

DAVID A. ROBERTSON

# THE MISEWA SAGA



THE BARREN GROUNDS

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EDUCATOR'S GUIDE



## DAVID A. ROBERTSON

is the author of numerous books for young readers, including Governor General's Literary Award winners *On the Trapline* and *When We Were Alone*. *The Barren Grounds*, the first book in the middle-grade *The Misewa Saga* series, received a starred review from *Kirkus* and was a *Kirkus*, *NPR*, and *Quill & Quire* best middle-grade book of 2020, as well as a USBBY and Texas Lone Star selection. *The Great Bear*, the second book in the series, was shortlisted for the Ontario Library Association's Silver Birch Award. A sought-after speaker and educator, and winner of the Writers' Union of Canada's Freedom to Read Award, Dave is a member of the Norway House Cree Nation and currently lives in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

For more information, visit his website: [www.darobertson.ca](http://www.darobertson.ca) and follow him on X: [@DaveAlexRoberts](https://twitter.com/DaveAlexRoberts)

This guide was created by **APRIL WATERS**, a Métis educator from Treaty One territory in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. She has been a classroom teacher and Indigenous Education teacher for over a decade. She is currently an administrator of Indigenous Education and provides instructional support and professional development for educators in bringing authentic Indigenous perspectives, culture and history into their classrooms.

# THE BARREN GROUNDS

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## THE MISEWA SAGA

**Narnia meets traditional Indigenous stories of the sky and constellations in an epic middle grade fantasy series from award-winning author David Robertson.**

Morgan and Eli, two Indigenous children forced away from their families and communities, are brought together in a foster home in Winnipeg, Manitoba. They each feel disconnected, from their culture and each other, and struggle to fit in at school and at their new home — until they find a secret place walled off in an unfinished attic bedroom. A portal opens to another reality, Askí, bringing them onto frozen, barren grounds, where they meet Ochek (Fisher). The only hunter supporting his starving community, Misewa, Ochek welcomes the human children, teaching them traditional ways to survive. But as the need for food becomes desperate, they embark on a dangerous mission. Accompanied by Arik, a sassy Squirrel they catch stealing from the trapline, they try to save Misewa before the icy grip of winter freezes everything — including them.



DAVID A. ROBERTSON | THE BARREN GROUNDS

BOOK ONE OF THE MISEWA SAGA • HC 9780735266100 • PB 9780735266124

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The main character, Morgan, is a thirteen-year-old girl who lives with a foster family. Describe her personality. What has Morgan's life been like up to this point?
2. Describe Morgan's feelings towards her current foster family. How does she express these feelings? How is her current situation different from her past foster experiences?
3. Describe Morgan's relationship with Eli, the twelve-year-old boy who is also being fostered in the same home. How has Morgan's childhood differed from Eli's childhood? How have they been similar? Why do both of them feel so different from other students at their school?
4. Morgan is an avid reader, especially of fantasy novels, and Eli is a gifted artist. Why do you think they connect with one another? Why do you think these interests are so important to them?
5. How do you think Morgan feels about being Indigenous? Why do you think her foster parents Katie and James try so hard to connect her to her Indigenous culture? How does Morgan react to that?
6. Why do you think the residents (the animals) of Misewa refer to the Cree language as "the good words"? Why do you think the author, David Robertson, uses so many Cree words throughout the novel?
7. In the novel, Ochek states, "All things are connected. Your world and this one, the sky and the land. All that is." Cree Elders and Knowledge Keepers talk about "misewa" — all that is. Why do you think the author uses "Misewa" as the name of the community?
8. What do you think is the significance and meaning behind Morgan's dreams? Why do you think her mother repeats "kiskisitotaso" over and over again in her dream?
9. Why do you think Morgan and Eli helped to save the lives of Arik and, later, Mahihkan?
10. *The Barren Grounds* contains Cree teachings around sustainability and the land. What are some of these beliefs and concepts? What does the man represent? How does this connect to issues in the world today?
11. Mistapew is a giant being in Cree stories that, according to Ochek, "takes your soul and leaves only flesh and bones behind." How does the author use Mistapew in the story? Does Mistapew remind you of similar creatures in other stories?
12. Why does connecting to and learning to live off the land become so important to Eli and eventually Morgan as well?
13. Identity and knowing who you are is something that Morgan struggles with throughout the novel. What kinds of things make up and impact your identity? What has disrupted Morgan's sense of identity? How does this lack of identity affect how Morgan interacts in the world?

