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NIGHT FLYING WOMAN

An Ojibway Narrative

by Ignatia Broker

About this Guide

The questions, discussion topics, and author biography that follow are designed to enhance your group's reading of Ignatia Broker's *Night Flying Woman.* We hope they will give you a number of viewpoints from which to consider this engaging narrative.

About *Night Flying Woman: An Ojibway Narrative*

Storyteller and Ojibway elder Ignatia Broker recounts the life of her great-great-grandmother, Night Flying Woman, or Oona, who was born in the mid-nineteenth century and lived during a chaotic time of enormous change, uprooting, and loss for Minnesota's Ojibway. But this story is also an optimistic affirmation of Ojibway traditions, strength, and continuity.

In *Night Flying Woman,* Broker describes the difficult changes that white treaty makers, missionaries, fur traders, and lumber companies bring to the Ojibway people and to the land that sustained them. Oona and her family, confined to the White Earth Reservation in northwestern Minnesota, struggle to balance the new ways with their own traditions. In spite of the alteration of her people's entire way of life, Oona continues to bear witness to the old ways and stories, knowing this will enable new generations of Ojibway to understand who they are and find a healing place of belonging.

For Discussion

1. The author notes about herself, "When I see my people every day and know how they are doing, I do not feel so lost in the modern times." What is it about "modern times" that might make her feel lost? What were and are Ojibway practices that provide an anchor to its people? When and why do you feel lost or anchored in life?

2. "The Ojibway tales teach a philosophy for living," Broker states. She describes a way of life constructed around Ojibway *community,* in which sharing and respect for all living things are two fundamental tenets. In what ways do the encounters with the white strangers prevent the Ojibway from living out these beliefs? What are the consequences for a culture that holds community as a core value?

3. As a child, Oona discovers her gift of dreaming and dream interpretation. What elements allow her gift to develop and persevere? Oona tells herself to "listen and you will hear the patterns of life." What role does listening have in dreaming and interpretation? Are there dreamers today? Why or why not?

4. When approaching her elders, Oona shows respect by casting her eyes down and waiting for them to speak to her first: "Always, the first words spoken should be from the older people." What might be the value of this practice? How are older people treated in your community?

5. Contact with white Europeans brought about many changes for Oona and her family. In what ways are her familial power structures disrupted? Why might this have occurred? Was it beneficial or negative for her family?

6. Oona notes the similarity of much of the Christian teachings to Ojibway beliefs: "'Honor thy father and mother,' 'Love thy neighbor as thyself' . . . —these were what the Ojibway had always practiced. The Old Ones believed that Christian principles that were similar to the old ways could help the Ojibway people." If the Ojibway could accept what was held in common, why were the missionaries and other white people unwilling to do so? Why was it so important to the European settlers and leaders that the Ojibway become Christian?

7. Repeatedly, Oona's family struggles to accept the "good" in the new ways being forced upon them by the dominant culture while maintaining the old ways in an adapted fashion. Are there members of your community/family doing this today? What are some of the challenges in seeking this balance?

8. What are the ways Oona's mother leads the family in adopting many of the new ways of living? Why does she agree to make these changes? Is she a willing or reluctant participant in embracing the new ways? How do you think this makes Oona feel?

9. What are examples within the book of discrimination against Indian people by white individuals and/or the United States government? Do you see evidence of discrimination against American Indians today?

10. Ojibway youth who were sent away to boarding schools became unfamiliar with their past and beliefs: "Those who knew about the old ways were silent. They were never asked to speak." Why did the elders not initiate conversations with young people, insisting they hear the Ojibway stories? What might be the value of having the youth take an active role in learning about their culture?

11. As the book nears its end, Oona laments about how greatly her people have diverged from the old traditions. No longer do Ojibway people identify themselves by which do-daim, clan, they belong to, such as Ma-i-ga-n (Wolf), A-wa-sa-si (Bullhead), and Muk-kwa (Bear). They now distinguish themselves by their reservations. What does this symbolize about their changing identity? How do non-Indians today perceive and identify American Indian communities?

12. A-wa-sa-si tells the young Oona, "In each generation of Ojibway there will be a person who will hear the si-si-gwa-d, who will listen and remember and pass it on to the children. Remembering our past *and acting accordingly* will ensure that we, the Ojibway, will always people the earth." A-wa-sa-si seems to indicate that more than passive remembering is needed to be fully Ojibway. What might she mean by "acting accordingly?" What must Ojibway do before "the circle will be closed," bringing a return to wholeness? Is there a role for non-Ojibway people in hearing the stories and helping to close the circle?

Suggestions for Further Reading

Margaret Archuleta, Brenda J. Child, and K. Tsianina Lomawaima (editors), *Away from Home: American Indian Boarding School Experiences* (Heard Museum Shop, 2000).

Veronica Brodie and Mary-Anne Gale, *My Side of the Bridge: The Life Story of Veronica Brodie as Told to Mary-Anne Gale* (Wakefield Press, 2003).

Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West* (Henry Holt, 1971).

Mary Crow Dog, *Lakota Woman* (Grove Press, 1990).

Francis Densmore, *Chippewa Customs* (Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1979).

Heid E. Erdrich and Laura Tohe (editors), *Sister Nations: Native American Women Writers on Community* (Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2002).

Joy Harjo and Gloria Bird (editors), *Reinventing the Enemy's Language: Contemporary Native American Women's Writings of North America* (W. W. Norton, 1998).

Basil Johnston, *Crazy Dave* (Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2002).

Winona LaDuke, *Last Standing Woman* (Voyageurs Press, 1999).

Sarah Penman, *Honor the Grandmothers: Dakota and Lakota Women Tell Their Stories* (Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2000).

Peter Razor, *While the Locust Slept* (Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2001).

Gerald Vizenor, *Everlasting Sky: Voices of the Anishinabe* (Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2001).

About the Author

Ignatia Broker, who died in 1987, was a member of the Ojibway tribe, the Ottertail Pillager Band, and the A-wa-sa-si Clan. She was born in 1919 on the White Earth Indian Reservation and attended an Indian boarding school in North Dakota. Her higher education included the Minnesota School of Business. Following this, she faced fierce discrimination when seeking employment. In 1966, she began a career with the Minneapolis Public Schools, where she became a member of the Minority Task Force, aiding in the development of the Title IV Indian Studies Curriculum. As a staff writer for the Audio Visual Based Indian Resource Unit of the Minneapolis Public Schools, she authored many stories, filmstrips, and booklets that are a part of the curriculum today. Broker was also a member of many Indian organizations and founded the Minnesota American Indian Historical Society. In 1984, she received a Wonder Woman Foundation award honoring her extraordinary accomplishments as a woman striving for peace and equality.

Ordering Information

Night Flying Woman: An Ojibway Narrative is available at bookstores or direct from the publisher at mnhspress.org