

A GUIDE TO

The Sign of the Beaver

Elizabeth George Speare

Like Robinson Crusoe, he had thought it natural and right that the wild man should be the white man's slave. Was there perhaps another possibility? The thought was new and troubling.

THE NOVEL AT A GLANCE

The Sign of the Beaver is a coming-of-age historical novel about survival in the Maine wilderness and relations between white settlers and American Indians.

Setting: Summer to winter, 1769, in the woods near the Penobscot River in Maine.

Conflicts: Hovering over the historical context of the novel is the external conflict between white settlers and American Indians, two worlds in constant collision. Other important conflicts include Matt's external conflict with the wilderness environment, which calls forth all his resources in order to survive; an external conflict between Matt and Attean, a young Indian, which gives rise to an uneasy alliance; and Matt's internal conflict as he recognizes that the American Indian way of life challenges and unsettles many of his preconceptions about the differences between so-called "civilized" and "savage" people.

Resolution: Matt learns to survive in the wilderness, using the skills Attean and his people have taught him. Matt and Attean part as brothers, having won each other's respect. Matt realizes that his experiences with the Beaver clan have changed him and his ways of thinking about the Indians.

Themes: Maturity comes when one accepts responsibility and learns to be resourceful and self-reliant. Self-reliance and an understanding of how to live in harmony with nature can ensure survival in even the most pressing situations. People should consider the viewpoints of those who are different from them and be open to learning from them.

Of Special Note: Speare, an expert in colonial American history, is noted for her meticulous research of historical **setting**. She got the idea for *The Sign of the Beaver* from an anecdote about a boy in Maine who was left on his own for an entire summer and was taken under the wing of an American Indian man and his son.

BACKGROUND

Penobscots. Saknis and Attean are Penobscots, members of an American Indian people most of whom live in Maine and who speak an Algonquian language. (Algonquian is a large group of languages spoken in the eastern United States.) During the period in which the novel is set, the Penobscots, like other Algonquians, were somewhat nomadic and relied mainly on hunting and fishing for their food. Because they lived in comparatively small bands, they were vulnerable to the encroachment of white settlers. These small family communities, or clans, lived in villages of wigwams and bark houses, with a few log houses as well. The Penobscots changed sites often, living in one place during spring and summer and traveling north for moose hunting in the winter.

In the 1970s, the Penobscots and the other large Maine tribe, the Passamaquoddy, sued the U.S. government. They sought compensation for the more than twelve million acres taken from their people during the 1700s and 1800s by means of fraudulent treaties. It's injustices like these that Saknis alludes to in the novel when he decides that his grandson should learn the white man's written symbols to avoid being defrauded in the future. In 1980, President Carter signed the Maine Indian Claims Settlement Act, awarding 81.5 million dollars to the two tribes as compensation for their losses.

The Fur Trade. The North American fur trade began in the 1500s, when French explorers started trading with American Indians. They bartered manufactured goods such as tools, weapons, and textiles for otter, beaver, mink, fox, and other furs. Soon European consumers developed an insatiable appetite for North American furs, particularly beaver pelts, which were manufactured into heavy, fashionable felt hats for men.

The fur trade created a complex socioeconomic relationship between Europeans and American Indians, who found themselves in the middle of the bitter competition between the French and the English for control of the fur market.

MAIN CHARACTERS (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Matthew (Matt) Hallowell, a resourceful, independent thirteen-year-old who has been left alone to watch over his family's new cabin in the Maine wilderness while his father goes back to Massachusetts for the rest of the family.

Matt's father, a hardy, forward-looking pioneer who has taught Matt to be self-reliant; he displays a respectful attitude toward American Indians.

Saknis, a noble, elderly Indian who saves Matt's life; he is leader of the Beaver clan.

Attean, Saknis's proud fourteen-year-old grandson.

PLOT

Chapter 1. The novel begins as Matt watches his father disappear into the wilderness on a trek to Quincy, Massachusetts, to fetch Matt's sister Sarah and their pregnant mother. Matt is left with provisions and two important items that will figure prominently in the **plot**: a prized rifle and an heirloom watch. Matt's father also advises him to keep track of the passing weeks by making notches on sticks.

