

TEACHER'S GUIDE
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FOR
In search of
april
Raintree

25TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

AND
april
Raintree

BY BEATRICE MOSIONIER



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A. INTRODUCTION

In Search of April Raintree is the story of two Métis sisters growing up in Winnipeg, Manitoba. They are taken from their home and family and each put into different foster homes. Yet, over the years, the bond between them grows. As they each make their way in a society that is, at times, indifferent, hostile, and violent, they both struggle to find their own identity. One embraces her Métis heritage, while the other tries to leave it behind. In the end, out of tragedy, comes an unexpected legacy of triumph and reclamation.

B. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Beatrice Mosionier, the author, was born in St. Boniface, Manitoba, in 1949, and at the age of three became a ward of the Children's Aid Society. She grew up in foster homes, away from her birth family and her Métis heritage. After a short time living in Toronto, where she attended college, she returned to Winnipeg. Following the loss of two sisters to suicide, Beatrice decided to write *In Search of April Raintree* in the hopes of finding personal insights. The story embodies her personal struggles for identity and relating to the world. First published in 1983, it has become a Canadian classic. The heart-rending and powerful account presents the difficulties that many Aboriginal and Métis peoples face in maintaining a positive self-identity.

Note: The content (language and graphic rape scene) may not be suitable for all readers. An abridged edition, *April Raintree*, was released in 1984 upon the request of the Native Education Branch of Manitoba Education and was revised with younger readers in mind. The unabridged version, *In Search of April Raintree*, should be considered for students in Grade 10 or above.

C. MANITOBA CURRICULUM CORRELATIONS

- ▶ English Language Arts
 - ✦ General Learning Outcomes 1–5
- ▶ Grade 10 Geographic Issues of the 21st Century
 - ✦ Cluster 5 Urban Places
- ▶ Grade 11 History of Canada
 - ✦ First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples
 - ✦ Identity, Diversity, and Citizenship
- ▶ Physical Education
 - ✦ General Learning Outcome for Personal Development
- ▶ Diversity and Equity
 - ✦ Belonging, Learning, and Growing: Kindergarten to Grade 12 Action Plan for Ethnocultural Equity
- ▶ Sustainable Development
 - ✦ Education for a Sustainable Future: A Resource for Curriculum Developers, Teachers, and Administrators
- ▶ Grade 11 and 12 Family Studies

Note: Check the Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth website for further details. Go to <http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/index.html>.

D. READING AND RESPONDING TO THE TEXT

Activating (before reading)

Many important and complex social issues are addressed in this novel. Before introducing *In Search of April Raintree*, it is important to provide background information and discuss these major themes with your students.

1. Discrimination

Ask your students the following questions:

- ▶ What does the term *discrimination* mean to you?
- ▶ What are some examples of discrimination in our world, community, or school?
- ▶ Why do people develop prejudices and stereotypes?
- ▶ How are people (both victims and perpetrators) affected by acts of discrimination?
- ▶ What actions can we take to prevent others and ourselves from becoming victims or perpetrators of prejudice and discrimination?

Suggested Activity

Graffiti Poster: In groups of four, have students discuss the concept of discrimination. Give each group a sheet of poster paper, with the word *Discrimination* written in the centre and circled. On the poster paper, have students use different coloured markers to jot down or draw their ideas about discrimination. Group members can then share their ideas in their group in preparation for a whole-class discussion. When the activity has been completed, display the graffiti posters in the classroom, and refer to them in future discussion as students think about the questions.

2. Historical and Present-Day Perspectives of Canada's Aboriginal Peoples

Ask your students the following questions:

- ▶ Who are the Métis?
- ▶ What biases and stereotypes about First Nations and Métis have been reflected in Canada's history (portrayal of Louis Riel, treaties, reserves, residential schools, child welfare system)?
- ▶ What impact have these prejudices had on Canada's Aboriginal peoples?
- ▶ What forms of prejudice and discrimination of the First Nations and Métis are still evident today?

