



Book Club Set #54

Through Black Spruce

By Joseph Boyden

About the Author

Joseph Boyden's first novel, *Three Day Road*, was selected for the Today Show Book Club, won the Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize, the CBA Libris Fiction Book of the Year Award, and the Amazon.ca/Books in Canada First Novel Award, and was shortlisted for the Governor General's Award for Fiction. His second novel, *Through Black Spruce*, was awarded the Scotiabank Giller Prize and named the Canadian Booksellers Association Fiction Book of the Year; it also earned him the CBA's Author of the Year Award. His most recent novel, *The Orenda*, won Canada Reads and was nominated for the Scotiabank Giller Prize and the Governor General's Award for Fiction. Boyden divides his time between Northern Ontario and Louisiana.

From: <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.ca/authors/149986/joseph-boyden>

About the Book

A haunting novel about identity, love, and loss by the author of *Three Day Road*

Will Bird is a legendary Cree bush pilot, now lying in a coma in a hospital in his hometown of Moose Factory, Ontario. His niece Annie Bird, beautiful and self-reliant, has returned from her own perilous journey to sit beside his bed. Broken in different ways, the two take silent communion in their unspoken kinship, and the story that unfolds is rife with heartbreak, fierce love, ancient blood feuds, mysterious disappearances, fires, plane crashes, murders, and the bonds that hold a family, and a people, together.

As Will and Annie reveal their secrets—the tragic betrayal that cost Will his family, Annie’s desperate search for her missing sister, the famous model Suzanne—a remarkable saga of resilience and destiny takes shape. From the dangerous bush country of upper Canada to the drug-fueled glamour of the Manhattan club scene, Joseph Boyden tracks his characters with a keen eye for the telling detail and a rare empathy for the empty places concealed within the heart. Sure to appeal to readers of Louise Erdrich and Jim Harrison, *Through Black Spruce* establishes Boyden as a writer of startling originality and uncommon power.

From:

https://www.bookbrowse.com/bb_briefs/detail/index.cfm/ezine_preview_number/3300/through-black-spruce

Discussion Questions

1. What role does the setting play in helping us to understand the cultural encounters in this novel? Will's memories take him North (describe the characteristics of the past and what it means to go north). Annie's journey takes her South (describe the characteristics of the present and the south). Is there a place where a happy balance between past and present, north and south, can be found?
2. Will and Annie are the novel's two major characters. Which do you think is the protagonist? Discuss the traits and weaknesses of each. Which character portrayal do you prefer and why? Do you agree or not with choices they make throughout the novel? Why do you think Boyden chose to put Will in a coma throughout the novel? We are told that Will is having to make a choice. He can choose whether to come out of the coma and live or to let go and die. What do you think Will considered in this choice and why did he choose to live?
3. Will undergoes a significant physical transformation during his time in the woods while Annie finds herself turning into a shadow of her sister while in Manhattan. How do their physical changes reflect their spiritual changes?
4. Why do you think Will and Dorothy work so well as a couple? What does Dorothy provide for Will that so effectively brings him back to life?
5. Discuss the importance of Will's three plane crashes. What lesson does Will learn with each crash? How do these lessons help to develop his character?
6. Would Annie have been successful without Suzanne having led the way? Is Annie only a replacement for her sister because Suzanne disappeared? Does Annie want to become a celebrity? For Suzanne? For herself? Does her time in NY help her find herself? Or lose herself?
7. Discuss Gordon's role in the novel. Why doesn't he learn to speak? What is his relationship Annie? Why do you think he is so interested in sticking with her, from Toronto and then back to Moosonee?
8. Discuss the symbol of the "Windigo," the evil spirit within, represented by Marius. Does the novel suggest that this Windigo Marius is responsible for the tragedies of the community?

