had smallpox. Immediate precautions are taken (anything the man touched is burned, the members of the family with whom he stayed purify themselves), but it's too late. Smallpox spreads through the town and into the home of Omakayas and her family, with only Omakayas and Nokomis remaining healthy. At first only Nokomis nurses them, but when her beloved Neewo gets sick, Omakayas joins her in the work of keeping her family alive.

Days and nights blend into one another as Nokomis and Omakayas nurse the feverish, suffering members of their family. Angeline is the first to begin recovery, then Pinch, then Mama, then Deydey. Neewo, however, gets worse and worse, eventually dying in Omakayas' arms. Shortly afterward, Old Tallow brings word that the gentle Ten Snow

has also died, an additional blow to Angeline, who is shocked to discover that her beauty has been scarred by the disease.

After Ten Snow and Neewo have been buried, and Fishtail loving his wife so much that he tries to kill himself, Omakayas falls into a deep depression. It's only after a visit by Old Tallow, who brings nourishing soup and who caresses her with surprising tenderness at the same time as speaking to her firmly about getting up, that Omakayas manages to rise from her bed. "For the first time since the illness," narration comments, "she felt the sun on her face, but even its promise of warmth did not make her smile."

Part 4, Biboon (Winter), Chapters 9 and 10 Analysis

The narrative's thematic consideration of the dangers of white influence/presence reaches a climax of sorts in this section with the arrival of smallpox in the home of Omakayas in her family, smallpox being, as previously discussed, a metaphor for the destructive power of that influence. The connection between whites and destruction of native life is made clear by the fact that the disease is introduced into the community by the white traveler at the dance. Meanwhile, the immediacy of the confrontation with smallpox also serves as the medium for consideration of another of the book's key themes, the need for/value of confronting fear. Specifically, both Omakayas and Nokomis experience fear at the thought and/or experience of confronting smallpox, and both transcend that fear in order to help their family. In addition, it could be argued that the depression experienced by Omakayas is itself a kind of fear - that her life will never be the same now that Neewo has left it (at least physically). Finally, the confrontation with the disease marks an important step in Omakayas' journey of transformation, in that she discovers inner strength she didn't know she had, a potential for compassion she didn't know she had, and a capacity for grief that feeds and defines the latter, undermines the former, and ultimately teaches her more about herself than either.

The mystery of the relationship between Old Tallow and Omakayas deepens in this section - or, at least, Omakayas' experience of that mystery, since it probably seems perfectly clear to the reader that Omakayas is the baby girl abandoned in the prologue.

At this point, it seems appropriate to look at the various stories told by Nokomis and Deydey, the stories within the story. To contemporary sensibilities, they might appear to be complete fabrications, myths or legends or simply ghost stories - or, in the case of Deydey's story (Chapter 4), a colorful explanation of what might have been a simple, straightforward accident (the ripping of his shirt). On another level, however, the stories might be seen as manifestations of the novel's thematic consideration of the relationship between humans and nature, the dead being (in the novel's perspective) as much an active, accessible part of nature as the living. They are certainly seen as such by the characters, the realization of their presence (and specifically the presence of Neewo) being an important component not only of Nokomis' identity but, perhaps more importantly, of Omakayas' eventual transformation into someone uniquely connected with nature, someone awakened to the presence and/or importance of nature, including the dead, in her life.

Part 4, Biboon (Winter), Chapter 11

Part 4, Biboon (Winter), Chapter 11 Summary

"Hunger" In an effort to either find the family more food or ease the debt he owes for the food he's already purchased on credit, Deydey plays the local shop-owner at chess, eventually winning the game, some extra food, and some freedom from debt. The food doesn't last long, however, and soon the family is again struggling for sustenance. Meanwhile, Nokomis at last encourages Omakayas to go on her spiritual quest for a dream or vision, painting her face with charcoal and encouraging her to fast. After a pair of unsuccessful tries, Omakayas finally succeeds, dreaming of the bear spirit woman who says she will be with Omakayas always. When Nokomis hears of the dream, she is pleased and urges Omakayas to always honor the presence of the bear spirit woman. She also tells Omakayas and the others another of her stories, this one of how the world was created with the help of a small, apparently weak and vulnerable Muskrat. Omakayas realizes the story has special meaning for her - she too seems small and vulnerable, but like Muskrat has a part to play.

One day, Andeg discovers a squirrel's cache of nuts. After the family feasts on his find and, determined to exhibit strength like Muskrat, Omakayas goes out into the winter to see if see can find some nuts herself. Still weak from her struggles with grief after Neewo's death, however, she finds it difficult to keep going, especially when she passes Old Tallow's cabin and encounters the nasty yellow dog, who knocks her to the ground and bites her, causing her to fall unconscious. When she revives, she sees Old Tallow scolding the dog, saying that she's given it a number of chances and reminding it that he was never to attack Omakayas. He has, she says, run out of chances, and with that, as Omakayas cries out for her to stop, she kills the dog.