Suggested Activity

Use a variety of resources (history texts, websites, newspaper articles) as well as students' own knowledge to lead students in a discussion of both historical and present-day perspectives related to the First Nations and Métis peoples in Canada.

"My Very Good Dear Friends," a speech given in 1971 by Chief Dan George, provides an excellent example of the issues that have faced First Nations and Métis peoples of Canada. The text of this speech is available online at various websites.

Note: This activity is only the beginning of this discussion. Its purpose is for students to develop an awareness of the relevant historical and social background and to establish a sensitivity to the issues of the First Nations and Métis peoples. The threads of these conversations need to be woven throughout the unit of study in order to connect and highlight both past and present-day issues.

Acquiring (during reading)

It is important for students to make personal connections as they read, and to use specific strategies that will help them gain information from the text. Double-entry journals and literature circles are two tools that can be used to support students' understanding of the text and learning about the important themes in the text.

- Double-entry journals encourage students to not only analyze texts but also to make text-to-self connections, text-to-text connections and text-to-others connections.
- Literature circles allow students to work in small groups to construct meaning and expand their comprehension of texts.
- Literature circles provide a discussion format that encourages both students' personal interaction with the text and consideration and reflection of the perspectives of others.

Connection Prompts

1. Text to Self: connecting with the text through personal experience, thoughts, and feelings

Ask your students the following questions:

- What experiences have you had that are similar to any of the characters' experiences?
- What are some connections you may have to the text or the main message of the text?
- Is this message important? Why? To whom?
- What are your thoughts or feelings about this message?

2. Text to Text: connecting the main message with another text

Ask your students the following questions:

- Have you read another story or text with a similar message? How was the message the same? How was it different?

3. Text to Others: refining thinking through sharing viewpoints, understanding the viewpoints of others, refining perspectives

Ask your students the following questions:

- What are some of the viewpoints or perspectives of others to the main message? In what ways are the viewpoints the same? In what ways are the viewpoints different from each other?
- Explain how your viewpoint may have changed by hearing the viewpoints of others. What changed and why?

E. INTRODUCING THE NOVEL

"Live powerfully or succumb to victimhood."

– From *In Search of April Raintree*, 25th Anniversary edition (2008)

Ask your students the following questions:

- What do you think is the author's purpose for writing the novel? (Connect the information in The Author's Note, the summary on the back of the book, and the About the Author sections to the initial class discussions.)

- ▶ What is the main message that the author wants us to consider?
- ▶ How might this message apply to us in present-day times?
- ▶ *Resiliency* may be defined as the ability to spring back from and successfully adapt to adversity. As students read the novel, have them consider the underlying theme of resiliency.

Chapter 1

In Search of April Raintree is a personal narrative. April is the narrator, and she gives us our first glimpse into the earliest memories of her life and family. The picture she paints is very bleak. It may, however, give some insight into the possible reasons for April's actions later in the novel. Here are some questions to guide the thinking through this critical first part of the story:

- ▶ Describe the hardships of the young girls that depict the harsh insensitivity and/or discriminatory attitudes of their family, government agencies, and the Church.
- ▶ The narrator introduces many stereotypes regarding First Nations peoples. These biases and assumptions seem to be already internalized by April even though she is only six years old. Discuss how April's feelings might impact on her future choices and identity.
- ▶ The author depicts a close and supportive relationship between April and Cheryl. This relationship forms the dramatic tension through which other events in the text are explored. What might happen that could make this relationship more vulnerable? What could happen that would strengthen it?

Chapters 2-7

These chapters focus on the diverse experiences and developing identities of both April and Cheryl as they grow up in foster homes. The question of parents' rights to their child's health and well-being form an important sub-theme in the novel. Here are some questions to guide the thinking through this part of the story:

- ▶ Compare Cheryl and April's foster-home situations, and consider how the experiences of each shape her own views about her personal and cultural identity.
- ▶ April's experiences with the DeRosier family provide an insight into some of the major issues regarding foster care. What are some of the measures that have been taken and/or still need to be taken to protect children's health and well-being in our country/province?
- ▶ Give examples of prejudice or discrimination that Cheryl and April experience in either their foster homes or schools, and describe their reactions to these situations. What experiences have you had that are similar? Explain how your reactions to these experiences were similar or different.

