

Unit 2: Monkey Beach Novel Study

Text

Robinson, Eden. *Monkey Beach*. Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2000.

Pre-reading

1. Locate the following on a map of Kitamaat, Kitimat, Kitlope Valley, Douglas Channel.
2. In one paragraph describe the Haisla people, include a brief history and some cultural background information.

Read pages 1-73

1. Read the following passage from page 44 of the novel. Relate its significance to what you have read so far. What do you know so far about the characters of Lisamarie, the narrator, and Jimmy, her brother, who is discussed in the passage? How does the passage develop the characters of Lisamarie and Jimmy?

I turned. Jimmy was waving to me from the breakwater logs, thirty feet from the dock. I could see him slick and shiny with water, and watched him help pull his friends up. They ran to the edge of the breakwater, leaping across the space between the logs, the space that opened and closed with the waves and the length of the chains that held the logs together. Every time they jumped, I imagined Jimmy falling. When they reached the end, they turned and ran all the way back. Jimmy saw me still watching him. While he and his friends dived in, he waved to me again. I waved back. He shouted something. Probably "Bonzai!"

2. Pick your favourite passage from what you have read so far. How does the passage you have chosen relate to the plot of the novel up to page 73? What themes do you see emerging? Discuss.
3. How do you relate to the character of Lisamarie? How do you relate to the character of Jimmy? Are there any other characters in the novel so far to whom you relate? Why? Discuss, using specific examples from the novel to illustrate your points.

READING SECTION TWO (73-138)

1. Read the following passage from page 131-132 and relate its significance to anything that has happened so far in the novel. Who do you think the little red man is? Why does he visit Lisamarie? What is his significance? Why does she wish he wouldn't appear? Why does she experience emotional pain in his presence?

The little man woke me before dawn, his eyes glittering and black. The Winnie the Pooh stories end with Christopher Robin saying he's too old to play with Pooh Bear. Little Jackie Piper leaves Puff the Magic Dragon. Childhood ends and you grow up and all your imaginary friends disappear. I'd convinced myself that the little man was a dream brought on by eating dinner too late—Mom had told me she always dreamed of earthquakes if she ate too much lasagna. Sometimes he came dressed like a leprechaun, but that night he had on his strange cedar tunic with little amulets dangling around his neck and waist. His hair was standing up like a troll doll's, a wild, electric red.

He did a tap dance on my dresser. Then he slipped, fell into my laundry basket and pulled my sweaters and T-shirts over his head. The basket tipped over and rolled beneath the window. I watched it warily, my chest aching so hard I couldn't catch my breath.

2. Read the following passage from page 93 and relate its significance to the novel so far. How is the oolichan important to the Haisla people? Discuss the analogy made between Dom Perignon and oolichan grease.

Oolichans spawn in other rivers on the northwest coast like the Chilcat, Nass, Skeena, Kimsquit, Bella Coola, Oweenkeno, Kingcome, and Fraser rivers. Each place has its own way of spelling and pronouncing "oolichans," so the fish are also known as eulachons, ooligans, ulicans,

hollikans, and oulachens. Other people make oolichan grease too, but Mom always said, "Ours is the Dom Perignon of grease."

When I was a kid, I always assumed Dom Perignon was another kind of fish oil. I was very disappointed when I found out it was just a champagne, like Baby Duck, which I'd snuck a sip of one New Year's Eve and hated. I coughed, spitting and sneezing as the bubbles tingled sharply up my nose.

3. Pick your favourite passage from what you have read so far. How does the passage you have chosen relate to the plot of the novel up to page 138? What kinds of identity issues do you see emerging? Discuss.

READING SECTION THREE (139-232)

1. Read the following passage from pages 152-153, and respond discussing what you now think of the little red man, and how Lisamarie must feel after having this discussion with Ma-ma-oo. Then, look at your novel, and read the couple of pages that follow. Why do you think that Gladys (Lisamarie's mother) has been dismissive of Lisamarie's visions? Why was her "gift" never discussed? *"What do the spirits look like?" She paused, looking up into the top of the cedar tree. "I don't know. Never seen one. The chief trees—the biggest, strongest, oldest ones—had a spirit, a little man with red hair. Olden days, they'd lead medicine men to the best trees to make canoes with." "Oh," I said shaking. All the*

air left my lungs for a moment and it felt like I couldn't catch my next breath. "Oh." Ma-ma-oo glanced at me curiously, then began walking again. She picked another tree and offered tobacco. I made my voice very casual. "What would it mean if you saw a little man?"

2. Read the following passage from page 160, and discuss why passages like this are so important to the novel as a whole:

"No, no, just these blueberries. See they have white stuff on them. Pipxs'm means 'berries with mould on them.' " "Mmm, tasty."