Chapter 2. Matt discovers that his time alone is passing quickly and pleasantly, except for some anxiety about Indians. Although there have been no Indian attacks in this part of Maine since the last treaty with the tribes, Matt can't forget the frightening tales he's heard. And he sometimes feels that someone is watching him from the forest.

Chapter 3. Late one afternoon, Matt has an unexpected visitor: a large, red-bearded trapper named Ben, who has come to the cabin in search of a meal and a night's sleep. Matt feels an **internal conflict**: He is uneasy about the stranger but has been taught to be gracious to company. So he instinctively lies to Ben, telling him that his father is due back that evening. Matt also resolves to stay awake and keep an eye on Ben all night—but he falls asleep. In the morning he finds to his horror that Ben has stolen his father's rifle. This **complication** will make Matt's survival difficult.

Chapter 4. Without the rifle, Matt has to procure food by fishing. Another **complication** arises one morning when he becomes careless and forgets to secure the cabin door. When he comes back from his fishing trip, he finds that a bear has invaded the cabin and raided his provisions.

Chapter 5. Matt climbs a bee tree to get honey. When he reaches into a hole to grab some honeycomb, bees attack him. Covered with bee stings, Matt runs wildly into a pond. Near unconsciousness and caught by his leg in underwater plants, he feels strong arms lift him out of the water. Two Indians, an elderly man and a boy, remove stingers from his body and take him safely back to the cabin.

Chapter 6. Matt wakes to find himself feeling better. The elderly Indian returns to the cabin to bring him food. Matt, feeling instinctive trust for this man, reveals that he is all alone, waiting for his family to return. The man introduces himself as Saknis, and Matt is confirmed in his earlier intuition about having been watched from the forest: Saknis has indeed been observing Matt for some time.

The next day Saknis returns with his grandson, Attean, a stern fourteen-year-old who seems disdainful of Matt and the cabin. Saknis gives Matt a crutch for his injured leg and notices that Matt has lost one boot. Three days later he returns with a new pair of moccasins. Realizing that the old man has not only saved his life but has continued to help him, Matt gives Saknis the only meaningful possession he can part with—his beloved copy of *Robinson Crusoe*. After accepting the gift stoically, Saknis holds it upside down, and Matt realizes that the man can't read. Saknis suddenly smiles and suggests a treaty: His grandson Attean will hunt food for Matt in exchange for reading lessons for Attean. Attean reacts to this idea with hostility, but Saknis insists. Learning to read the white man's language, he explains, will enable his people to understand written treaties—so that they can avoid the mistake of signing away their lands. The stage is set for a reluctant partnership between Matt and Attean, one of the central **conflicts** in the novel.

Chapter 7. Matt creates a schoolroom in the cabin. When Attean arrives with a rabbit, Matt opens *Robinson Crusoe* and starts to teach Attean the letter *A*. When Attean finds out that it will probably take him many months to learn how to read, he angrily knocks the book off the table and storms out of the cabin.

Chapter 8. Trying a new tactic the next day, Matt reads aloud an interesting portion of *Robinson Crusoe*. The seemingly stoic Attean gets caught up in the story, and he returns the next day for a continuation. Attean, however, criticizes many parts of *Robinson Crusoe*, causing Matt to reconsider some aspects of the book, particularly its notion of the superiority of white men to "savages." In the process, he begins to understand Attean's reactions to the story.

Chapter 9. Attean, at Matt's request, shows him how to make a rabbit snare out of a plant root. In a few days, Matt becomes a proficient hunter with the snare, and he announces that he won't be needing any more presents of food. Attean, though, continues to bring game, evidently feeling bound by his grandfather's treaty. Then Matt learns that Attean's real motivation for persevering is to hear more of the story of Robinson Crusoe. When Matt reads the scene in which the native man, Friday, kneels before Crusoe and swears to be his slave, Attean gets upset and angry. He protests that the character would never kneel to a white man. This episode fuels Matt's **internal conflict**, through which he reassesses his views of the relationship between whites and "savages."