Chapters 8-10

These chapters focus on life after foster care. April chooses a marriage that promises economic and social security. Cheryl becomes actively involved with the Friendship Centre to reach out to other Aboriginal youth who need help to find their way. Here are some questions to guide the thinking through this part of the story:

- ▶ April enters into a marriage that promises economic and social security, because she craves stability. Yet, the marriage fails. What are the factors that contribute to the failure of the marriage? How does this experience change April in either a positive or negative way?

- ▶ Cheryl's activism in support of First Nations and Métis peoples is often regarded as a positive outcome of her early introduction to Aboriginal issues through her education. From your experience and knowledge, would you say that her education has been adequate? How has the representation of Aboriginal issues in school changed? What do you think is still needed to provide an unbiased portrayal of Aboriginal history and culture?

Chapter 11

The sexual assault scene is a graphic portrayal of violence against women. Violence against Aboriginal women, in particular, continues to be a pervasive issue. *Stolen Sisters: Discrimination and Violence Against Indigenous Women* (<http://www.amnesty.ca/campaigns/sisters_overview.php>) tells the stories of nine Aboriginal women (including Helen Betty Osborne) who have been raped and murdered. The website states

“...young Indigenous women are five times more likely than other women of the same age to die as the result of violence... Indigenous women have long struggled to draw attention to violence within their own families and communities. Canadian police and public officials have also long been aware of a pattern of racist violence against Indigenous women in Canadian cities – but have done little to prevent it.”

Here is an important question to guide thinking through this chapter in the story:

- ▶ Some people argue that the sexual assault scene should be cut from the novel, especially for young readers. Others argue that the scene is necessary to the overall vision of the text. What position do you agree with and why?

Chapters 12-15

These chapters focus on the breakdown of the sisters' relationship. Cheryl's deceptions and April's inability to forgive Cheryl's behaviour, especially her sex-trade work, are central to the breakdown. The following questions guide the thinking through the final chapters of the story:

- ▶ Do you agree that Cheryl's deceptions and April's inability to forgive her sister are the key factors that contribute to the breakdown of their relationship? Give specific examples that support your point of view.
- ▶ What other factors contribute to the rift between the sisters?
- ▶ In chapter 13, Cheryl and April attend a powwow in Roseau River. Cheryl recites a piece that she wrote in university that was never published, because it was thought to be too controversial. Would this be considered controversial today?
- ▶ Reflect on Cheryl's message and its importance in relation to our present-day environmental issues. What connections do you see between how Aboriginal peoples have been treated, both past and present, and the detrimental factors affecting our current environmental situation?
- ▶ The book, *The Elders Are Watching*, by David Bouchard and Roy Henry Vickers, is a message of concern from Aboriginal leaders of the past and a plea to respect the natural treasures of the environment. Compare Cheryl's message to the message of this picture book and/or other texts that address environmental issues and responsibility.

- ▶ The novel ends on a positive note, suggesting April's return to community and her strong identification with Aboriginal issues. April concludes "...for Henry Liberty and me, there would be a tomorrow. And it would be better. I would strive for it." Do you find the ending convincing? How do you envision the future for Cheryl's son, Henry Liberty?

Applying (after reading)

Reflection and Discussion Prompts

- ▶ What surprised you about this book?
- ▶ What questions do you still have about this book?
- ▶ Pick one passage that you think is the most important or interesting passage in the novel. Why have you picked this passage?
- ▶ What is the important message that the author wishes to convey?
- ▶ How does this message affect your beliefs about discrimination against First Nations and Métis peoples?
- ▶ How have your biases changed since reading the novel?

