

The Birchbark House



By

Louise Erdrich

A Novel Study
by Nat and Joel Reed

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About the author: Nat Reed was a member of the teaching profession for more than 35 years. He was a full-time instructor at Trent University in the Teacher Education Program for nine years. For more information on his work and literature, visit novelstudies.org.

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Suggestions and Expectations

This curriculum unit can be used in a variety of ways. Each chapter of the novel study focuses on one or two chapters of *The Birchbark House* and is comprised of these activities:

1. Before You Read
2. Vocabulary Building
3. Comprehension Questions
4. Language and Extension Activities

A **portfolio cover** (p.7) as well as a **Checklist** (p.6) are included so that students may track of their completed work.

Every activity need not be completed by all students.

Links with the Common Core Standards (U.S.)

Many of the activities included in this curriculum unit are supported by the Common Core Standards. For instance the *Reading Standards for Literature, Grade 5*, makes reference to

- a) determining the meaning of words and phrases. . . including figurative language;
- b) explaining how a series of chapters fits together to provide the overall structure;
- c) compare and contrast two characters;
- d) determine how characters ... respond to challenges;
- e) drawing inferences from the text;
- f) determining a theme of a story . . . **and many others.**

Themes which may be taught in conjunction with the novel include the Ojibwa people, honor and loyalty, personal growth, perseverance, accepting responsibilities, learning to accept life's difficulties, coming of age, and dealing with loss.

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List of Skills

Vocabulary Development

1. Locating descriptive words/phrases
2. Listing synonyms/homophones
3. Identifying/creating *alliteration*
4. Use of capitals and punctuation
5. Identifying syllables
6. Identify *personification*.
7. Identify *anagrams*
8. Listing compound words
9. Identifying parts of speech
10. Identify/create *similes*
11. Identification of root words

Setting Activities

1. Summarize the details of a setting

Plot Activities

1. Complete a *time line* of events
2. Identify conflict in the story
3. Complete Five W's Chart
4. Identify *cliffhangers*
5. Identify the climax of the novel.
6. Complete a Story Pyramid

Character Activities

1. Determine character traits
2. Identify the protagonist/antagonist
3. Relating personal experiences
4. Compare characters

Creative and Critical Thinking

1. Research
2. Write a newspaper story
3. Participate in a talk show
4. Conduct an interview
5. Create a poem
6. Write a description of personal feelings
7. Write a book review
8. Complete an Observation Chart
9. Complete a KWS Chart
10. Create a friendly letter.

Art Activities

1. A Storyboard
2. Create a collage
3. Design a cover for the novel
4. Create a comic strip

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Synopsis

The Birchbark House is a 1999 indigenous juvenile fiction novel by Louise Erdrich, and is the first book in a five book series known as *The Birchbark Series*. The story follows the life of Omakayas and her Ojibwa community beginning in 1847 near present-day Lake Superior.

After the prologue, the novel continues through the eyes of a seven-year-old young girl, Omakayas ("her name means "little frog" because her first step was a hop). The circular motion of the Ojibwa culture is represented through the motions of the four seasons, Neebin (summer), Dagwaging (fall), Biboon (winter), and Zeegwun (spring). The community in each season works together to hunt, build, gather, and survive. Omakayas cares for her family when a smallpox epidemic sweeps through her village. She learns about her connection to all nature, and discovers her gift of dreams. The most important thing Omakayas learns about herself is why she didn't get smallpox when most everyone in the community did. [Adapted from *Wikipedia*]

Author Biography

Louise Erdrich

Louise Erdrich, a member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa, is the author of many novels as well as volumes of poetry, children's books, and a memoir of early motherhood. Her novel *The Round House* won the National Book Award for Fiction. *Love Medicine* and *LaRose* received the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction. Erdrich lives in Minnesota with her daughters and is the owner of Birchbark Books, a small independent bookstore. Her most recent book, *The Night Watchman*, won the Pulitzer Prize. (The Publisher)



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Student Checklist

Student Name _____

Assignment	Grade / Level	Comments

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Name: _____

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Introduction + Chapter 1



Before you read the chapters:

The **protagonist** in most novels features the main character or “good guy”. The main character of *The Birchbark House* is Omakayas (Little Frog), a seven-year old Ojibwa girl who lived almost 200 years ago. Think back on some of your favorite characters from past novels you have read or movies you’ve seen. What do you think makes for an interesting **protagonist**? (One that's hard to forget.)