9. Will comes face to face with two bears, under very different circumstances. Discuss the symbolism of these two encounters. How do the bears represent Will at different times of his life?
10. The gun that Will inherits from his father is described as “a rifle he’d lost but that had come back” and a “burden, not a gift.” Discuss the gun’s history and what it represents to Will and his family.
11. One of the most difficult tasks an author faces is choosing a title. What is the significance of each word in the title, *Through Black Spruce*?
12. Will sits at the crossroads of the Old World (North) of his father and ancestors and the New World (South) of his nieces. He speaks both Cree and English. His coma places him at the in-between state of life and death. How does the constant theme of being “in-between” help us to understand what Boyden wants us to know about the present life of First Nations people?
13. Stories are “twisted things that come out no matter how we want them.” Will and Annie struggle to tell each other their own story. What role does storytelling play in the novel? Why is it important for them to tell their stories to each other? What role does storytelling play in the larger indigenous culture? Especially in an oral culture?
14. “Everything you need can be taken. Everything you hold dear, it can be taken.” “You lose some things, so you must try and gain some things too.” How do Will and Annie deal with the losses they face. How do their losses contribute to their characters? Do you consider “loss” to be a significant theme of the novel?
15. What role does silence play in novel? Consider Gordon, the coma, other examples of silence? Why do you think Gordon never learns to speak? Do you think Will can hear while he is in a coma?

From: <https://sanmiguelliterarysala.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/BIG-READ-Discussion-Questions-Black-Spruce.pdf>

Author Interview

Winnie the Pooh. His reflective location was a log under a tree marked by a sign that read, "Pooh's thoughtful spot." It was the place where Pooh did his best thinking. It was where he got his inspiration when his well ran dry.

Often when Pooh visits his thoughtful spot, he sits down, taps his head, closes one eye, and says, "Think, think, think." That is a sign that he is thinking hard.

Visitors journey to northeastern Ontario for many "BIG" reasons in all four seasons. These "thoughtful places" we seek are often called, "me," "magic" or "sit" spots. Sought after locations, for times of solitude in the natural world. We often sharpen nonverbal skills like watching and waiting, silencing and stilling, opening and receiving and reflecting on one's life in the moment.

Water and land trails lead us to favourite vistas and waterfalls all providing solace and comfort, with the next visit. What about a famous author, where does he go for inspiration? Of course it is northeastern Ontario!

Joseph Boyden's first novel, 'Three Day Road,' won numerous awards including the Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize and the McNally Robinson Aboriginal Book of the Year. His second novel, 'Through Black Spruce,' was awarded the Scotiabank Giller Prize and named the Canadian Booksellers Association Book of the Year; it also earned him the CBA's Author of the Year Award. Completing the trilogy to date (two more novels on the way) 'The Orenda' was a finalist for the Governor General's English Language Prize and the Scotiabank Giller Award, and won the Libris Book of the Year Award. In 2012, Boyden received the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal for his contributions to Canadian art and culture. Boyden is a member of the creative writing faculty at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada, and at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico. He divides his time between Northern Ontario and Louisiana.

We know the setting for 'Through Black Spruce' is Moosonee. The small town located along the Moose river and about 19 kilometers away from James Bay. It is known as "The Gateway to the Arctic." In the book it is described as the end of the tracks, an isolated town where just through the black spruce another world lies. There are two main characters with parallel stories. The two settings featured are seemingly incongruous: the hunting and trapping centered life in Northern Ontario and the fashion model scene in Montreal and New York City.

Setting plays a major role in the story because it acts as a place of respite for Annie as she journeys down south and a place to avoid for Will. The two main characters have completely opposite views on Moosonee. Will lives a few kilometres away from the town out in the bush. There, where other people view as dangerous Will views as safe. He thinks that the real danger lurks in the city.

Annie constantly thinks back to her town when she is in New York, Toronto and Montreal. The town of Moosonee is not as bad as the towns she visited and therefore she has a different view of it. She associates the town with all the good, such as her family, friends, the beauty of the land and good things it provides. Will only sees it for the bad and believes that the bush will provide everything for him.

He said, “Some of what I consider my most important epiphanies as a writer were experienced here. I write primarily from the point of view of First Nations, of which I am a part. My writing didn’t really mature until I reconnected with the land in a big way in the mid-1990s, and from there I’ve constantly been amazed and hugely appreciative to recognize how humans are just one small part of the bigger landscape.

“Having lived on the west coast of James Bay, travelling from Moosonee north to reserves like Fort Albany, Kashechewan, Attawapiskat and as far as Peawanuck by Hudson Bay, I fell in love with both the land and the people. I’d never seen such a beautiful, rugged, and sometimes terrifying landscape. And I’d never met a more generous and life-loving people. The landscape and the people are inseparable, and I realized I had found my writing home, my writing heart. I continue strong friendships there, and still travel up the four seasons to camp, canoe, fish, hunt and snowmobile.”