Chapter 10. As the reading lessons continue, Matt carefully edits out any references to the slave-master relationship between Friday and Crusoe. Unexpectedly, Attean invites Matt to go fishing. Matt does poorly with a spear Attean lends him; and when he falls in the water, he feels that Attean is mocking him. Resentful, Matt fishes in his own way. However, when he loses his hook, Attean shows him how to make new hooks from twigs.

Chapter 11. Seven weeks have passed and Matt's family has yet to arrive. Attean and Matt often go off hunting and fishing, sometimes with Attean's mangy dog. One day, Attean explains a sign on a tree stump—a picture of a beaver. It indicates that this is the hunting territory of his people, the Beaver clan; no other clan can hunt there. Attean shows Matt how to avoid getting lost in the forest by making secret signs to mark the route he has traveled. Matt suddenly realizes that he and Attean are reversing the roles in the story of Robinson Crusoe: The "savage" is teaching the white man. Matt also becomes aware that he deeply wants to earn Attean's respect.

Chapter 12. Matt decides that he wants a bow and arrows. Attean helps him make a good bow, using a particular kind of wood and a painstaking process that tries Matt's patience.

Chapter 13. One day in the forest, the boys come across a fox in an iron trap, an incident that **foreshadows** a key event later in the novel. Matt wants to end the fox's suffering, but Attean refuses. The fox is on clearly marked Turtle clan territory, he explains, and a member of the Beaver clan cannot hunt there. While admitting that using white men's traps is wrong, Attean explains that some Indians are reluctantly starting to use them to compete with white trappers.

Chapter 14. Matt finishes reading *Robinson Crusoe* to Attean, who reveals that he has been telling the rest of the tribe the story in episodes every night. Matt decides to share more stories with Attean by reading from his father's Bible.

Chapter 15. In this turning-point chapter, an important **external conflict** brings Matt and Attean closer together. Matt makes his first successful rabbit kill with the bow and arrow and is happy that Attean is there to witness it. Then, on their way to the beaver dam, the boys encounter a bear cub and its angry mother—ready to charge. Instinctively, Matt hurls the dead rabbit at the bear's nose, giving Attean time to shoot two arrows at the bear and then charge it with a knife. Matt is puzzled when Attean apologizes to the bear for killing it, but he gratefully accepts Attean's compliment that he acted quickly, like an Indian. At last Matt has earned some much-desired respect from Attean.

Chapter 16. After the triumph over the bear, Attean invites Matt to his tribe's village for a feast of bear meat. In a carefully detailed description of **setting**, we get our first glimpse of the Penobscot clan's village.

Chapter 17. Matt learns that not everyone in the village is happy to have him as company: Attean's grandmother hates all white men, because her daughter, Attean's mother, was killed by white men for no reason when Attean was a small child. After that tragedy, Attean's father went out to find his wife's killers and never returned. On his way home from the village, Matt notices many signs of the beaver, and he realizes that he could easily find his way back to the clan's village one day.

Chapter 18. A key chapter: It is autumn, and while far away from the cabin, Matt hears a yelping dog. He discovers that it is Attean's dog, caught in the same kind of iron trap that the fox had been caught in earlier. Matt tries to free the frantic dog, but the panicked creature tries to attack him. After Matt's arm is wounded in the attempt, he goes to the Beaver village to fetch Attean. Attean, however, has gone away with all the men to hunt. Matt insists on seeing Attean's grandmother, a brave move given that he knows she hates him. The grandmother does not understand English, but Attean's sister Marie translates for him. Matt manages to convince both of them that the dog is worth saving for Attean's sake. After the grandmother dresses Matt's wound, Marie accompanies him to the site of the trap. The two manage to free the dog.

Chapter 19. Two days later the grandmother, impressed that Matt went to so much trouble for Attean's dog, sends Attean to invite Matt back to the village. Attean shows Matt all around the village, and then they join some other boys in games. As Matt departs, he feels he has passed a test: He has been accepted by the Beaver clan, and he is finally respected by Attean. He no longer feels alone.

Chapter 20. Matt doesn't hear from Attean for a week. When Attean returns, he appears very serious. He tells Matt that he is leaving to seek his manitou—his spirit—which he must find before he can be considered a man and a hunter.