A short time later, Nokomis herself has a dream, in which she envisions the deer One Horn offering itself as food for the family. She gives Deydey detailed instructions, and he ritually prepares to go hunting, successfully bringing down One Horn after praying in gratitude for the deer's sacrifice. He hides half the deer's body and takes the other half home, sharing it among the other members of the community. Later, Omakayas remembers seeing One Horn on the way to the corn field (Chapter 4) and wonders if, in his gentle behavior then, he somehow knew he was going to save her family. In her mind, she resolves to honor his memory and sacrifice ... but then she is shaken out of her thoughts by Pinch, who accidentally sets the seat of his pants on fire. He screams and yells, but then quickly sits down in the water bucket and puts the fire out. This starts the family laughing, and narration comments that from then on, Pinch was changed. "The great deer had saved their bodies," narration comments, "and Pinch's absurd jump had saved their souls."

Part 4, Biboon (Winter), Chapter 11 Analysis

Nokomis' encouragement of Omakayas' vision quest (a common ritual, albeit one known by different names, among aboriginal peoples all over the world) is seen as a fulfillment of the foreshadowing in chapter three. There is the sense that by this point in the novel, Nokomis has recognized that while Omakayas may be young, the family's need for guidance and strength is too great for her (Omakayas) to not seek whatever help she can. In terms of the vision itself, the image of the bear spirit woman can be seen as a manifestation and/or an echo of the spirit of the mother bear, and perhaps of the bears in general, that she has encountered throughout the narrative. Ultimately, however, the prime significance of the vision here is to amplify and/or illuminate the narrative's overall thematic contention that the connection between humanity and nature, or at least the potential for such a connection, is profoundly important. That theme is further amplified by the narrative of the hunting of One Horn, and in particular by the suggestion that the connection between deer and human was mutually, deeply, respectful and compassionate.

Again in this chapter, the narrative deepens the "mystery" associated with the relationship between Tallow and Omakayas. But while Tallow's comment that she "told" the yellow dog to never harm increases Omakayas' curiosity about just what their relationship involves and why it is what it is, what's even more intriguing about their contact here is the portrayal of the two sides of Tallow - her evident compassion and affection for Omakayas contrasted with her ruthlessness towards the dog. It might not be going too far to suggest that on some level, Tallow is in fact a metaphoric representation of nature which, as portrayed by the narrative at least, is both compassionate (providing food, shelter, health and sustenance) and ruthless (i.e., the cold and snow of winter).

Part 5, Zeegwun (Spring), Chapters 12 and 13

Part 5, Zeegwun (Spring), Chapters 12 and 13 Summary

"Maple Sugar Time" As ice breaks up on the lake, enabling the family to catch more fish, the famine of winter ends. As the family looks forward to maple sugar time, Angeline teaches the rest of the family the ways of reading and writing the white man's language she has learned in the missionary school. Eventually, the family travels to their traditional sugaring place in the bush, where they tap the sap running in the maple trees and boil it down to make syrup. During all the activity, Omakayas feels she is the only one thinking of Neewo and, at one point, disappears into the bush to cry privately. On her own, however, she finds she is unable to weep, feeling instead the presence of Neewo's spirit and being visited by the two young bears. She talks with them, warning them of the power and danger of the white man and also of Old Tallow, and then asks for their guidance and wisdom. After the bears disappear, she feels better, gathers some firewood, and heads back to camp, the whole while becoming disturbed by strange voices she hears but can't quite understand. Back at camp, she tells Nokomis what happened and is happy to learn that not only does her grandmother believe her, but that she too has heard the voices of the plants and animals (see Chapter 7). Nokomis suggests that Omakayas has been chosen by nature to be a healer, and that she (Nokomis) is going to teach her everything she knows.

As the abundant maple syrup harvest continues, community celebrations take place, with various family members attending at different times. One day, while most of the family is at one such celebration, Pinch wanders through the woods in search of an animal to shoot. He comes upon the carcass of a freshly dead deer, sticks his arrows into it, and plans to claim it as his own kill. Back at the camp, however, after he starts telling the family his story but before he can reveal the details, he has hot maple syrup accidentally spilled on his foot. As he screams and yells in pain, Deydey runs to fetch Nokomis, who is at one of the celebrations. Omakayas, however, is still at the camp. She fetches the bag of medicines that Nokomis carries for emergencies, finds and prepares the correct herb, and puts it on Pinch's burn. He feels the healing begin immediately. Later, when Nokomis returns, she compliments Omakayas on her good work. When Deydey asks Pinch for more information about the kill, he (Pinch) says it was a mistake, "amazed at himself for not lying". He then thanks Omakayas for her help. For her part, Omakayas realizes "it felt good to her to heal another human, even if that human was Pinch."

"One Horn's Protection" The good sugaring year enables Deydey to pay off the winter's debt at the store and to buy each member of his family something special. Andeg, meanwhile, seems to be becoming more and more attached to Omakayas, several

times bringing twigs and pieces of bark almost as though he wants to build a nest with her. One day, though, he suddenly flies off to join a pack of crows, and Omakayas sadly realizes that, in spite of their closeness, is still a crow, and that she couldn't change that. She realizes that she too "couldn't help being just who she was, Omakayas, in this skin, in this place, in this time ... no matter what, she wouldn't ever be another person or really know the thoughts of anyone but her own self". A sudden surge of fear that accompanies this realization, the fear followed by a sudden, gentle, safe sense of touching down in her own body.