Vocabulary:

Choose a word from the list to complete each sentence.

voyageur	solitary	pliable	enigmatic
mischievous	vanquish	insistence	luscious

1. At his dad's _____, Joel took the garbage out to the curb.
2. My grandma made a pie that was so _____, it made my mouth water.
3. A _____ was an expert when it came to canoeing.
4. He was such an _____ person, that no one could figure him out.
5. The puppy was so _____ that we had to put him in a pen.
6. She was a _____ woman who enjoyed her own company very much.
7. The clay must be very _____ before it can be used to make pottery.
8. The Toronto Maple Leafs hope to _____ the Boston Bruins in the playoffs.

Ojibwa Words

Match the Ojibwa words on the left with the correct meaning on the right. You may be able to check your answers in the Glossary at the end of the novel.

1	manitous		a	A giant creature.
2	makuks		b	Ojibwa or Chippewa people.
3	pakuk		c	Spirit beings.
4	makazins		d	Wild rice.
5	manomin		e	Footwear.
6	windigo		f	A container made of birchbark.
7	Anishinabe		g	Skeletons of little children.

Questions



1. What is the **setting** of the story at the beginning of Chapter One?

Smallpox – In the Introduction (*The Girl From Spirit Island*), the author mentions that the voyageurs came upon an Anishinabe village that had been wiped out from smallpox. Smallpox was an infectious disease brought to North America by early settler from Europe. The indigenous people of North America had no resilience to this disease and as a result millions perished.



2. Why was the voyageur ashamed as he paddled away from the Anishinabe village? What other decision might he have made?

3. Why was Omakayas given this name?

4. Nokomis was getting birchbark to help build their shelter. True or False

5. Match the character on the left with the proper description on the right.

1	Nokomis		a	A strong-looking woman.
2	Omakayas		b	A voyageur.
3	Yellow Kettle		c	Grandmother.
4	Hat		d	The baby.
5	Angeline		e	The protagonist.
6	Pinch		f	Smart and pretty.
7	Neewo		g	Mischievous.

6. What was there about tanning the moose hide that Omakayas found repulsive?

7. What did Omakayas' father do for a living?

8. What was your impression of Angeline? What helped you to form this impression?

9. How was Omakayas able to get out of helping her mom tan the moose hide?

Language Activities



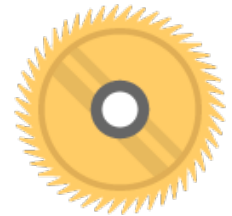
A. The Ojibwa

The Ojibwa (Ojibway or Chippewa) people currently live for the most part in south-central Canada (mainly in Ontario) and the northern Midwestern United States and northern plains. In Canada they are the second largest indigenous people in the country. Investigate the Ojibwa people further and record three interesting facts about them below.

1.	
2.	
3.	

B. Anagrams

An **anagram** is a word that is formed by changing the order of the letters of another word. For example, the letters in the word **WAS** can also form the word **SAW**. Follow these directions to form the anagrams:



a) read the clue in the right-hand column.

b) Using the word in the left-hand column move the letters around in any order, but you must use all the letters. All of the words in the left-hand column can be found in the first chapter of *The Birchbark House*.

Word	Anagram	Clue
start		Desserts.
shore		An animal.
finger		The edge.
trade		Graded.
faces		Small restaurants.
strip		Journeys.
sprang		Crashes.

C. A Quatrain Poem Celebrating the Moose.

The **quatrain** is a popular form of rhymed verse. It is a poem of four lines, is usually light and can be humorous. The following quatrain was written by the famous poet, Atrocious Halitosis. It is called, ***The Unloved Moose***.

*The moose sure ain't a pretty beast,
He makes a dreadful sight.
The other forest folk all think
That mooses, ain't so bright.*



Various rhyming schemes make up a quatrain poem. As you can see, the above four lines have a rhyming scheme of **A - B - C - B**. Other rhyming schemes include: ABAB, AABB, AABA, ABBA, ABBA, and AAAB.

Your task is to write your own quatrain poem. You may choose a rhyming scheme that fits with your own personal creation. The theme should have something to do with the themes established in the first chapter of our novel.

The Quatrain Poem

Now create your own Quatrain Poem. Your poem must follow the format of a quatrain poem described above (and must rhyme).

Title: _____

D. Personification is giving human qualities to something that is not human. The following example is taken from Chapter One: *Her stitches never faltered.*

Describe how Angeline's stitches are personified in this example.

