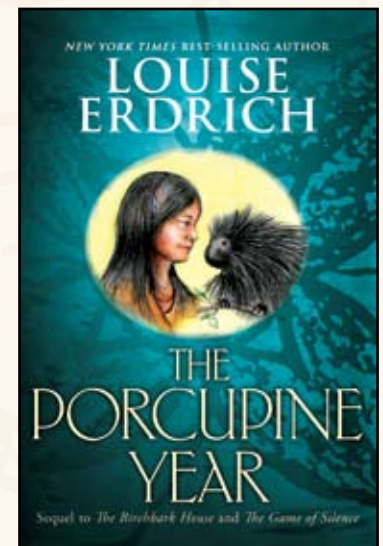
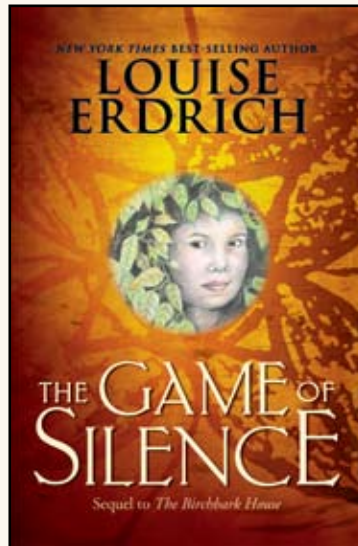
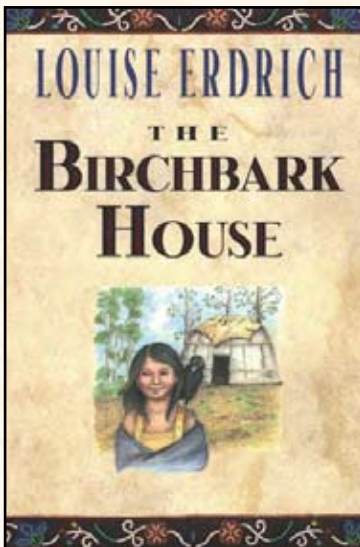


LOUISE ERDRICH'S BIRCHBARK HOUSE BOOKS

Supplemental Teaching Guide



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Louise Erdrich writes fiction, poetry, short stories, and nonfiction for both adults and young people. Born in 1954 to a German-American father and a French-Chippewa mother, she is a member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Ojibwe and grew up in North Dakota, where her parents taught at the Wahpeton Indian school. Ms. Erdrich received her undergraduate degree from Dartmouth College and her masters in creative writing from the Johns Hopkins University. She lives with her daughters in Minnesota, where she runs Birchbark Books, an independent bookstore.

Ms. Erdrich based the Birchbark House book series on her own family history: Her ancestors lived on Madeline Island (Island of the Golden-Breasted Woodpecker) during the mid-1850s, the backdrop against which these stories are set. The first book in the series, *The Birchbark House*, was a National Book Award Finalist, and the second book, *The Game of Silence*, won the Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction. The sequel to these titles, *The Porcupine Year*, continues the story of Omakayas and her family.

The name Omakayas appears in a Turtle Mountain census of 1892, and Ms. Erdrich felt that using the name would honor the life of a real Ojibwe girl. Please visit Louise Erdrich online at www.louiseerdrichbooks.com.



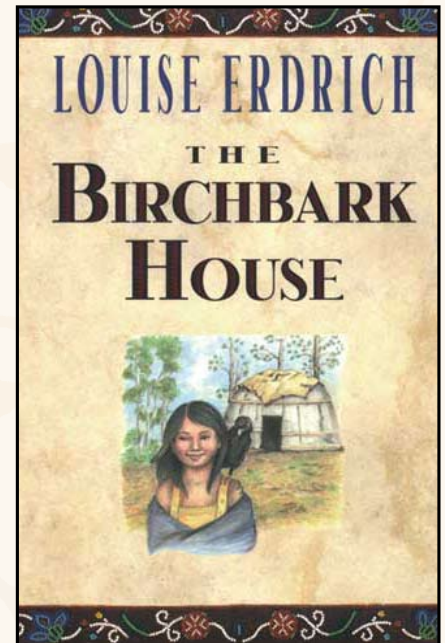
Ann Marsden

THE BIRCHBARK HOUSE

ABOUT THE BOOK

Set in 1847, *The Birchbark House* chronicles the life of Omakayas, a seven-year-old Ojibwe girl, as well as the lives of her family members: grandmother Nokomis, mother Yellow Kettle, father (Deydey) Mikwam, beautiful older sister Angeline, irritating younger brother Pinch, and baby brother Neewo. The story encompasses a year of daily routines and chores, a harsh winter and a spring of rebirth, myths and stories, and feasts and celebrations. Through the deaths of two people, a grandmother's wisdom, a crotchety old aunt's protection, a reverence toward nature and elders, and a family's support, Omakayas begins to discover her true identity and direction in life.