Boyden said, “As for specific places of inspiration, Moose Factory is just a freighter canoe trip in summer or a short snowmobile ride in winter, but it feels so absolutely different than its cousin Moosonee across the Moose River. Reserve life is a more contained life, a richer life in some ways. Despite what we so often and wrongly hear, living on a reserve is living in independence and self-reliance. The people of Moose Factory are rightfully proud of their beautiful community and the spirit is both friendly and foreign to outsiders. I love that and it has given me a lot of fodder for my fiction over the years.”

The writer acknowledges another. “I’m also lucky enough to call the Cree legend (trapper, hunter, and former bush pilot) William Tozer one of my best friends. He’s introduced me to the land of James Bay, and the land itself I think is the heart of my writing. I’ve gone onto the land with William for twenty years now, and every time I do, he teaches me something new. The land of Mushkegowuk is certainly gorgeous, but it isn’t a place to be overly romantic about. The bush can just as easily kill you as sustain you, and I think that’s the most important lesson I’ve been taught.”

So where is this bush? His current destination for inspiration and solace is a camp called Onakawana that introduces indigenous youth to the land, to their birthright.

Joseph extends an invitation to visit. “If you ever wish to reach our Camp Onakawana, drive to Cochrane, and then board the Polar Bear Express. Make sure to ask the conductor to stop the train at the 131.5 mile marker, where the tracks cross the Onakawana River and then walk in on the trail the few kilometers to the camp.” The confluence is located on the Abitibi River downstream from the Little Abitibi River (WGS 84 N50° 39.892’ W81° 21.679’ or 17 U 474465 5612620.) (For many canoeists it is on the canoe route from Abitibi Canyon, north of Smooth Rock Falls, northeast, downstream on the Abitibi River to the James Bay coast to Moose Factory and Moosonee. On the way you could visit a former the Hudson Bay Co. outpost and New Post Falls, one of my favourite locations in northeastern Ontario.)

Back Roads Bill shares a “me” location; seldom seen, it is the vista at Elm Point on the north side of Mattawa River, just east of aboriginal ochre mine. It is a short walk from the sand beach up the slope along the east side of the cold water stream, to the highest contour; walk east about 400 m. The view along the Mattawa fault line seems to go on forever, (WGS 84 N46° 18.307’ W78° 56.347’ 17 T 658644 5129962).

It allows me to hear the wind in the red and white pines. It allows for an unobstructed view of nature with no development in sight or unnatural sounds. It is a multi-sensory location. The location reflects my long-time thoughts of being “with” nature. The conjunction is inclusive, rather than exclusive and many metaphors can be drawn as to how we – as a human species – relate to the natural world. Sitting on the precipice “grounds me.” Any time of the year I will venture here, with snowshoes soon enough.

Relax in your “magic spot” for at least 5-10 minutes or as long as you like (don’t time it...you will know when you are ready to leave). Pay attention to “things” on the micro-scale (ie. what is located directly in front of you) and “things” on the macro-scale (ie. the BIG picture). Try not to think too much (I know this can be hard)...about the why’s and explanations for things but rather to enjoy and “see” and “hear” (perhaps for the first time) the beauty and features of our natural world.

Look for a spot where you will be left alone. You need time and space where you can watch, but people won’t interrupt the conversation in your head. Find a place that sparks your imagination a place to call your own. When you arrive, turn off your phone. It is a guarantee the electronic appendage will ring right as inspiration begins to unload. Take that “me” time and think for yourself. You won’t have to tap your head.

From: <https://www.steerto.com/?p=885>

Links and Other Resources:

Through Black Spruce Movie: <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/q/blog/through-black-spruce-and-indigenous-identity-on-and-off-the-screen-1.4816127>

Articles about Joseph Boyden controversy:

<https://www.aptnnews.ca/national-news/author-joseph-boydens-shape-shifting-indigenous-identity/>

<https://thewalrus.ca/the-boyden-controversy-is-not-about-bloodline/>

<https://www.macleans.ca/news/canada/my-name-is-joseph-boyden/>

Share your thoughts with other readers!

DATE: _____

BOOK CLUB: _____

BOOK TITLE: _____

As a group we rated this book:

1	2	3	4	5
Ugh!		It was OK...		Loved it!

Would we recommend this book to other book clubs?

Yes	No	Undecided
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Why/why not?

Our discussion: