

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

House Made of Dawn

by
N. Scott Momaday

Book Information

N. Scott Momaday, House Made of Dawn
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Interest Level: UG

In this fictional story based on the lives of the author's Indian ancestors, a young American Indian is torn between two worlds--his ancestors' and the modern world.

Award: Pulitzer Prize

Topics: People, Native American; Popular Groupings, College Bound

Main Characters

Abel the main character; an Indian who cannot find where he truly belongs

Angela St. John a white woman who has an affair with Abel

Ben Benally an Indian friend and roommate of Abel's

Father Olquin the priest in Abel's town

Francisco Abel's grandfather and a hardworking Indian and Christian

Milly a social worker who is romantically involved with Abel

Reverend J. B. B. Tosamah Pastor and Priest of the Sun at the Holiness Pan-Indian Rescue Mission

Vocabulary

censer a vessel in which incense is burned

enmities a state or feeling of hostility or hatred

kaolin fine white clay from which porcelain is made

sacristan the official of the church who looks after the room where the sacred vestments and vessels are kept

scrivner an official scribe

stasis a stoppage or slowing of the normal flow of fluids in a body organ or vessel

swarthy dark in color

Synopsis

This is a story about an Indian man named Abel who feels misplaced in society. He leaves the reservation to go to war, but is not very successful. He finds that when he returns home from the military, he is not comfortable at home. He has a drinking problem and arrives home drunk. He has an affair with a white woman, kills an albino man, and goes to jail. When he gets out, he takes a job in the city and meets another Indian, Ben Benally.

He and Ben become friends, and Ben introduces him to Reverend John Big Bluff Tosamah. The reverend does not like reservation Indians, and Abel learns to dislike him. Abel also meets Milly, a social worker. They become involved, but his drinking and internal turmoil interfere with his life. Abel is severely beaten, and after he is released from the hospital, he leaves Ben and Milly and returns to the reservation.

At home, Abel finds that his grandfather who raised him is dying. He takes care of the old man until he passes away. Then Abel takes a trip to the Black Mesa to run a race.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

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Initial Understanding

Why does Abel feel out of place? How does alcohol affect his life?

There are many sad memories for Abel on the reservation. His mother and brother both died, and he feels alone. He leaves to join the military and goes to war. He seems to stay drunk while in battle and miraculously survives a savage attack that kills most of his unit. When he returns home, his drinking keeps him isolated from his grandfather. He murders a man one night while drunk and is sent to prison. Alcohol adds to his feelings of isolation. He tries to use it as an escape, but it really makes his problems worse.

Literary Analysis

How did the author introduce the reader to information that happened before the time frame of the story?

He used several literary devices. He used flashbacks to describe Abel's life as a boy and his relationship with his grandfather. Flashbacks were also used to describe Abel's relationship with Milly and Ben's friendship. He used an old journal being read by Father Olguin to tell about the albino. The author used imagery to make the reader "see" the eagle capture and the battlefield.

Inferential Comprehension

Ben and Abel are both Indians. Why did Ben survive in the city, while Abel did not?

While we are not given much background on Ben, we know he was able to leave the old ways behind. He also considered himself lucky to be where he was. Abel was traumatized by his past and did not fit in wherever he was.

Constructing Meaning

Why did Abel keep thinking of Milly when he was hurt and lying on the beach?

She was the one person in Los Angeles who really cared for him. Since he met her, she had been taking care of him. She had found him jobs, fed him, and loved him. He felt that she was the one person he could count on no matter what. He had many fond memories of their time together.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting Parts of the story are set in Mexico on an Indian reservation. Have the students research the Indian reservations in Mexico and the United States and cite similarities and differences. The tribes specifically mentioned in the story were the Navajos and the Pueblos. The legend of Santiago traveling in the region was celebrated in the story; have the students find more information about him and why he is a legend to the Indians in this story.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors

Alcoholism is a devastating disease. Have the students research the disease and its far-reaching effects. It is a disease that hurts the afflicted person and those who care about the person. The students can make charts or projects showing statistics on the disease and treatment options. They can read biographies of celebrities who suffered from alcoholism or study about the increasing numbers of teenagers affected by alcoholism in the United States and the futures they face.

Understanding the Author's Craft The author used flashback extensively in this story. Many parts of the story were told in reverse. The main character woke up on a beach, badly injured. The reader had to read about what he was thinking and remembering before it became apparent that he had been beaten up and his hands broken. In the next section of the story, after Abel returns home after being released from the hospital, Ben's thoughts reveal more of the story, showing how Abel came to be out the night he was

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attacked and who might have attacked him. Ask the students to discuss their opinions on this style of writing. Did they find it difficult to follow? How did they determine in each flashback who it was in the action? How would they have done it differently? How would the story have been different if it had been written in strict chronological order? Can they think of other stories they've read that were told the same way? One example would be the movie *Titanic*, which started in the modern day with a group of documentary scientists diving on the wreckage.

Comparing and Contrasting Abel finds it extremely difficult to fit in, either on or off the reservation. He uses alcohol and peyote to cope. Instead of helping his situation, this makes things worse. Ask the students to compare Abel and his reactions to change to the way teenagers cope with school and friends. Abel has self-esteem problems and is genuinely hurt by things people say to him. Additionally, there are many other stories told in books and film about misfits. Ask the students to find one and compare the stories.