- National Book Award Finalist
- WILLA Literary Award
- ALA Booklist Editors' Choice
- ALA Booklist Top Ten Historical Fiction for Youth
- Horn Book Fanfare
- *New York Times* Notable Children's Book
- *Publishers Weekly* Best Book
- Notable Social Studies Trade Book for Young People



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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

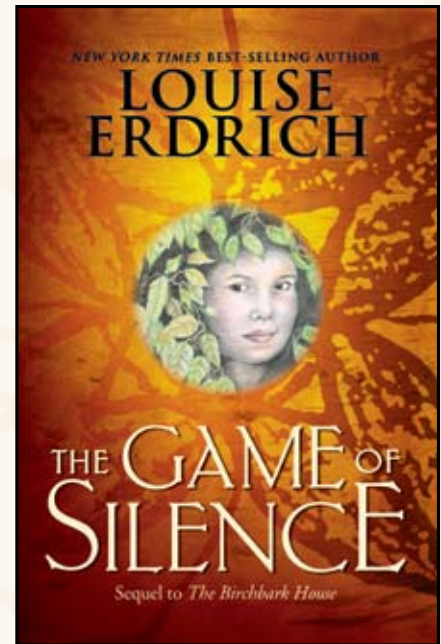
1. Discuss with your students why the author wrote "The Girl from Spirit Island" as a prologue to her story. What is a prologue? What clues in the story suggest that Omakayas (Little Frog) is or is not the girl from Spirit Island?
2. The four large divisions of the book—Summer, Fall, Winter, and Spring—reflect the cyclical organization of the Ojibwe way of life. Ask students 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 students 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. For the Ojibwe, tobacco is sacred. Discuss with your students the varied uses for this product, as indicated in the story. What is the source of tobacco? What are the hazards we know today about the use of tobacco?
6. Discuss the manitous (manidoog) and what they do. Who is Nanabozho?
7. How do Omakayas and her family get food? Do they grow crops? Where do they get seeds? How do they fish and hunt and what do they gather? How do they cook? How do they preserve fresh foods? What do they drink?
8. 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 students share with the class how or why their parents selected their names.
9. Describe the Ojibwe burial ritual. How are the four compass directions significant in the lives of the Ojibwe?
10. 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?

THE GAME OF SILENCE

ABOUT THE BOOK

The Game of Silence takes place two years after *The Birchbark House*. Trouble is brewing between the Ojibwe and both the chimookomanag (white people) and the Bwaanag, the Native tribe into whose territory the Ojibwe may be forced to migrate as they are pushed westward by the government and broken treaties. Against this tumultuous backdrop, much happens to Omakayas's family: they adopt a new baby boy, Omakayas is given a puppy, Two Strike Girl becomes a problem, romance blossoms between Angeline and Fishtail, the Angry One and his father join Auntie Muskrat's family, Pinch painfully matures, Omakayas goes on her vision quest, and in the end the family departs their beloved island.

- Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction
- ALA Notable Children's Book
- ALA Booklist Editors' Choice
- *Horn Book* Fanfare
- *Kirkus Reviews* Editor's Choice
- *New York Times* Notable Children's Book
- *Parenting Magazine* Best Book of the Year