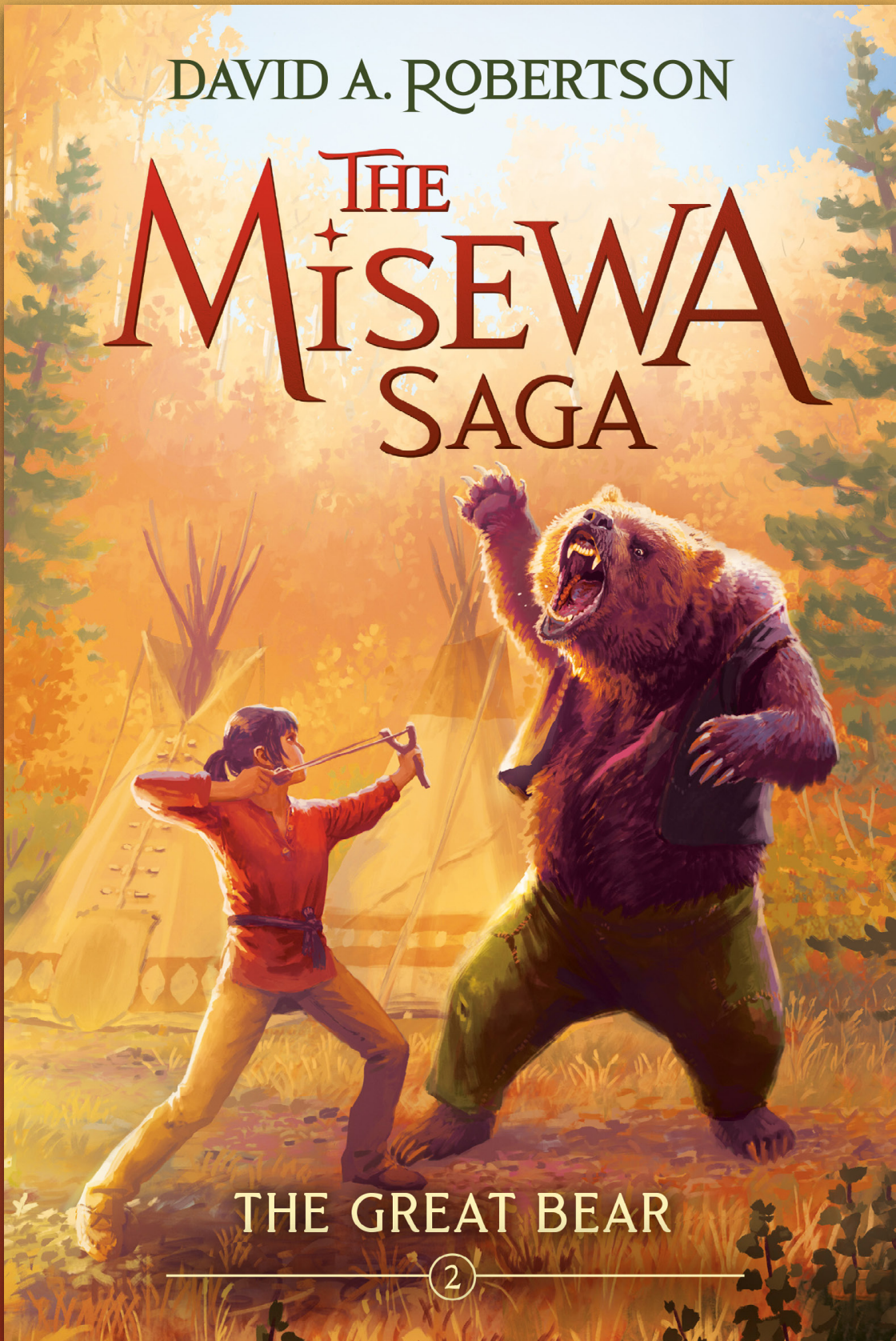


# FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

1. Read *Tipiskawi Kisik: Night Sky Star Stories* by Wilfred Buck. Have students compare and contrast Cree constellations and star stories to ancient Greek and Roman mythological stories. Why is it important to learn about Cree stories? Why do you think we have only usually ever heard about Greek and Roman stories in school?
2. Learn about the history of the land you are currently on. Whose traditional territories are these? What treaties were signed so that you could share space there? What Indigenous languages are spoken in your area? As a class, think of ways to honor this and share this knowledge within your school community.
3. Invite an Indigenous Elder or Knowledge Keeper from a local Indigenous community into your classroom. Ask them if they would be willing to share their teachings and knowledge around the land and sustainability. Connect this knowledge to environmental justice projects that are currently taking place within your school community.
4. Two of the main characters, Morgan and Eli, are children who have been placed in care (the foster system) for different reasons. Investigate the current situation and statistics of children in care in your area. Why do you think there are so many Indigenous children within the foster system? Has this been true of previous generations? Why do you think this is? Have students think about and discuss how historical events and colonization have contributed to this.
5. Imagine that *The Barren Grounds* is turned into a movie. In small groups, have students create movie posters that theaters would use to advertise. Who would the students choose (which actresses/actors) to play Morgan and Eli? What imagery and words/phrases would they include on the poster to entice viewers without giving away the story? How would they honor the Cree culture within the movie and on the poster?

DAVID A. ROBERTSON

# THE MISEWA SAGA



THE GREAT BEAR

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EDUCATOR'S GUIDE



# THE GREAT BEAR

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## THE MISEWA SAGA

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**In this second book in the Narnia-inspired Indigenous middle-grade fantasy series, Eli and Morgan journey once more to Misewa, traveling back in time.**