Create your own example of personification.

As you continue to read through the novel be on the lookout for other examples of this literary device. If you should find one, come back to this question and enter it below.

E. A simile is a comparison using the words “like” or “as”. An example from Chapter One is: *But there were also times her words were sharp as bee stings.*



What is being compared in this example?

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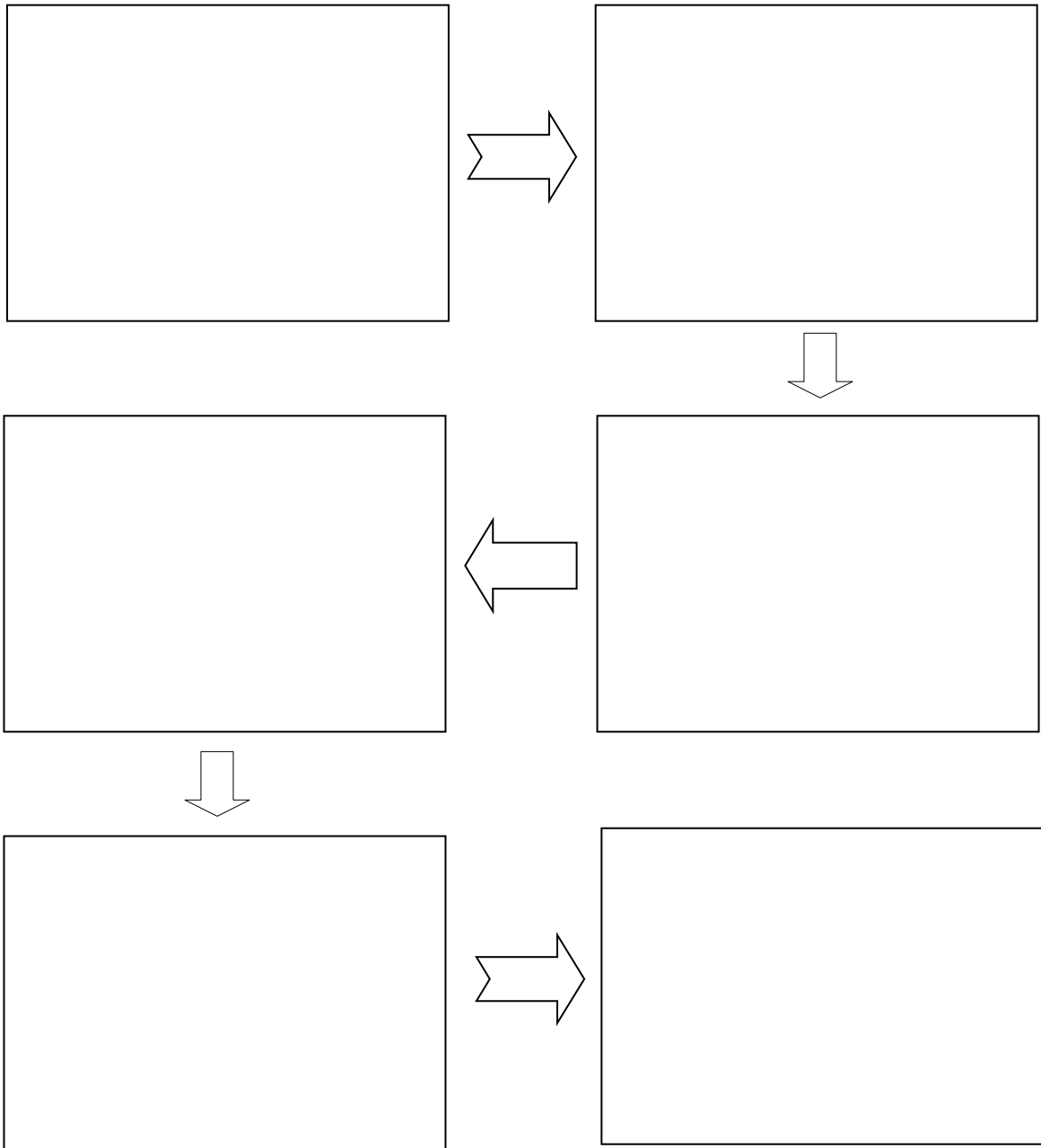
Invent your own **similes** comparing the following items with something from your own imagination:

a) Working at tanning a moose hide.