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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The story opens and closes with a game of silence. What is the significance of this game, and why is it being played? Is it a serious game or for entertainment?
2. What happens when Omakayas goes on her vision quest? What do your students think Omakayas's vision means? Have your students ever dreamed about the future?
3. Omakayas is usually a dutiful daughter and granddaughter, but she goes against the teachings of her elders during the annual rice harvest and disobeys tradition. Why? Why does Twilight accompany her cousin? What are the reactions of the various elders? Ask your students if they have ever done something that they knew was wrong. Why did they do it?
4. Four girls in this story—Omakayas, Twilight, Two Strike Girl, and Break-Apart Girl—are about the same age but couldn't be more different. Ask students to compare and contrast the personality traits of these girls. Which one would they most want for a friend? Why?
5. Help your students find physical, emotional, and spiritual examples of Ojibwe culture's high regard for children in *The Game of Silence*. Ask your students to describe how adults take care of them. How do they feel that they are regarded by adults?
6. Father Baraga and Omakayas's father debate religion when they are stranded on the ice. Ask students to discuss how the two men survive and whether their survival is a measure of religion. Compare and contrast the religion of Father Baraga with that of the Ojibwe.
7. In *The Game of Silence*, the amount of trash produced by the chimookomanag is contrasted with the lack of trash generated by the Ojibwe. Why don't the Ojibwe make trash? What things are in your students' trash at home and at school? What can they tell about a culture from its trash?
8. Help your students think about why the Angry One leaves Omakayas a gift of a perfectly round stone representing protective spirits. How might this gift help Omakayas understand the developing relationship between Angeline and Fishtail?
9. Discuss the power of the cold with your students. Old Tallow learns the hard way about frostbite. Help your students learn to recognize the symptoms of frostbite as well as its treatment and prevention.
10. The Ojibwe have many enemies in this story: the chimookomanag and the Bwaanag as well as White Man's infectious diseases and "water that scorches." Discuss these threats with your students and help them decide which one is the most serious.

THE PORCUPINE YEAR

ABOUT THE BOOK

The year is 1852, and Omakayas is twelve years old. In *The Porcupine Year*, Omakayas and her family have left the Island of the Golden-Breasted Woodpecker and are traveling west and north along Lake Superior in hopes of reuniting with Auntie Muskrat and her family. As they search for a new home, they face unexpected danger and hardships, including the theft of their possessions, capture by the Bwaanag, near starvation, the blinding of Deydey, and the death of a beloved family member. The travelers reunite with Auntie Muskrat and their cousins, and as they begin to form a new life, Omakayas comes of age.

- ★ “Based on Erdrich’s own family history, this celebration of life will move readers with its mischief, its anger, and its sadness. What is left unspoken is as powerful as the story told.” — *ALA Booklist* (starred review)
- ★ “This gladdening story details Omakayas’s coming-of-age with appealing optimism.” — *Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)
- ★ “Erdrich’s resonant descriptions . . . give the narrative a graceful flow. A beautiful offering.” — *School Library Journal* (starred review)



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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Both Omakayas and Pinch have their names changed in *The Porcupine Year*. Discuss with your students how and why these name changes happen and what the new names symbolize.
2. The book begins and ends with porcupine quills. What is the significance of porcupine quills for both Omakayas and Pinch (now named Quill)?
3. Discuss with your students how Omakayas and Quill’s relationship changes in *The Porcupine Year*. How are Omakayas and Quill affected by adversity?
4. Omakayas parts with her beloved red beads twice in this book. To whom does she give them, and why does she make this sacrifice? Does she ever get the beads back? Ask your students if they have ever had to sacrifice something important to them.
5. Who or what is a memegwesi? What does a memegwesi do and for whom? Do your students believe in memegwesiwag? What are memegwesiwag similar to in other cultures?
6. Ask your students if they are surprised by who steals the possessions of Omakayas’s family. Why or why not? What is lost? Which losses are the most serious or painful? Ask students to think about which of their possessions they would least like to have stolen and why.
7. Ojibwe tell stories only in the winter. Why? Help your students recall the stories that are told in *The Porcupine Year* and discuss why they are significant. Then have students reread the tales in *The Birchbark House* and *The Game of Silence*. What commonalities are shared by the stories in all three books?
8. Ask students to make a list of the kinds of medicines Nokomis uses in the Birchbark House books. Are such medicines still used effectively today?
9. Discuss with your students why Old Tallow’s burial is different from Neewo’s and Ten Snow’s. Why is Omakayas given Old Tallow’s spirit bundle? What does she do with it? Consider with your students why Old Tallow is so fond of Omakayas.
10. What is the woman house? Why does Omakayas give and receive gifts? How is *The Porcupine Year* a coming-of-age story for Omakayas?

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Extension Activities and Projects