F. CLASS ACTIVITIES

1. Graphic Timeline Assignment

A graphic timeline illustrates key events and depicts them as either highlights or hardships. Have students select key events and plot them sequentially along the timeline either above the line (highlights) or below the line (hardships). These are the recommended steps for students to follow:

- ▶ Select 5–8 important life events for each character (April and Cheryl), and write a brief description of each event.
- ▶ Arrange the events for each character sequentially across the timeline.
- ▶ Rate each event as either a highlight or a hardship, and plot each event above or below the line accordingly.
- ▶ Connect the events with straight lines to show each character's journey. Use a different coloured marker to trace the life events of each character.
- ▶ Analyze and discuss the similarities and differences in each character's experiences.
- ▶ The author, Beatrice Mosionier, has suggested that the personalities and experiences of both Cheryl and April embody two sides of her own personality and of her journey to find her own identity in relationship to the world. Use the graphic timeline to discuss this statement, and consider the conflicting forces that are a part of life's journey, not only for the author, but for all of us.

Note: The above activity is recommended as a project for the whole class or small groups. The presentation and discussion is a critical component for deepening understanding about the author's purpose and the complexity of character development.

2. Media Scrapbook Assignment

Many important social issues are addressed in the novel. Some of them are dealt with briefly, while others pervade the entire fabric of the book, especially as they pertain to First Nations and Métis peoples. Such issues include:

- drug/alcohol abuse
- separation of families/abuse of children (especially emotional abuse)
- foster-home situations in Manitoba
- child welfare system
- rape/violence against women
- suicide
- First Nations history/land claims/political struggles/environmental issues

Have students find and clip newspaper or magazine articles or letters to the editor that they find interesting and relevant to one or more of the above social issues. These articles must relate in some way to First Nations/Métis peoples and their struggles or successes in society.

Remind students to document each article or letter with the name of the publication, date, and page number. For each article a student collects, have him or her do the following:

- Write a commentary about why you chose it and why you feel it is interesting or important, or write a personal response to it. Your response must explore the ways in which the article has contributed to your overall awareness of the issue(s).
- Put the articles in a scrapbook, title the scrapbook, and make a cover page. Make sure you organize the articles neatly, efficiently, and as effectively as possible.

G. FURTHER READINGS AND RELATED TEXTS AND MULTIMEDIA

Alexie, Sherman. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2007.

Bouchard, David (illustrated by Roy Henry Vickers). *The Elders Are Watching*. Vancouver: Raincoast Publishers, 2003.

Erdrich, Louise. *Love Medicine*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1993.

_____. *The Beet Queen*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1988.

_____. *Tracks*. New York: HarperCollins, 1988.

_____. *The Bingo Palace*. New York: HarperCollins, 1994.

George, Chief Dan. "My Very Good Dear Friends." UNESCO Courier. December 2001.

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Knopf, 1987.

_____. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Plume Books, 1994.

_____. *The Song of Solomon*. New York: Plume, 1987.

Other books by Toni Morrison.

Ross, Rupert. *Dancing With a Ghost*. Markham, ON: Octopus Books, 1992.

Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. New York: Harper Brace Jovanovich, 1982.

Wegamese, Richard. *Keeper'n Me*. Toronto: Doubleday, 1994.

Pittman, Bruce (director). *Where the Spirit Lives*. Canada: Amazing Spirit Productions Ltd., 1989.

Pow Wow Trail. DVD Video Series Education Package. Arbor Records, Ltd.

H. WEBSITES

- ▶ Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples
<http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ch/rcap/sg/cg_e.html>
- ▶ A Lost Heritage: Canada's Residential Schools
<<http://archives.cbc.ca/society/education/topics/692/>>
- ▶ Manitoba Métis Federation Inc.
<<http://mmf.mb.ca/index.php>>
- ▶ Aboriginal Healing Foundation
<<http://www.ahf.ca/publications/research-series>>
- ▶ Métis National Council
<<http://www.metisnation.ca/>>
- ▶ Stolen Sisters: Discrimination and Violence Against Indigenous Women
<http://www.amnesty.ca/campaigns/sisters_overview.php>
- ▶ Alternatives to the Traditional Book Report
<http://mohigh.com/Book_Report_Alternatives.htm>