

Module 5 Evaluation – Native/First Nations/American Indian Literature for Youth

A Text Evaluation on *The Birchbark House* by Louise Erdrich

1. **Quality**. From the prologue at the beginning of the story, the reader can tell that this will be a special book. Is it foreshadowing what is to come? Did it already occur? The reader is unsure because of present-day knowledge on what happened to so many Native American people. Answers occur later in the story, and more is revealed. But this mystery is only a small fraction of the greater story; it lures the reader into its pages but the reader stays because of the rich family life portrayed in the book. Its literary merit is found as the reader moves throughout a year in the life of the Anishinabe as seen through the eyes of Omakayas, who sees her 8th winter during the course of the story.
2. **Language/Speech**. Ojibwa is scattered throughout the book, sometimes with the words in English used in context, sometimes not. The glossary provided in the back matter helps to understand both the definitions of the words used as well as their pronunciation. As I read, I found it helpful to say the words out loud using the pronunciation guide to really boost my appreciation for the language. For example, on greeting Old Tallow, Omakayas states, “Ahneen, my auntie....Mino aya sana” (p. 23). This greeting wishes Old Tallow good health. Another example occurs in the four sections of the book: they have the word for the season first in Ojibwa and then in English in parenthesis – like Dagwaging (Fall).
3. **Characters’ Development**. Omakayas (Little Frog) is seven at the start of the story, and the reader follows her during this year of her life. In her household live her grandmother, her father (a fur trader), her mother (quick to laugh), and her siblings – a pretty older sister, a pesky younger brother, and a baby brother not-named yet and referred to as Neewo. Neewo and Omakayas had a special relationship and she took great joy caring for him and loving him, even as he breathed his last. Omakayas sickened in a different way, following her brother’s death, and she questioned the world for taking her baby brother while she was left behind (p. 159). His death’s profound impact led to Omakayas learning about her family in a different way, and it allowed her to find her missing piece. Although the story is told from Omakayas’ point of view and the book provides diversity within diversity through its richness in describing members of Omakayas’ family as well as the community as a whole, my favorite character is Old Tallow because her strength of self reverberates throughout the book whenever it is needed. She lives alone, “afraid of nothing,” with excellent hunting skills (p. 20). It appears to take much to earn her respect, but Omakayas and her mother and grandmother are in her circle of trust. She drove away her three husbands, and thrived because of it. Winter on the island was marked by Old Tallow donning her “remarkable coat,” a patchwork made up of furs, blankets, and whatever she could find and sew, and the reader can picture her as a study in female fierceness (p. 114).
4. **Cultural Background**. During winter, Omakayas’ family lived in a cabin in the village of La Point, on an island named Moningwanaykaning (Island of the Golden-Breasted Woodpecker) in Lake Superior. Their home moves near the water whether the weather warms. This book occurs during the time when white traders were beginning to enter

Minnesota in great numbers, causing the Anishinabe adults to discuss whether they should move west (p. 123). One adult, Albert, “dreamed that’s where they want us to go, anyway....That will please them” (p. 79). Dreams are honored by the Anishinabe and they have a ritual for them. The first time a person is ready for a special vision, the child’s mother puts charcoal on their face, and the child fasts until a vision occurs. Other ways dreams matter to the Anishinabe include the way babies in the community are named: only selected individuals have the power to name, and those names occur in dreams. In the back matter, both the author’s note on the Ojibwa language plus the glossary and pronunciation guide on Ojibwa terms assist the reader’s understanding of the story.

5. **Lifestyle**. Clothing, foods, and living conditions are portrayed realistically. The birchbark house as well as their winter cabin are thoroughly described in a way that the reader feels like they are present with the family. A special touch occurs when the author describes how Omakayas’ parents’ “makazins always had a special way of turning toward each other” where her Mama’s protected her Deydey’s “watching over and soothing away the many dangers of his footsteps” (p. 49). This short description allows the reader to understand how the family honors each other in small ways, even unintentionally. Omakayas’ daily activities change based on the season. She becomes so good at tanning hide that her father gifts her a tool. The whole community comes together to harvest rice, and everyone has a specific job to do. Anishinabe life requires everyone do their part, and the book’s seasonal structure lends itself to describing these activities as part of the story.
6. **Celebration of Culture**. Cultural respect is evident, particularly in the Anishinabe’s reverence for nature. Generally, the family honors trees when they strip bark to create their summer home and before they take syrup. Omakayas’ affinity with animals is described in both her repeated encounters with two bear cubs as well as her adoption of a crow (Andeg). As one knows, when there are cubs, the mama is close behind, and their mama confronted Omakayas when she saw her playing with the cubs. The author writes that Omakayas walked away without a scratch because she explained her actions and treated the bears with respect. Omakayas reflects on the experience and became “convinced that something had happened between them” (p. 34). Her grandmother had told her that bears had human qualities and must be addressed as if they were people. Since she did that, and sat with her thoughts afterwards, a closeness to nature occurred (she heard a spirit). All of this is intentionally discovered as Omakayas learns about herself. The celebration is most prevalent in its three stories told from older generations to younger, where familial and cultural touchstones are passed down in the form of lore or as teaching moments. My favorite story is *Fishing the Dark Side of the Lake*, which serves as a love story or ghost story depending on the listener. Despite its spookiness, I found it peaceful, closing the circle of life in a new-to-me way.

Other things to consider:

1. **Author/Illustrator’s Background/Sources**. The author/illustrator is a member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Ojibwa and lives in Minnesota, where the story takes place. The smallpox outbreak of 1847 served as the basis for the one in this book.

2. **Critics/Reviews.** The book was a 1999 National Book Award Finalist for Young People's Literature. It also is a Jane Addams Children's Honor Book.
3. **Overall Quality.** The book's cover is simple, showing a young girl with a crow on her shoulder and her birchbark house in the background. Throughout the book are fantastic black and white illustrations by the author that make the text come alive in a whole new way, adding further detail to the story.