1. On a large map of the upper United States and Canada, help students mark the migration of the Ojibwe (also called Anishinabe or Chippewa) from the Atlantic Coast inland along the St. Lawrence River to the northern Great Lakes region (c. 900–1700). Note on the map the locations of reservations (U.S.) and reserves (Canada) as well as current tribal centers and schools. At one time, the Ojibwe were the largest tribe of Native North Americans and their territory covered a vast area. Indicate the extent of this area on the map. What states and provinces does this area include?
2. In *The Game of Silence*, Omakayas goes on her vision quest and realizes that she is to become a healer and that her protector is the bear. Ask students to consider what their calling in life might be.
3. Ojibwe were skilled in various crafts. Have each student complete a craft project representing Ojibwe culture. Projects might include:
 - A beaded object, such as a pouch or patch
 - A model of a wigwam, birchbark house, snowshoe, bow and arrow, fish net, or birchbark canoe
 - Moccasins or other form of clothing
 - A woven mat
 - A doll's cradleboard
 - A dream catcher
 - Picture writing ("tracks") on stones or birchbark to tell a story or record important information
 - A carved decoy fish or other animal
 - A chart of animal tracks that Omakayas might have seen on her island
4. Divide the class in half. One group should create a mural depicting the major events in the Birchbark House novels, noting the changing of the seasons and thus the passing of time. The second group should collect interesting "found" objects that they feel are representative of their home and school communities. Just as Old Tallow's coat is an amalgamation of many fabrics and furs, students should create a three-dimensional class art piece using their found objects. Display the mural and integrated art piece together.
5. The Ojibwe had an oral tradition and therefore relied on their memories, individually and collectively, to preserve and pass along their history, traditions, skills, cures, religious customs, and explanations for natural events. Discuss why people no longer rely on their memories to the same extent. Then share with your students Native American myths and legends, such as the Creation story, Nanabozho, the story of Indian corn, and the Seven Fires Prophecy. Discuss the stories and their lessons about life.
6. The policies of various federal and state government agencies have controlled Native Americans since the U.S. federal government was formed. The main objectives of these policies were to gain control of Native American lands and people, to allow for western migration of white settlers, and to control natural resources. Help your students research and understand the following policies dealing with Native Americans: **removal** to reservations (early nineteenth century), **allotment**, **boarding schools** for Native American children (1880s–1960s), end of allotment and **reclamation** of Native lands, relocation from reservations to cities, **assimilation**, **termination** of tribal groups, and **self-determination**. What are the current government policies toward Native Americans?
7. Louise Erdrich's Birchbark House books are based on her family's genealogy. Have each student research several generations of his or her own family tree, noting ethnicity, the years that people were born, and the locations where family members lived. Students should use boxes for male family members, circles for female family members, and short lines to connect two people if they have children together.



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Extension Activities and Projects

8. Have each student prepare and present a historical report on a person, place, event, or other topic related to the Ojibwe. Then record significant historical dates on a class timeline.

Notable Ojibwe persons include:

- Dennis Banks
- Clyde H. Bellecourt
- Rebecca Belmore
- Charles Albert Bender
- Edward Benton-Banai
- Kimberly M. Blaeser
- George Copway
- Louise Erdrich
- Fast Dancer
- Flat Mouth
(Aysh-ke-bah-ke-ko-zhay)
- Foremost Sitter
(Naagaanab)
- James Fortier
- Cindy Goff
- Harold Goodsky
- Nick Hockings
- Hole-in-the-Day
- John Johnson
- Basil Johnston
- Peter Jones
- Winona LaDuke
- Wilma Mankiller
- Matonabee
- George Mitchell
- Norval Morrisseau
- Ron Noganosh
- Ted Nolan
- Adam Fortunate
Eagle Nordwall
- Leopold Pokagon
- Rocky Boy (Stone Child)
- Sam Yankee
- Jane Johnston Schoolcraft
- Shingabawassin (Image Stone)
- Chris Simon
- Gerald Vizenor
- William Whipple Warren

Other research subjects include:

- American Indian Movement (AIM)
- American Indian Religious Freedom Act (1978)
- Battle of the Brule (1842)
- British Proclamation of 1763
- Étienne Brûlé
- George Catlin
- Samuel de Champlain
- Dawes or General Allotment Act (1887)
- French and Indian Wars (1689–1763)
- Gathering of Nations Powwow
- Grand Portage Trading Post (1679)
- Greenville Treaty (1795)
- The Hudson's Bay Company
- Indian Arts and Crafts Act (1990)
- Indian Education Act (1972)
- Indian Gaming Regulatory Act (1988)
- Indian Removal Act of 1830
- Indian Reorganization Act (1934)
- Ipperwash Crisis
- Lewis and Clark Expeditions
- Mille Lacs Band Treaty (1855)
- Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (1990)
- Native Americans recognized as U.S. citizens (1924)
- Ojibwe schools started in Sabaskong Bay, Ontario (1974–77)
- Ontario Ojibwe land reclamation
- Frederic Remington
- Robinson Treaties (1850–60)
- Treaty of 1837
- Treaty of Fort McIntosh (1785)
- Treaty of Paris (1783)
- War of 1812
- Wounded Knee Massacre (1890)



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