Back at home after their first adventure in the Barren Grounds, Eli and Morgan each struggle with personal issues: Eli is being bullied at school and tries to hide it from Morgan, while Morgan has to make an important decision about her birth mother. They turn to the place where they know they can learn the most, and make the journey to Misewa to visit their animal friends. This time they travel to the past, meeting a young fisher who might just be their lost mentor. Discovering the village is once again in peril, Morgan and Eli must dig deep within themselves to find the strength to protect it from destruction. But can they carry this strength back home to face their own challenges?



DAVID A. ROBERTSON | THE GREAT BEAR

BOOK TWO OF THE MISEWA SAGA • HC 9780735266131 • PB 9780735266155



# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Eli's braid is something that has always been important to him. What do you learn about the braid in this novel? Why do you think Eli cuts it off? How do you think he feels after?
2. Katie and James have tracked down Morgan's birth mother, and give her name and phone number to Morgan. Throughout the story Morgan struggles with the decision to connect with her. Why do you think Morgan hesitates to call her? If you were in Morgan's shoes, would you call her?
3. Morgan and Eli have to deal with racist attitudes and actions from students at their school. Eli says, "If I could stop being brown, I'd do that too." What advice do Morgan and Emily give to Eli? Have you or someone you know ever been discriminated against for who you are? How did you handle that situation?
4. Morgan and Eli learn from Ochek's family about how the Pisiskowak (animals of Misewa) receive their names. How are names given to them in Askí? How is it different from how names are given on Earth? How is it similar?
5. Mihko talks about something called "blood memory" on page 102: "'This place,' he said deliberately, 'is woven into the fabric of your beings. It's part of you, and it always has been. Kayas, long ago. Before time was. It called you here for whatever reason, and you heard its call.'" What do you think Mihko means by blood memory? Do you have a strong connection to a place where you feel you belong?
6. "And it was hard to feel worry or nervousness or sadness or any negative emotion where they were. Morgan and Eli were living the good life in Misewa, and all of those bad feelings were forgotten." (page 112) In Cree, "mino pimatisiwin" means the good life. What do you think it means to live the good life? Do you think it's possible for Morgan and Eli to live the good life in Winnipeg? Would the good life in Misewa look different from the good life in Winnipeg?
7. Compare Morgan and Eli's reactions to their bullies with how the villagers in Misewa and Otakosik have reacted to Muskwa.