Part 5, Zeegwun (Spring), Chapters 12 and 13 Analysis

The novel's thematic focus on the relationship between humans and nature is the most important element of this section, manifesting in several ways. To begin with, there is spring's reawakening of life in the world, paralleling the re-awakening of life in Omakayas and also her discovery of new and important elements of her identity - specifically, her capacity to be a healer which itself, in her use of nature's healing powers, is another manifestation of the core theme. Then there is the very act of tapping the trees, a metaphoric representation of how humans "tap into" nature for sustenance. There is also Omakayas' third encounter with the bears, during which Omakayas' personal relationship with nature deepens even further. Finally, there is the reference to her hearing nature's voices, a fulfillment of the foreshadowing in chapter seven (in which Nokomis spoke of hearing the voices of the herbs she carries with her). All of these carry Omakayas forward on her journey of transformation - specifically, her growing into her destiny as a healer, a journey that reaches an active climax with her healing of Pinch and a more reflective climax, the acceptance of her nature, as triggered by the disappearance of Andeg.

It's important to note, however, that this sense of realization, this sense of settling into identity, brings with it the sense of fear and confusion that concludes chapter thirteen. The statement here seems to be that nature is powerful and identity is important, but that connections with both bring a sense of responsibility which, like any sense of any responsibility, brings with it an apprehension, a fear, an uncertainty that that responsibility is impossible to live up to. Hear the narrative reintroduces the theme of fear, its nature and the necessity for/value of responding to it courageously. An echo of this thematic perspective can be found in Omakayas' choices around the accident to Pinch which, it's important to note, she faces without fear but with confidence, without over-thinking but with instinct which, it could be argued, is itself a manifestation of nature. In other words, as she acts to help Pinch, Omakayas is so connected with her own sense of nature-infused self that she forgets to be afraid, a reiteration of the point discussed earlier in relation to chapters five and sis (in which fear is again faced down as the result of connection to nature).

Part 5, Zeegwun (Spring), Chapter 14

Part 5, Zeegwun (Spring), Chapter 14 Summary

"Full Circle" As the family once again builds their birchbark house, Omakayas once again misses those who have left her - Neewo, Ten Snow, and Andeg. One day, Albert La Pautre comes for a visit, full of an important story - how he suddenly acquired a new spirit helper, one that came to him as he attempted to steal one of Old Tallow's traps which, he says, she owed him. But just as he was reaching for it, he says, a crow came and spoke to him, in words, telling him to stop! The family laughs happily, having realized the crow must have been Andeg. They are too overcome with laughter to tell Albert who had expected a more awestruck response and leaves in a huff, hopeful that his guardian spirit will return. Later, as the family plants their crops, Andeg himself comes back. Omakayas calls to him excitedly, but Pinch realizes Andeg has become half-wild and that Omakayas is scaring him off. He then stands still, and Andeg comes to him. When Omakayas seems upset that Andeg preferrs him to her, Pinch gently eases over to her, and Andeg hops onto her shoulder. This, narration comments, changed the relationship between the two siblings ... and Andeg remains with the family.

Shortly afterward, Old Tallow visits and, after a conversation with Nokomis, tells the uneasy Omakayas a story - how Omakayas was the only survivor of a smallpox epidemic on Spirit Island, how Tallow raised her (after kicking out her foolish husband for leaving the infant girl alone on the island), and how Deydey and Mama adopted her. Now, Tallow says, she understand why things happened the way they did - because Omakayas had had the smallpox already, she was brought into the family to save them when they caught it. "They did a good thing when they took you in," Tallow says, "and you saved them for their good act. Now the circle that began when I found you is complete." Omakayas, for her part, somehow senses the circumstances of her early life, and remembers the singing of the island's birds, the white throated sparrows. "I remember their song," she says, "because their song was my comfort, my lullaby. They kept me alive."

Early the next morning, Omakayas goes out into the day, surrounded by the sound of hundreds of white throated sparrows. After a few moments, however, she hears something new and different in their voices - the sound of Neewo's spirit, assuring her he's all right and that he will always be there for her. Omakayas lies back, closes her eyes, and listens to the birds, "as the song of the white throated sparrow sank again and again through the air like a shining needle, and sewed up her broken heart."

Part 5, Zeegwun (Spring), Chapter 14 Analysis

This chapter marks the conclusion of Omakayas' journey of transformation, portraying her as having come to the realization of just what her connection with nature is, how deeply it runs, and the possibilities for the future it contains. Like most good endings,

this ending is also a beginning, suggesting that by concluding one phase of her experience, Omakayas is about to embark on the next phase - having discovered her identity, she is now about to undertake the challenge of living within it. That identity, the narrative contends, is clearly and profoundly connected with nature, which makes Omakayas' journey of transformation also the primary manifestation of the book's central thematic focus on the relationship between humanity and nature. The completion of Omakayas' journey marks that relationship as complex, ever-present, and defining - if, the narrative suggests, humanity allows it to be such the way Omakayas does.

At the same time, this chapter also brings closure to the "mystery" of the relationship between Omakayas and Tallow, a mystery that (as previously discussed) was more a mystery to the central character than to the reader. What's important to note here is how the revelation of Omakayas' origins, and Tallow's interpretation of both those origins and Omakayas' apparent purpose, are juxtaposed with the above discussed suggestion that Omakayas' identity is defined by nature. Specifically, Omakayas' origins and purpose are defined by compassion (that of Tallow and her adoptive parents, and also of Omakayas herself). This, because of that above mentioned juxtaposition, suggests that compassion is itself a fundamental component and/or manifestation of nature.

