

BOOK CLUB QUESTIONS

Why do you think the authors chose *My Indian* as the title of the book?

“My Indian” is how Cormack refers to his Mi’kmaq guide, Sylvester Joe, throughout his journal, *Narrative of a Journey Across the Island of Newfoundland in 1822*. The authors chose this title as a way of reclaiming the narrative. Much of Mi’kmaq history has been told through a colonial lens. Giving the book this title is a way of symbolically taking the name “My Indian” away from Cormack and giving it back to the Mi’kmaq of Newfoundland.

What is the significance of retelling the story of Cormack’s journal, *Narrative of a Journey Across the Island of Newfoundland in 1822* from Sylvester Joe’s perspective?

This story has never been told from a Mi’kmaq perspective, only through Cormack’s lens. Two hundred years ago, there was a different way of doing things. Cormack’s interpretation of how to use the land and the things around him was different from that of the Mi’kmaq and the Beothuk who had been inhabiting the island for uncounted years. As natural environmentalists, they knew the land and all that it could offer, including food, clothing, shelter, and medicines.

What is the significance of the silver streak that both Sylvester and his grandfather had in their hair? How was it important to their relationship with the Beothuk people?

The Beothuk recognized Sylvester from his grandfather's time, when his grandfather was a captive of the Beothuk. This solidified the connection between the Mi'kmaq and the Beothuk people.

Why did Sylvester Joe travel to U'nama'kik/Cape Breton?

Sylvester Joe travelled to U'nama'kik/Cape Breton to find more Mi'kmaw people, to be educated about Mi'kmaw history, to meet the Grand Chief, to meet more Elders, and to talk about the vastness of the Mi'kmaw territory, which extended from Newfoundland all the way to what is now known as Atlantic Canada, Quebec, and even parts of the United States.

Why were there two ceremonies (one for the man, one for the woman) for one marriage?

Traditionally, there were always two ceremonies, one for the man and one for the woman. As with modern-day ceremonies, the groom does not see the bride on the wedding day. There were things for the wife to learn that only the women could tell her. For example, as his wife, she was the only one permitted to braid the man's hair. Becoming a wife is to become part of an elite group; she would be accepted into the circle. The wife of a warrior takes on a different role, with different responsibilities.

It would be the same with the man. He would have different roles as a husband. He would not only become a provider for his own family but would become part of an elite group of warriors and hunters, who would take on the responsibility of providing food for all the village. He would join the circle of men and Elders and would be groomed to become a leader and an Elder. He would now become part of an inner circle; a storyteller, a historian, and a spiritual guide for younger people. The men would continue to teach him to be humble and respectful around women, even more so now as a married man. When the two come together, the circle is complete.

Marriage and raising children were village obligations. It was frowned upon for young men to take women and then leave their families and go off on their own to raise their children. It was important for the families to be part of raising the children and passing on their spiritual belief and spiritual ceremonies. (Mi'sel Joe)

Why did Sylvester Joe go to the mountain with his grandfather? What did he learn?

Sylvester Joe went to the mountain with his grandfather to offer tobacco, to ask for prayers for good hunting and safety, and to ask for good luck for hunting and travel across the land. Sylvester learned that his grandfather spoke the Beothuk

language and that he had lived with the Beothuk for two years and considered them friends.

When Sylvester meets Cormack, he tells Cormack that Sylvester is his church name. What does he mean by that?

When he was born, Sylvester was given the name Suliewey—Silver—because of the silver streak in his hair. In later years, the missionaries baptized him Sylvester, a Christian name.

Compare the similarities between Cormack’s journal and Sylvester’s travelling stick.

Cormack wrote in a book about his journey, and Sylvester put symbols on his stick to record each day of his journey. Sylvester’s symbols included the form of a wikuom for campsites or a symbol for fire. Each ring on the stick represented a day’s travel.

A journey stick was meant to be kept for one moon or longer. In both cases, the journal and the travelling stick were used to keep a record of their journey.

Why would Sylvester have used the word wikuom and not mamateek to describe the Beothuk homes?

Wikuom is the Mi’kmaw word, and at that time was the only word Sylvester would have known to use to describe ‘home’ or ‘shelter’.

Sylvester's grandfather spent time living with the Beothuk when he was a child, and experienced part of their culture. What sort of things did he learn and do with the Beothuk?

Sylvester's grandfather learned some of the Beothuk language, played games that taught skills such as hunting, and was painted with red ochre, as the Beothuk were. He also learned from an Elder about how the Beothuk gave thanks for the gifts from the land.

Why did Mi'sel Joe, a Mi'kmaw Chief, decide to take action to repatriate Beothuk remains?

In Indigenous culture, remains are treated with respect. So this would have been important to all Indigenous people. There is also growing DNA evidence which confirms the oral history of intermarriage between the Mi'kmaq and the Beothuk. The Beothuk were seen by the Mi'kmaq as their brothers and sisters.

In what ways did Mi'kmaw people use balsam fir and birchbark? (Refer to Chapter 9)

The gum from the small blisters on balsam fir was used as a medicine to heal cuts. Tips of young balsam fir were eaten, and are known to be high in Vitamin C.

Birchbark had many uses: it was used to start a fire, for shelter, for building ocean-going canoes, and to make containers for bear fat, berries, or even for boiling water.

In Chapter 9, Cormack and Sylvester Joe talk about eggers. What is the difference between how Sylvester describes the European eggers and how the Mi'kmaq collected eggs?

Europeans were known to take all the eggs, and as a result destroyed colonies of birds, including the Great Auk. The Mi'kmaq did not take all the eggs out of the nest; they took only what they needed and left some eggs behind in each nest to ensure there would always be food for two or three generations.

Sylvester knew where the Beothuk were camped. What shaped his decision not to tell Cormack?

This decision was pre-determined by the Elders before Sylvester left Miawpukek in the spring of 1822. It was also influenced by his grandfather's friendship with the Beothuk.

What do you think happened to Sylvester between 1823 and 1828?

It is speculated that between 1823 and 1828, Sylvester went back to find and live with the Beothuk.