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (CONT.)

8. Morgan's feelings towards Katie and James begin to change in the novel. Nikamon, Ochek's mother, says to Morgan on page 105, "Niwakomakanak, my relatives, are all the beings in this village, whether they are blood or not. It's the same for you." What do you think she means by this? Do you think this helps Morgan?
9. Courage is an ongoing theme throughout *The Great Bear*, with different characters having to show courage in different parts of the story. Is there a time when you had to be courageous? How did you feel before/after?
10. Morgan and Eli are concerned that Muskwa destroys the history of Otakosík as he attacks the village, but Mihko introduces the idea of Knowledge Keepers to them. What do the children learn about Knowledge Keepers? What does this tell you about the importance of storytelling and oral traditions in Indigenous communities?
11. Muskwa is very different in this novel from how he behaves in *The Barren Grounds*. Morgan is convinced that she can reach him, and he will change into the good bear that they know. Why do you think Muskwa is so angry and destructive? Do you think it is possible for people to change who they are?
12. The stories that Indigenous nations carry throughout the generations often explain why something is or how something came to be. Within *The Great Bear*, are there stories told to Morgan and Eli that do that? Why do you think these kinds of stories are told?
13. Morgan and Eli discover how Mason arrived in Askí. How do you think this knowledge will possibly impact the next book?