Other points to note include the reference to the singing birds (an apparently deliberate echo of the circumstances in which the infant Omakayas was discovered on the island surrounded by similarly singing white throated sparrows), the transformation of the relationship between Omakayas and Pinch, and the reference to Neewo's voice being heard in the song of the birds. Here again, the narrative repeats the suggestion (first discussed in relation to Chapters 9 and 10) that death and the dead are just as present a form of nature, an aspect of nature, as the living.

Characters

Omakayas (Little Frog)

Omakayas is the novel's central character and protagonist. The book's plot and themes are simultaneously anchored and defined by her experiences, perceptions, insights and reactions, by the steps she takes and movement she makes as she evolves from an innocent, fun-loving seven-year-old into what might be described as a young woman. In many ways, she is a typical child - mischievous, occasionally sulky about household chores and responsibilities, in awe of her parents, resentful of her siblings, and very much attached to her grandmother. At the same time, however, and as the narrative clearly indicates, she has certain special qualities, particularly her connection to nature. These two sides to her character are what make her an especially appealing, not to mention relevant, character when it comes to consideration of the novel's apparent target audience of young women. Her essential identity, simultaneously normal and special, has the potential to suggest to that audience that it's possible to have what feels like a normal life, and perhaps even suffer intense difficulties (which, in the case of Omakayas, include death, privation, illness, and an often absent parent), and still discover a sense of self worth ... of specialness. In this aspect of her character, and indeed of the novel, Omakayas is transcendent of her race - that is, her story is, or at least has the potential to be seen as, a story not only of a young Ojibwa, but of any young person coming of age in a world she both loves and is awed by.

Old Tallow

Old Tallow is a mysterious mentor figure, an elder within the Ojibwa community in which Omakayas and her family make their lives. Outspoken, sharp-tongued, reclusive and eccentric, the strong and independent Old Tallow is feared but nevertheless respected by many in the community. Omakayas, however, does not find her frightening, but merely intriguing and unusual, a circumstance that the narrative seems to want the reader to find unusual as well. But because the prologue refers to a woman named Tallow, the reader is likely to have an intuitive insight into the true nature between the two (Tallow and Omakayas) very early on. The point is not made to suggest that Tallow is not an interesting character, or that her relationship with Omakayas is neither intriguing or engaging - it's just that the reader knows the truth before Omakayas, and in that sense is ahead of both her and her story.

Mama (Yellow Kettle), Deydey (Mikwam)

Omakayas' parents are both complex, strong-willed individuals who play a powerful role in the development of both her identity and the narrative chronicling her discovery of that identity. Mama is hard-working, patient, and fair ... Deydey is at times stern and demanding, but ultimately concerned only for the welfare of his family. From both of

them, Omakayas learns the values that shape her relations with others - her immediate family, her more distant cousins, and friends like Old Tallow. In other words, they inspire her to be part of a community, and to realize that no one individual is ever truly, ONLY an individual. Their example is an important component of her growth into compassion, which manifests with particular clarity in the "Winter" section of the novel when she devotes herself to nursing her family and, later in that same section, when she transcends her resentment of Pinch and helps him when he is burned by the boiling syrup.

Grandmother (Nokomis)

Nokomis is, like Old Tallow, a respected elder in the community of Ojibwa in which Omkayas and her family make their home. She is a wise and experienced healer, a mentor to Omakayas as she discovers her connection with the spiritual side of life. Her words of support encourage Omakayas as she discovers and explores her capacity for connection with, and understanding of, both animals and plants. She also, like Omakayas' parents, models selflessness and compassion, showing Omakayas the value of caring for others and, at times, sacrificing self for their well being.

Angeline

Angeline is Omakayas' only sister, the oldest child in the family. Beautiful and vain, she is at times condescending and somewhat nasty to her sister, but at other times is capable of perhaps surprising compassion. There is the sense that she is on a path towards becoming popular with the boys of the community, but there is also the sense that the smallpox that attacks her family leaves both her beauty and her sense of self forever scarred. Her journey of transformation, from near-arrogant confidence to near-shamed humility, can be seen as a mirror to that of Omakayas. Where the latter blossoms as the result of her encounters with nature, Angeline withers as the result of her encounter with what the narrative contends is something unnatural, a previously unknown disease introduced to indigenous peoples by whites.

Pinch

Pinch is Omakayas' brother, portrayed throughout the narrative as selfish, indulgent, spoiled, and a liar. Later, as he accumulates wisdom that eventually awaken in him a new and different perspective, he becomes more aware of his identity and purpose, and also becomes a degree or two more compassionate and/or sensitive to those around him. He is, in many ways, a Trickster character - in Native American mythology and lore, Trickster was/is a joker, a game player, at times crafty and at times foolish, a being who shows/showed human beings their own failings by displaying them himself. Trickster is, in many ways, an embodiment of the capricious, unpredictable ways of nature, an aspect of the type that suggests that in his own way, Pinch is as connected to the natural world as Omakayas. This idea is supported by events in chapter fourteen, when

Andeg the crow (a symbol throughout the narrative of the presence of nature) returns to the family and first settles with Pinch because Pinch is the first to recognize what he (Andeg) has become and how he is reacting to people, having been back in the wild for so long.