Chapter 21. One morning a changed Attean returns to Matt's cabin with Saknis. Matt can tell that Attean has found his manitou, because his head is shaved like an adult male's and he is carrying a rifle. Saknis explains that it is time to head north to hunt moose and invites Matt to join the Beaver clan on the hunt. With the approaching winter, Matt will find survival difficult, and he will be truly alone. Saknis voices Matt's biggest anxiety: His father may never return. Now Matt wrestles with an **inner conflict**. He is tempted to join Saknis and Attean, but he knows that it is his responsibility to stay on his father's land. Matt's loyalty to his family wins out, and he decides to stay.

Chapter 22. In the novel's bittersweet **climax**, Attean and Matt part ways. Four days later Attean returns with his dog to ask if Matt has changed his mind about coming. After Attean reveals his respect for his friend's

decision to remain, Matt reflects on the **irony** that a simple decision to stay put has earned him more respect than any amount of heroic action. Attean explains that his people will move west, where they think there are no white men. Matt knows better but says nothing to spoil Attean's hopes for the future. As a parting gift, Attean gives Matt his beloved old dog, a companion for his "white brother." Deeply moved, Matt decides to give Attean in return his most precious possession: the silver watch that his father bequeathed him.

Chapter 23. With winter settled in, Matt spends his days tending to tasks of survival. He creates winter clothing for himself and is proudest of his homemade otter-fur cap.

Chapter 24. It is nearly Christmas and the first snowfall comes one afternoon. By the next morning, Matt is almost trapped in the cabin by a bank of snow. Strapping on snowshoes that Saknis had given him, he discovers the joy of tramping about in the snow. In this newly benign **setting**, Matt realizes he is happy for the first time since Attean went away.

Chapter 25. The novel reaches a happy **resolution**: Three days after the snowstorm, Matt's family returns. His mother looks thin and pale, and Matt discovers the reasons for his family's delay: They contracted typhus, and the frozen river forced them to stay at a trading post. Eventually they had to make the rest of the journey overland by sled. Matt also learns that the new baby died after five days; his mother is still grieving. Matt's mother remarks that several families are moving to the area. Matt, who has begun to think like Attean, finds this possibility less than appealing. While resolving to tell his family about Attean and the Beaver clan later, he knows they will never fully understand his experiences.

APPROACHES FOR POST-READING ACTIVITIES

Speare is noted for both her evocation of **setting** and her handling of **characterization**, and both literary elements figure prominently in the novel. Its focus on a specific time and place makes it an excellent adjunct to American history studies. Discussion groups or students working on individual research projects might favor the

following activity.

Researching Colonial America

Elizabeth George Speare always conducted painstaking research for her novels, often going to primary sources for information. Here are some ideas for subjects students might want to research:

- How did colonial Americans live? How large were families, and what kinds of homes would you have found in the Northeast?
- What did people eat, and how did they provide for themselves? What was the average life expectancy? What diseases, disasters, and crimes did colonial settlers have to cope with?
- What economic problems did settlers face? What were their interactions with American Indians like?
- What problems did Penobscots face as white settlers moved into their land? What are they doing today?

MEET THE WRITER

Elizabeth George Speare (1908–1994) was born in Melrose, Massachusetts, where she grew up in a large, happy extended family. After graduating from Boston University in 1930, Speare taught high school English while earning a master's degree. In 1936, she married and then moved to Connecticut. Speare spent all her life in New England, the setting of *Sign of the Beaver*. Her secure reputation as a writer for young people rests on just four books, the best known of which, *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*, is one of the few books ever to be awarded the Newbery Medal by unanimous vote.

READ ON

Mary Whitebird, "Ta-Na-E-Ka." In this short story, eleven-year-old Mary experiences Ta-Na-E-Ka, a traditional Kaw Indian rite of passage involving survival skills and endurance.

Anne McCaffrey, "The Smallest Dragonboy." A short story about self-reliance and coming-of-age issues. On the planet Pern, an unlikely candidate, twelve-year-old Keevan, strives to achieve his dream of becoming a dragonrider.

Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve, "The Medicine Bag." In this short story, a Sioux Indian boy learns to accept his Sioux heritage and receives his family's medicine bag.

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