"They are." As if to prove it, she popped a few in her mouth and chewed with her eyes closed. I tried one, and it was so sweet that it was almost piercing. I had never noticed that there were different types of blueberry bushes. If it was blue and on a bush, you picked it. Ma-ma-oo pointed out the contrast in the leaves and stems, but it was easier to see the distinctions in the berries themselves. We found the other kind, sya'konalh, "the real blueberry," shiny bluish-black berries, prettier, but not as sweet as pipxs'm. We drove around, going higher up the mountains until we found the third type, pear-shaped and plump and sweet. Their Haisla name is mimayus, which, loosely translated, means "pain in the ass," because although they taste wonderful, they're hard to find and pick.

3. So far in the novel (up to page 232), Lisamarie and her family have had to deal with a lot of loss. Discuss how they do this, using specific references to the novel.

READING SECTION FOUR (232-294)

1. Read the following passage from page 255, and discuss whether or not you agree with Aunt Trudy's belief that the men would have "got off scot-free" for raping or killing Lisamarie, if it had happened. Be sure to support your position with connections to real life and the novel.

"Lisa," Aunt Trudy said, "you got to be more careful." "About what?"

"Those guys could've killed you." "It was broad daylight," I said. "And there were tons of witnesses. They wouldn't have done anything."

"Honey," she said, "if you were some little white girl, that would be true. But you're a mouthy Indian, and everyone thinks we're born sluts. Those guys would have said you were asking for it and got off scot-free."

2. Read the following passage from pages 288-289 and discuss why Lisamarie is encouraging Jimmy to talk to Karaoke. How does she deal with her own "love" issues?

"She's so pretty," he said. "You aren't dog food yourself," I said. "Look, this is silly. Go over to her. Say hi. As her if she wants a pop or something. Life is short, Jim." "You think she'd go out with me?"

"You'll never know until you try." He stayed beside me, taking deep breaths. He stood, gave me a nervous smile, made it to the bottom of the bleachers, paused and turned around, annoying the anxious fans who hissed at him as he pushed his way through them back to me. Maybe it was better this way, I thought as he sheepishly sat beside me. If you never fall in love, you never get your heart broken.

3. At the end of this section, Ma-ma-oo dies. Discuss why Lisamarie has so much guilt connected to this. How does she deal with this loss?

READING SECTION FIVE (295-374)

1. Read the following passage from pages 295-296, and discuss the fusion of story and the modern world that Eden Robinson is exploring. How is this passage indicative of themes from this novel?

Weegit the raven has mellowed in his old age. He's still a confirmed bachelor, but he's not the womanizer he once was. Plying the stock market—instead of spending his time being a trickster—has paid off and he has a comfortable condo downtown. He plays up the angle about creating the world and humans, conveniently forgetting he did it out of boredom. Yes, he admits, he did steal the sun and the moon, but he insists he did it to bring light to humankind even though he did it so that it would be easier for him to find food. After doing some spin control on the crazy pranks of his youth, he's become respectable. As he sips his low-fat mocha and reads yet another sanitized version of his earlier exploits, only his small, sly smile reveals how much he's enjoying pulling the wool over everyone else's eyes.

2. Read the following passage from pages 332-333. Compare the story of T'sonoqua to that of B'gwus. Why is this significant to the rest of the novel?

T'sonoqua is not as famous as B'gwus. She covers herself in a cloak and pretends to be an old woman. She will ask for your help, feigning a helpless shake in her hands as she leans on her cane. If you are moved to go close enough for her to see you with her poor vision, she will straighten to her true height, and the hands that grip you will be as strong as a man's. She is an ogress, and she won't let go because, to her, human flesh is the ultimate delicacy and young flesh is especially sweet. But discredited scientists and amateur sleuths aren't hunting her. There are no conferences debating her existence. She doesn't have her own beer commercials. She has a few amusing notes in some anthropology books. She is remembered in scattered campfire tales. But she is, by and large, a dim memory.

3. Read the following passage from pages 368-369 and discuss Lisamarie's experiences in "the land of the dead"—both literal and figurative. Why do you think Eden Robinson chose to end the novel in this way?

I wake. The moss is soft and wet against my back. There is a dull aching pain in my hand. I lift it, and the cut is raw, but it has stopped bleeding, and all the blood has been licked away. Its tongue was scratchy, like a cat's. "You said you would help me!" I yell, but my voice cracks, and I don't know if they heard me, so I yell it again.

They snigger. I push myself up with my right hand, cradling my left hand against my chest. The bushes rustle. "More," a voice says from the shadows. I stand. "You tell me where Jimmy is first."

4. This novel, like many novels by First Peoples authors, has an unresolved conclusion. Look up the definition of this literary term. Why do you think that Eden Robinson decided to have an unresolved conclusion? Predict what could happen after the conclusion. Why do you think this could have happened? Use specific details from the novel to support your response.