Neewo

Neewo is Omakayas' beloved baby brother, a playful, innocent infant with whom she feels a stronger connection than she does with any of her other siblings. Omakayas seems to have an instinctive understanding of his situation and feelings, a bond that is (from Omakayas' initial perspective) seriously tested when he dies as the result of smallpox. Later, however, she senses the presence of his spirit in nature, and comes to realize he is with her always. This suggests that Neewo is, throughout the narrative, a symbolic representation of nature, with Omakayas' intuitive insight into his feelings and wants foreshadowing her eventual acceptance of her insight into the ways of nature in general.

Andeg

Andeg is a once-wild crow that Omakayas and her family domesticates and turn into something of a pet. His presence in Omakayas' life both manifests and symbolizes her strong connection with nature, while his brief departure from that life metaphorically suggests that while that connection may be strong and powerful, nature is ultimately unpredictable. Change, Andeg's actions suggest, must always be accepted and eventually valued for the opportunity for insight it provides.

One Horn

The deer One Horn appears twice in the narrative, both times serving as a symbolic representation of nature's generosity and sacrifice towards those who respect it.

Fishtail, Ten Snow

Fishtail (a powerful warrior) and Ten Snow (his beautiful wife) are friends of Omakayas' family, with Fishtail being particularly close to Deydey and Ten Snow being particularly close to Angeline. Fishtail is strong-willed and intense, while Ten Snow is patient and a skilled craftsperson. The intensity of their relationship is revealed almost in passing when the narrative refers to Fishtail's attempt to commit suicide when Ten Snow dies as the result of the smallpox epidemic. His determination to learn the white man's language, however, suggests that he (and, perhaps by extension, the entire native community), is not prepared to give in to the white man and the suffering, both potential and real, that whites bring to the native world and ways.

Albert La Pautre

The overweight, foolish Albert is another of Deydey's friends. Full of himself and pompous, he takes himself very seriously and has no real idea of how foolishly he behaves. He is a vivid and illuminating contrast to Deydey and the other, more hardworking and more serious members of the community.

Objects/Places

Spirit Island

This is the island where the infant Omakayas is found, and abandoned, by a group of fur traders. It is portrayed as being naturally beautiful, populated by happily singing birds.

Smallpox

Smallpox is a highly contagious disease that for centuries, on and off, destroyed entire European communities. As white settlers explored and made their homes in North America, they brought the disease with them, passing it on to the indigenous peoples who lived there and in turn devastating those communities. Over the years, smallpox has become a symbol and/or metaphor for the generally destructive influence of whites on indigenous peoples, and is utilized in the same way here.

Moningwanaykaning (Island of the Golden-Breasted Woodpecker)

This is the island where Omakayas and her family make their home. It's interesting to note that its translated name contains a reference to a bird, a species of animal that, like bears, seems to have a particular connection and/or meaning to Omakayas.

The Birchbark House

Omakayas and her family spend their spring and summer in the birchbark house constructed by Omakayas and her grandmother. The walls of the house, as its name suggests, are constructed from the bark of birch trees, a circumstance that suggests that the family metaphorically lives within nature, embraced and protected by nature. In other words, the house is a symbolic representation of one of the novel's central themes.

The Bear and her Cubs

Several times throughout the narrative, Omakayas encounters a pair of young bears, sometimes with their mother and sometimes without. At first both sides on the encounter are fearful and un-trusting, but eventually Omakayas and the bears come to a respectful connection with one another. These encounters are the most important indications to Omakayas that her relationship with nature is different from that of others in her family and community.

The Cabin in Town

As fall deepens into winter, Omakayas and her family move from the birchbark house into a small cabin in a nearby community. The cabin is the setting for the family's battle with smallpox.

Old Tallow's Coat

Tallow's winter coat is made up of many different sorts of cloth, furs, and skins. A eccentric and unpredictably changeable as she is, the coat is also a powerful protection against the ravages of winter. In that sense, it might not be going too far to suggest that on some level, the relationship between Tallow and her coat is, on some level, representative of the relationship between Tallow and Omakayas, the former (in her patched-together identity and life) protecting Omakayas from the ravages of fear and, after her beloved Neewo has died, of depression.

Spirits

Throughout the narrative, spirits are referred to by several of the characters as being present in life in many forms. Spirits of the dead appear in scary stories told by Deydey and Nokomis, and in Omkayas' realization at the end of the novel that the dead Neewo's spirit is with her always.

Animals and Herbs

Also throughout the narrative, plants and animals are also described as having spirits, portrayed as being apparent and/or accessible to Omakayas and her grandmother. It is, it seems, the presence of these spirits that awakens them both to the presence of spirit in others, and in the world. It only takes openness and trust to connect with them.

Medicine

"Medicine" is the term used throughout the narrative in particular, and in indigenous North American culture in general, to describe spiritual power. Healing plants have "good" medicine, poisonous plants have "bad" medicine. The same can be said of good/bad people, good/bad animals, etc.