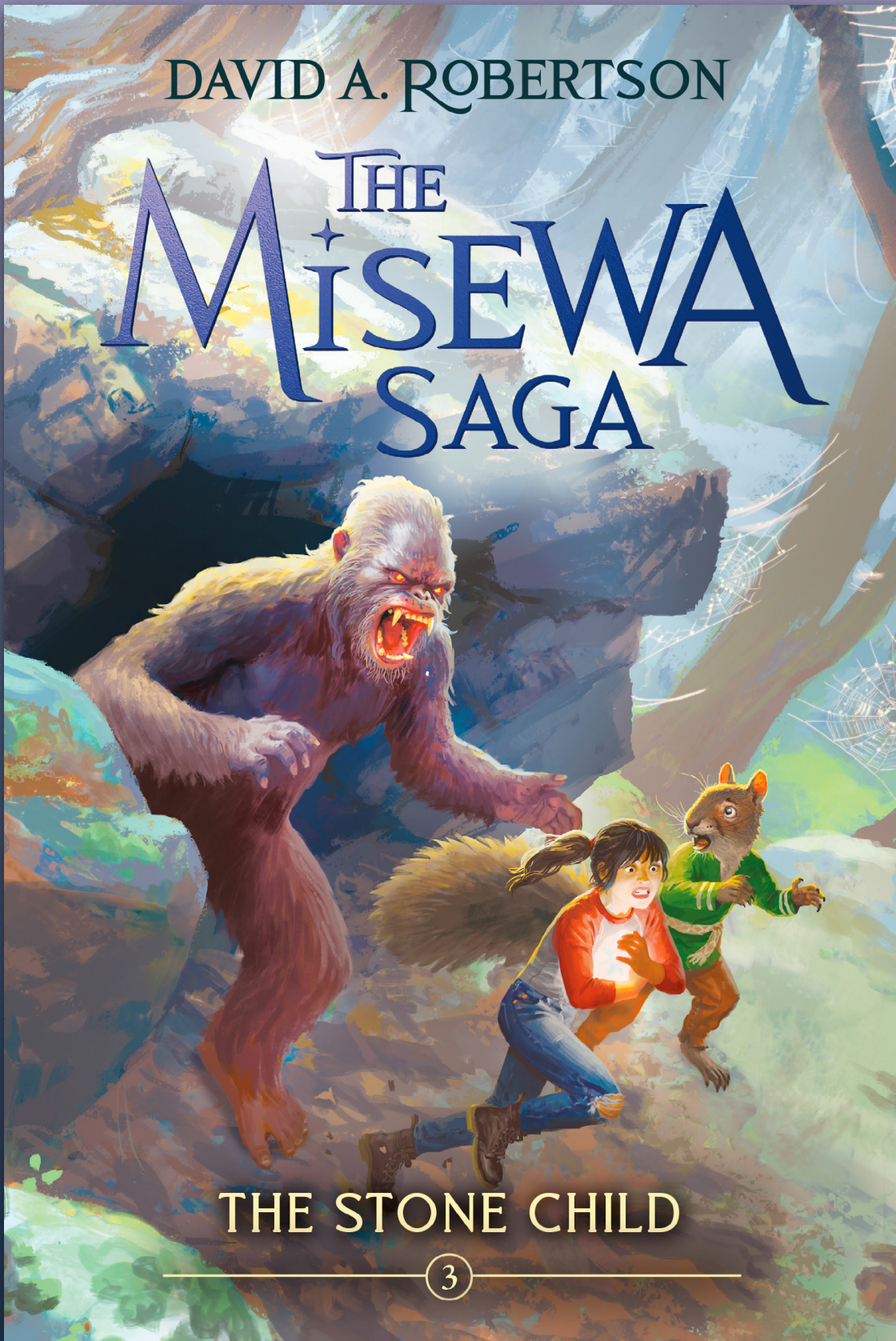


# FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

1. Morgan and Eli experience different situations where they are victims of racism and hate. Unfortunately, incidents like these are not uncommon. Education and allyship are essential to creating safe spaces for all. Invite community members into the school to share their experiences and lessons. Explore other texts where racism is a theme. As a class, come up with an anti-racism campaign where you can educate others in your school community. Hold discussions to identify possible issues and work together as a community to find solutions.
2. Courage is an important teaching within Indigenous communities. Invite an Indigenous Elder or Knowledge Keeper from a local Indigenous community into your classroom. Ask them if they would be willing to share their teachings and knowledge about courage. Be sure to follow proper protocols when inviting them in. Share stories within your learning community around courage and create a classroom anthology of stories.
3. Throughout *The Great Bear*, traditional medicines are used to heal injured or sick characters. There are Indigenous Elders or Knowledge Keepers within your local community who carry sophisticated knowledges of local plants and medicines that are used to heal. Following the proper protocols, make a request to go on the land with them to learn. What plants were used in your area? What were they used for? How were they used? Do Indigenous people still use them?
4. Indigenous people have always told stories as a way to share and pass down their community's histories and teachings. Passing down these traditions is complex and requires a lot of memorization. How is storytelling used in Indigenous communities? How do Indigenous stories differ from the stories we typically read in and out of school? How are they similar? Research some different Indigenous stories that would have been told in your local area. Invite an Indigenous storyteller into your classroom.
5. Eli's braid is a source of pride for him, and its cultural significance is something that is discussed frequently throughout the story. There are many cultural and spiritual items, practices and ceremonies that are important to different Indigenous nations. Colonial legislation such as the Indian Act in Canada made it illegal for Indigenous peoples to practice their culture and spirituality. Research policies like the Indian Act and share your findings within your school community. How did Indigenous nations resist these policies? How can learning about this history help in the reconciliation process?

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# THE MISEWA SAGA



THE STONE CHILD

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# THE STONE CHILD

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## THE MISEWA SAGA

**It's a race against time to save Eli in this third book in the award-winning, Narnia-inspired Indigenous middle-grade fantasy series.**

After discovering a near-lifeless Eli at the base of the Great Tree, Morgan knows she doesn't have much time to save him. And it will mean asking for help — from friends old and new. Racing against the clock, and with Arik and Emily at her side, Morgan sets off to follow the trail away from the Great Tree to find Eli's soul before it's too late. As they journey deep into the northern woods, a place they've been warned never to enter, they face new challenges and life-threatening attacks from strange and horrifying creatures. But a surprise ally comes to their aid, and Morgan finds the strength to focus on what's most important: saving her brother's life.



