

The Birchbark House by Louise Erdrich

Book Club Discussion Questions

1. Discuss with your group why the author wrote “The Girl from Spirit Island” as a prologue to her story. What is a prologue? What clues in the story suggest that Omakayas (Little Frog) is or is not the girl from Spirit Island?
2. The four large divisions of the book – Summer, Fall, Winter, and Spring – reflect the cyclical organization of the Ojibwe way of life. Ask the group to contribute to a class chart categorizing the activities, chores, foods, festivities, hazards, and major events that take place each season for Omakayas’s family.
3. Before the White Man came as traders, the Ojibwe were self-sufficient and wasted nothing. Imagine Old Tallow has just killed a buck. Help your group list the uses for as many parts of the deer (e.g., hide, fat, muscles, tendons, brain, internal organs, bones, antlers) as they can, finding evidence in the story or through research.
4. Discuss with your students the positive and negative characteristics of Angeline’s and Pinch’s personalities. What is Angeline’s humbling experience? How might Pinch be considered an antihero?
5. Discuss the manitous (manidoog) and what they do. Who is Nanabozho?
6. Only a few people on the island have the right to dream names, but the name-givers were unable to dream a name for baby Neewo. Why? Speculate with your students why Angeline does not have a Native American name. Let your groups share how or why their parents selected their names.
7. Dreams and their meanings are very important in the Ojibwe culture. Discuss the differences between Albert La Pautre’s dreams and those of Omakayas. What does charcoal on the face have to do with dreams?