Themes

The Relationship between Human Beings and Nature

This is the narrative's primary thematic concern, embedded in both the plot and the journeys/experiences of the characters. It shows up primarily in the story of Omakayas, and there in several ways. In the first part of the book, she spends time with, and learns from, her grandmother, a powerful and respected healer who is clearly and consistently portrayed as having insight into nature and its ways that many others don't. Omakayas then has several experiences in which she develops her own insights - her encounters with the bears, her friendship with Andeg the crow, her experience of "communicating" with the same herbs that her grandmother is able to communicate with. By the end of the narrative, Omakayas comes to a more enlightened understanding of both nature and her place in it, and of one aspect of nature in particular - that there is life in death, and that death is a part of life. Other characters and circumstances also manifest this theme. Pinch, for example, is an embodiment and/or personification of nature's capriciousness and unpredictability. The narrative of the sacrifice of the deer, One Horn (see Chapter 11), can be seen as representing nature's generosity to those who respect and honor its value and presence. Perhaps most potently, there is the connection between the seasons of climate and the seasons of life and death, cycling through the experiences of Omakayas and her family in tandem - life, and connection to it.

The Influence of the White Man on Indigenous Culture

This theme manifests on two levels. The first is more literal, and more direct. Several times throughout the narrative, characters refer to white men (mostly traders and missionaries) physically moving into areas populated by the Ojibwa. The presence of whites is seen as a threat, potentially dangerous and overpowering, to the point where characters discuss moving west in order to escape their influence. At the same time, whites bring disease and death into the community into which Omakayas and her family have moved, a symbolic echo of the physical danger discussed by the characters earlier. Finally, in Fishtail's reference to wanting to learn the white language so he cannot be cheated, there is the implied sense that cheating (a moral and social manifestation of white danger?) is at the very least to be expected. All these ideas, in turn, lead to consideration of the novel's second, more implied, exploration of this theme. It is a fact that indigenous North American culture (and, arguably, all non-white indigenous cultures around the world) has, as a whole, been challenged, corrupted, betrayed, and in many ways outright destroyed by centuries of white exploration and domination. The point must be made that in some cases, white influence was well-intentioned, but it is also historically evident that in most cases, that influence was deliberately destructive and controlling. In short, the presence and influence of whites in "The Birchbark House" on a single family and a single community can be, and perhaps is intended to be, seen as representative of the experience of all indigenous North American peoples, and perhaps by extension, of indigenous people's everywhere. In

this context, it's essential to remember the book's ending, in which Omakayas not only survives the death (smallpox) brought by whites (not once but twice) but becomes stronger and thrives. In the book's larger thematic context, she can be seen as a metaphor for hope, the hope of an entire people.

Confronting Fear

Throughout the narrative, characters confront their fears, tell stories of how they confronted their fears, and are portrayed as transcending their fears to great benefit and reward. Again, the primary example is Omakayas, who transcends her fear of the bears and comes to greater understanding of her place in and relationship with nature. She also transcends her fear of dying to nurse her family and, when confronted with the burned and screaming Pinch, transcends her fear of making a mistake and heals him with her grandmother's herbs, again drawing herself closer to nature and her identity. Herein lies the point of this particular thematic consideration. By confronting and transcending fear, the narrative is suggesting, people can claim and reinforce their own personal truths in ways they could not otherwise have done.

On another level, this theme also relates to the theme of the influence of whites. Throughout the narrative, whites and their influence are portrayed as a trigger of/for fear, a cause for apprehension. It's interesting to note how, when confronted with the threat posed by whites, the adult characters (Deydey and Fishtail) tend to respond with ideas of flight, of running away. Omakayas, on the other hand, confronts the influence of white people directly, nursing her family into renewed strength to fight the ravages of smallpox, the white man's killer disease. Again, there is the sense that Omakayas is the embodiment of the dreams and aspirations of a people - to stand against white-triggered fear in particular, to have courage and trust in nature and, in doing so, be rewarded with a renewed sense of faith, in self and in the nature-defined ways of life.

Style

Point of View

For the most part, the story is told from the third person, past tense point of view, with limited perspective - specifically, that of the central character, Omakayas. The main benefit of this point of view is that it draws the reader more fully into Omakayas' experiences, enabling a sense of intimacy and connection that, on some level, echoes Omakayas' sense of connection with nature. In other words, as Omakayas connects with a particular truth in the world around her, the reader is enabled, through point of view, to connect with her own particular truth and, perhaps by doing so, connect with his/her own version of that truth (i.e., a close connection with nature and spirit).

Occasionally, the point of view shifts to that of another character - for example, the story of chapter six is told from Pinch's point of view. The events of the prologue, meanwhile, are recounted at first from a fully omniscient point of view (that is, without limitations imposed and defined by the perspective of a particular character), but shifts into the perspective of Hat, the only one of the traveling fur traders that experiences remorse at leaving the infant (who turns out to be Omakayas) behind.

On another level, the book's point of view can be seen as reflecting that of Omakayas' Ojibwa community, and perhaps (by extension) of indigenous North Americans in general - specifically, the perspective that whites are dangerous. On this, as well as on the first level (i.e., point of view reflective of and/or defined by Omakayas), point of view can be seen as reflecting and/or manifesting theme. In the case of the former, this is the book's thematic exploration of the relationship between whites and indigenous peoples ... in the case of the latter, the book's thematic exploration of the relationship between human beings and nature.