b) your choice

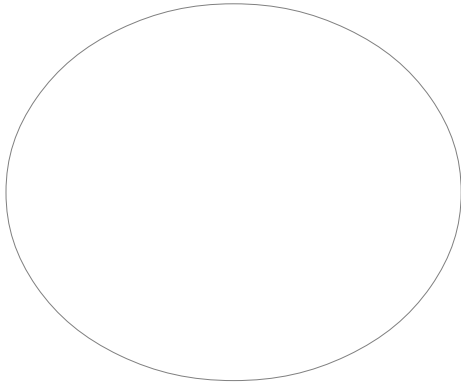
F. Sequence Chart

Choose what you consider to be the six most important events in Chapter One. In each of the six boxes below list the six events that you have chosen, describing what happened and telling why you consider this to be an essential part of the story.

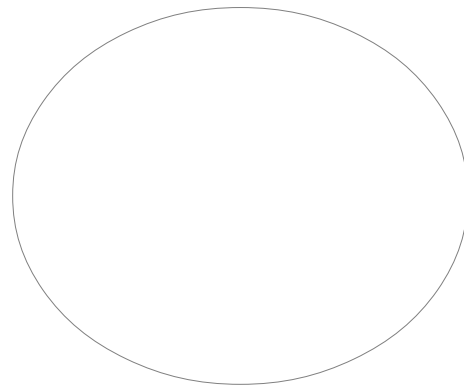


G. 5 Ws and an H.

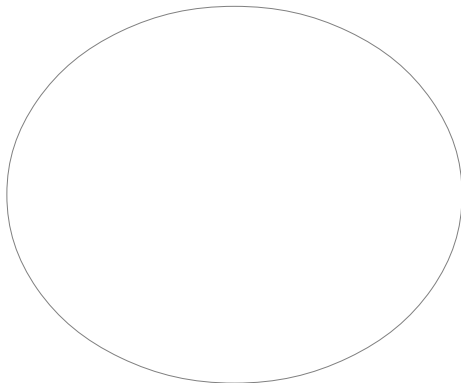
Choose an event from this section that you thought was really important and/or exciting. Using facts that you gleaned from reading about this event, fill in the balloons below, summarizing what you learned.



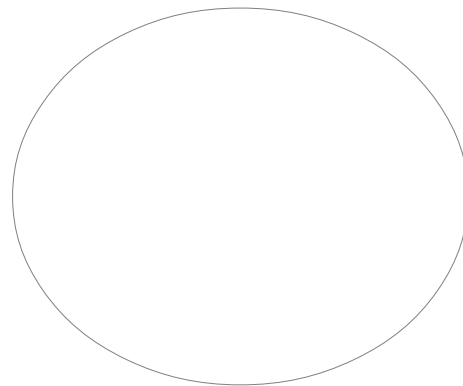
WHO?



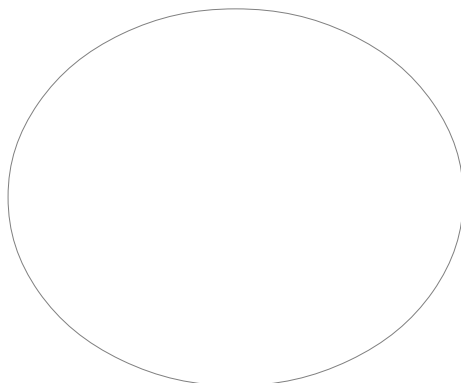
WHAT?



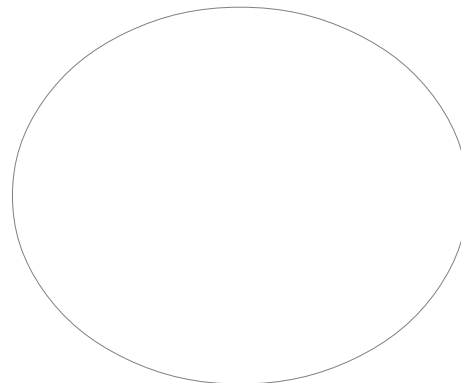
WHEN?



WHERE?



WHY?



HOW?

Extension Activity



Storyboard

A storyboard is a series of pictures that tell about an important event in a story. A storyboard can tell the story of only one scene – or the entire novel. Complete the storyboard below illustrating the events described in the first chapter of our novel. You may wish to practice your drawings on a separate piece of paper.



1	2
3	4
5	6