DAVID A. ROBERTSON | THE STONE CHILD

BOOK THREE OF THE MISEWA SAGA • HC 9780735266162 • PB 9780735266186



# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. After Morgan discovers that Mistapew has taken Eli's soul, she remembers the story of Kihiw. What happened to him? What makes her worry the most for Eli?
2. Morgan pulls her friend Emily through the portal to help her save Eli. How does Emily react to the situation? How would you deal with it if you were Emily?
3. In the Council Hut right before the meeting, Muskwa smudges. Morgan also smudges the sweatlodge before she begins the ceremony. What is smudging? Why do you think they are smudging before the meeting and ceremony? Do you know of other similar practices that other cultures observe?
4. Muskwa tells Morgan that tears are your body letting out pain, and Mahihkan tells her that sweat is negativity leaving the body. Why do you think they tell her that?
5. On page 32, we begin to get an idea of what it's like in the northern woods. What is it like in this area? How does it compare to Misewa?
6. Arik and Morgan compare the differences in perspectives towards youth and age in Askí compared to our world. How are the two worlds different?
7. The children and Arik first run into the groundlings in the northern woods. Describe these creatures. How would you react if you encountered these creatures in the forest?
8. Mahihkan returns to the story, much to the surprise of Morgan. He explains what happened to him the last time the children saw him. He tells them about World's End and the village called Ministik. How does Morgan feel about Mahihkan returning?
9. On page 79, the group discovers paintings on the wall in the cave. What is the significance of the paintings?
10. What happens to Eli near the Great Tree? What do the children and animals do to the Great Tree to help release Kihiw? What do they sacrifice in the process?
11. Morgan decides to connect with her kókom and wants to visit her right away in Norway House. How do Katie and James react?
12. Describe Morgan's interaction with her mom, Jenny Trout. How does Morgan feel after the interaction?
13. How does Morgan and Emily's relationship develop and transform throughout the book?



# FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

1. A sweatlodge is built by Morgan, Emily, Arik, and Mahihkan, and then Morgan holds a ceremony with Eli to bring Eli back to life. What did you learn about this ceremony in the book? Following appropriate protocols in your area, invite an Elder or Knowledge Keeper from an Indigenous nation in your territory to learn more about it. Or, if you discover that the nations in your area don't hold sweatlodges, see if they have a similar type of ceremony.
2. Throughout the book we learn a little bit about Morgan and Eli's home communities, Norway House First Nation and Cross Lake First Nation. Find these communities on the map. Where are they in relation to Morgan and Eli's current home of Winnipeg? What treaty territory are these communities in? Research both communities — their histories and present-day realities. Compare it with life in your own community.
3. In this book we finally learn how Eli became a part of the CFS (Child and Family Services) system — his parents became involved in a dispute with the local police. Across Canada, Indigenous communities have a turbulent relationship with police. Research some events that have taken place that have impacted that relationship (for example, the role of police in residential schools; Oka; Elsipogtoq; We'tsuwet'en; starlight tours). Share what you have learned with your class.
4. On page 195, Eli brings up the cost of food up north as he talks about the price of apples. Look at some prices of basic healthy food items in your area, as well as some “junk food.” Compare those prices with prices in a store in the north. How do they differ? Why do you think there is such a difference? How do you think these costs would influence a family's eating habits, and how do these habits affect health in the north?
5. Throughout the book we learn about different dreams that Morgan has. These dreams are significant as they contain important information and directions that Morgan needs to follow. Arik states in the book that “dreams help us make sense of the world in ways that we can't while we're awake” and that they help connect us to the spirit world. Have you ever had a recurring dream or a dream that left such a strong impression that you remembered it when you woke up? How did it make you feel? Consider keeping a dream journal and write down what you remember every morning. Once you've written a few entries, go back and review. Do you notice any repeating images, feelings or themes?



DAVID A. ROBERTSON

# THE MISEWA SAGA



THE PORTAL KEEPER

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EDUCATOR'S GUIDE





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# THE PORTAL KEEPER

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## THE MISEWA SAGA

**Eli and Morgan experience life-changing revelations in this new adventure in the award-winning, Narnia-inspired Indigenous middle-grade fantasy series.**

While exploring World's End, an area in Askí they've just discovered, Morgan and Emily delight in their developing relationship, while Eli struggles to understand his newfound power: the ability to locate a portal. A shocking turn of events leads them to a new village, Ministik, where the animal beings who live there are going missing. Horrified to discover who is responsible, the children vow to help and turn to friends old and new. But it's getting harder and harder to keep the two worlds separate, especially when details of a traditional legend change everything. Forever.