Setting

The novel is never entirely, specifically clear on when and where it takes place. There are, however, clues in the text that give a rough idea - specifically, its references to the characters being involved in the fur trade, which started in North America in the 1600s and continued for several centuries. Another clue is the reference to smallpox, of which there was a North American epidemic in the late 1700s. This is not to say that smallpox was absent from North America before that time - in fact, the passing references to white presence in Ojibwa territory seem to suggest two things. The first is that the incursion of white people into indigenous lands is in its relatively early stages, and the second is that North American white society is itself in its early stages. Taking all that into consideration, it would be reasonable to conclude that the narrative is set in the early 1700s in Eastern North America (the place where the fur trade began and was centered).

The most important component of the book's setting is its specific geographical placement in space - specifically, its placement in nature. This aspect of setting serves as both a reflection and manifestation of the narrative's central theme - the connection between humanity and the natural world. Throughout the narrative, Omakayas' experience of that connection (not to mention her grandmother's experience, which triggers that of Omakayas) takes place within the context most supportive for the development of such a connection - a life lived within an unspoiled, respectfully colonized, mostly untamed environment. In this sense plot, setting and theme are all entwined - events (plot) unfold in a set of physical circumstances (setting) in which both embody and manifest meaning (theme).

Language and Meaning

The first point to note about the language used in the novel is that is essentially geared towards a younger reader, say in the pre-teen/early teen years. Vocabulary and sentence structure are uncomplicated and straightforward, while feelings and events are written about with clear imagery and a generally sensitive emotional sensibility. The descriptions of illness and death, for example, are clear but tactful, defined by implication rather than stark detail. This aspect of language usage can be seen as representing and/or echoing the point of view of seven-year-old Omakayas, whose experiences and insights are themselves uncomplicated even when the issues with which she's dealing (her relationship with nature, her feelings for her dead brother, the strangeness of Old Tallow) seem, to her, both troubling and problematic.

At the same time, another important point about language is that it's often used to create a sense of mystery, intrigue and/or suspense. This is true of several of the novel's key circumstances - the relationship between Omakayas and Tallow, the relationship between Omakayas and the bears, the cabin-bound events of the smallpox winter. In this sense, the language catches the reader up in the waves of narrative movement, drawing the reader forward with questions and with answers that give rise to more questions. The shaping of the mysterious relationship between Tallow and Omakayas is particularly effective, especially since there is probably little doubt in the reader's mind, from very early on in the narrative, exactly what the relationship is. The suspense, therefore, is not necessarily about what the truth is, but about what the impact of the truth will have on Omakayas and her family once it's revealed. Here, language-triggered suspense is more a function of character and circumstance than it is of event.

Structure

Apart from the prologue (which is set seven years before the action of the main narrative), the events of the story are structured to take place over the course of a single year - summer through fall, then winter, and into spring. There is a link here to the novel's key theme, its consideration of the relationship between humanity and nature. Specifically, the four seasons define the particular sort experiences of life and/or nature

encountered by Omakayas - the flourishing of life in summer, life drawing into itself in fall and dying in winter, but then being born/reborn in spring. In other words, a year in the life of Omakayas echoes a year in the life of the world around her, the world in which she lives, the world to which she has an unusual connection.

Another, and related, way to look at the structure of the narrative is to consider the idea brought forth by Old Tallow in the final chapter, the idea of the full circle. In the same way as the book's successive chapters move through and repeat the cycle outlined above (summer/fall/winter/spring), Omakayas moves through what might be described as the successive chapters of a typical human cycle of experience - innocence through challenge into knowledge and back to a place of new innocence i.e. knowing there's more to know. Thus structure not only echoes theme - it also echoes character which, as previously discussed and to bring this discussion full circle - is itself connected to, and a manifestation of, theme.

Quotes

"Birds were singing, dozens of tiny white-throated sparrows. The trilling, rippling sweetness of their songs contrasted strangely with the silent horror below."
p. 2

"Most of the time Angeline was kind to Omakayas ... but there were also times her words were sharp as bee stings, and at those times Omakayas shed tears her sister never knew or probably even cared about, for as very beautiful people sometimes are, Angeline could be just a little coldhearted at times."
p. 10

"Old Tallow was so isolated by the force and strangeness of her personality that she could have been surrounded by a huge dark forest. She had never had any children, and each of her three husbands had slunk off in turn during the night, never to be seen again."
p. 19

"Perhaps they had communicated in smells. Or maybe in a language of feelings. Her terror, the bear's pity. Perhaps it was her own grandmother's advice that had saved her life. Nokomis had told her that the bear must be addressed with the greatest respect, as a treasured relative, that the bear had human qualities and nobody quite understood the bear. But that bears understood humans quite well."
p. 35

"A thought was coming. A voice approached. This happened to her sometimes. A dizzy feeling would pass over her. If she attended to it closely, once it was gone she would know something a little extra, as though she'd overheard two spirits talking."
p. 35

"Her mother's and father's makazins always had a certain way of turning toward each other ... [Mama's makazins] protected Deydey's used-up ones, nuzzled them together, and seemed to be watching over and soothing away the many dangers of his footsteps."
p. 49

"With Deydey home, things were more exciting, things were more difficult, things were less predictable but somehow more secure."
p. 53