DAVID A. ROBERTSON

THE PORTAL KEEPER

BOOK FOUR OF THE MISEWA SAGA • HC 9781774880258 • PB 9781774880272

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. At the beginning of the book, the idea of “blood memory” is reintroduced. Where does Eli feel the “pull”? Is there a place where you feel the pull?
2. As the children are out on the land traveling to Misewa, they discuss traditional roles and responsibilities of men and women. What do we learn about the work that needs to be done to run a camp successfully?
3. The children reconnect with Pip, Chaos and Pick, the Bird Warriors. How are they treated by the birds? How do their plans change?
4. The children are forced to travel to the village of Ministik. What is Ministik like in comparison to Misewa? How are the children treated there once they arrive?
5. Once again the children discover paintings within the village that tell a story or history of the community. Describe the paintings that Eli observes in Ministik. How would you interpret them?
6. How does Ace the lynx describe his relationship with Ashék the wolverine? On page 73, Eli and Ace talk about “traditional adoption.” Explain the concept and how it might happen. Do you have people in your life who you consider family, even though they might not be blood-related?
7. Eli has flashbacks to a variety of different memories with his family, before he was taken into the Child and Family Services system. What was his life like in Cross Lake? How does Morgan compare it with other things that have happened to Indigenous families in history?
8. The children and their new friends finally meet the other humans who have been returning to Askí. What happens when they meet?
9. On page 136, Eli begins to have a panic attack. What happens to him? How do Morgan and Emily help him? Why do they think it is happening to him?
10. The children make it back safely through the portal to Norway House. They then go for breakfast at Morgan’s kókom’s home. What is it like there? How does Morgan react to her kókom?
11. The children see their animal relatives on television in the Assiniboine Zoo in Winnipeg. What do they do next? How do Morgan’s kókom and Katie react? How do you think you would react if someone was explaining the same situation to you?
12. The children make their way back to Misewa to get some help from Mahihkan and Arik. What happens when they finally make it to Ministik?
13. What does Eli discover at the end of the book? How would you react to a discovery like this? How do you think this connection will impact him in the next book?



# FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

1. On page 222, Mahihkan states that “stories run through our veins like blood.” The story of Star Woman is significant in Ininew (Cree) culture and communities. It explains how the people came to be on earth. Explore different ways of learning about the story of Star Woman. There are Indigenous Elders or Knowledge Keepers within your own local community who carry similar stories. Following the proper protocols, invite them into your class to share their nation’s stories.
2. David Robertson introduces other beings, such as Wíshkécáhk, Coyote, and Raven into the novel. Research these beings further, as well as other similar ones in other Indigenous nations. How are they similar and how are they different? Using what you have learned about them, choose one that interests you the most and create an illustration of what you think they might look like. You can choose to use traditional art supplies or use a digital/ graphic art program.
3. The children and their animal relatives have the goal of making their way towards World’s End and the Sleeping Giant. What is it like when they finally make it there on page 126? How is it different from the rest of Askí? Is there a real place on Turtle Island (North America) that is referred to as “The Sleeping Giant”? Using the information that David Robertson gives you, create a model of what you think it looks like. Your model can be a drawing or painting, or a three-dimensional work such as a diorama.
4. After the battle at Ministik, the animal relatives who have passed away are honored with star blankets. What does a star blanket look like? What is their significance? Learn about star blankets through the book that is in Eleanor’s living room [mfnerc.org/product/the-making-of-a-star-blanket-book/](http://mfnerc.org/product/the-making-of-a-star-blanket-book/) or by inviting in an Elder or Knowledge Keeper. Try to replicate patterns with either fabric or paper.
5. The animal relatives that are kidnapped by the humans are taken to a zoo in Winnipeg. The children are devastated to learn this on the news on TV. Many people have varying opinions about zoos and the ethics around keeping animals in captivity. How do you feel about zoos in general? Break the class into two groups – those in favor of zoos, and those against. Have the groups research the topic and use their facts to formulate their arguments. Organize a class debate by breaking the class into two groups. At the end of the debate, ask the students where they stand. Have them share what they learned with the school community.