"Outside, the birds hushed. The sky bent to listen. The wind died down. Golden leaves hung balanced in the air. It was as though, Omakayas thought, all of creation was interested in Nokomis' words. Even her own heart beat quieter, and that excited, jumpy feeling in her calmed. Whenever Grandma prayed, she made the world around her feel protected, safe, eternal."
p. 101

"[I]n Old Tallow's look there was true affection, something she didn't feel for other humans. It made Omakayas feel both strange and safe inside ... she had the odd, sudden, curious knowledge that, if it ever came to that, Old Tallow would protect her, Omakayas, with her life."
p.115

"The coat of Old Tallow was a fantastic thing, woven of various pelts, including one of lynx, one of beaver, a deer hide, and two that belonged to beloved dogs. She had pieced together old blankets ... discarded shreds of unidentifiable stuffs were sewed patch on patch, including some black beaded velvets and bright calicos ... she wore it well, springing lightly along like a huge, tattered bear."
p. 124

"How deeply she loved her children. How dear they were to her, the center of her life. Being naturally cheerful and bold, though, she soon grinned and joked. Yellow Kettle could not help turning the mood her way and soon everyone was laughing ..."
p. 138

"If they were all to die together, then let it be so. She would not stay outside alone and away from those she loved, no, not even if it meant her life."
p. 147

"[She] was called Ten Snow not because her own skin was white, nor because she had much of anything to do with snow at all, but because the kind assurance of her nature had reminded her namers of the way the deep snow covers and forgives all it touches when it falls."
p. 155

"It was difficult for Omakayas to understand all that had happened. Why Neewo was gone, though at night she still imagined that she heard his cries. Why her sister's face would never again be smooth. Why she herself was still too weak to run ... she slept and slept as though she would never wake."
p. 158

"The last that [Omakayas] saw of the yellow dog, he was bundled in Old tallow's arms. The strong old woman was walking away, and in her step there was the sadness of parting with an old but dangerously foolish friend."
p. 181

"Ever after that terrible winter, as though he understood from then on how important it was to be funny, Pinch gave laughter to them all. He became a joker, a trick player, and joked on himself as well as others ... he had saved his family, in a way, every bit as much as One Horn."
p. 185

"There was a feeling to that time before the sap began, a quietness that had the going-out taste of winter. All that happened in the snow and cold, the storytelling and the sadness, too, was left behind. Omakayas opened herself to the warming wind. Before

them, the sweetness of the maple waited, the warmth of the sun."
p. 197

"She, Omakayas, was the only one thinking of Neewo. The knowledge made her lonely. If she could talk to him, look into his cheerful, upslanted eyes, share with him her feelings that he never laughed at, play with him in her arms. She missed him terribly, so much so that her heart seemed to drop right through her stomach with a thud."
p. 200

"Always, in the near distance, sacred drums were sounding. The sound of the drums called people to the good life, a way of kindness, love, and deep respect for all that lived."
p. 210

"She couldn't change that any more than she could change being who she was, Omakayas, who heard the voices of plants and went dizzy. Omakayas, who talked to bear boys and received their medicine. Omakayas, who missed her one brother and resented the other, who envied her sister. Omakayas, the Little Frog, whose first step was a hop. Omakayas who'd lost her friend."
p. 219

"Although spring, with all the force of its poised new growth, called to her, although the tender new buds, opening magically, touched her heart, there would always be a shadow to her laughter, a corner of sadness in her smile."
pp. 221-22.

"Omakayas could feel in her heart what it was like for that baby, for herself, all alone with the dead, with her mother, walking from those she loved as though walking stone to stone. Somehow, deep in side, she remembered."
pp. 236-37

"This was the first day of the journey on which she would find out the truth of her future, who she was ... the birds, the whole earth, the expectant woods seemed to wait for her to understand something. She didn't know what. It didn't matter ... those sweet, tiny, far-reaching notes were so brave."
p. 238

Topics for Discussion

Discuss the ways in which Omakayas' relationship with Tallow manifests and explores the narrative's theme of the need to confront fear. Include elements such as the Prologue and Tallow's dogs in your discussion.

In what ways do other characters confront their fears, both of physical threats and emotional/spiritual threats? What experiences do you have of confronting fear? What changes have you experienced as the result of doing so?

Consider the various mother figures in the novel, human (i.e., Mama) and animal (i.e., the mother bear), biological (i.e., Mama) and metaphorical (i.e., Tallow), and cross-generational (i.e., Nokomis). In what ways are they similar? In what ways are they different? In what ways is Omakayas herself a mother figure?

Briefly discuss ways in which the titles of the various chapters reflect their narrative content and thematic explorations. Consider each title's literal and metaphoric implications.

How soon in the narrative did you gain the insight that Omakayas was the girl from the prologue? If you realized it early on, how did that realization affect your response to Omakayas' experience of her relationship with Tallow as mysterious? Were you in suspense about how Omakayas might react? Or were you just wishing that the story would hurry up and reveal the truth?

Discuss the book's views on the relationship between humanity and nature to contemporary society and culture. What lessons and/or insights can be taken from the book and the story of Omakayas and applied to contemporary issues associated with nature and the environment?

Research and discuss ways in which other indigenous communities throughout history have been affected and/or challenged and/or corrupted by the influences of white society and culture. Are there parallels in other cultures/experiences, either literal or metaphorical, to the destructive power of smallpox in "The Birchbark House"?