

## ***The Sign of the Beaver***

### **Book Review**

New York: Dell (1983)

135 pages

grades 4-7

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**RATING: Harmful -5**

By Marlette Grant-Jackson

### **Overview:**

During the summer of 1769, Matt Hallowell and his father buy property in an up and coming town-site in Maine. Matt is left alone to guard the house when his father returns to Quincy Massachusetts to get Matt's pregnant mother and sister. While waiting months for his family to return to their cabin, 12 year old Matt endures many miss fortunes during his first two months alone. His fathers gun is stolen by a questionable red bearded guest, a bear breaks in and leaves him with little food supplies, and the dark shadows seem to be Indians watching Matt everywhere he goes. Matt is saved by two Penobscot Indians. Saknis and his grandson, Attean (14 years old), when he is almost drowned trying to elude a swarm of bees. To thank Saknis and Attean for saving his life Matt gives them his "only possession", a book. Saknis asks Matt to teach Attean to read the white man's signs, and in making a "treaty" Attean would provide Matt with food. During the months to come Attean ends up teaching Matt how to survive without guns, metal fish hooks and steal traps and how to find his way through the forest without getting lost. Matt shares his Robinson Crusoe book and bible stories with Attean. The boys become companions (not necessarily friends) and hunt and fish together often. You find that Atteans' distrust of "whites" comes from the loss of his mother and father, as well as hunting territory to the incoming settlers. As winter sets in Saknis offers to adopt Matt and take him north with the tribe as it moves west beyond the reach of settlers. Matt was impressed that Saknis offered the chance for him to be considered Attean's brother, but he also knew he must wait for his own family. His family finally returns in December and Matt waits to gradually tell his family all about the "Indians," figuring they wouldn't understand.

### **Before you start**

- Imagine yourself as a Native Child. You've grown up being an Indian, you know that your parents and grandparents are from a given tribe, you know that you have cultural ceremonies that are happy, very family oriented and spiritual. Your parents have warned you of stereotypes, shown you movies and taught you to think critically when viewing materials about people of other ethnicities. Then when you get in the fifth grade your teacher gives you a book that says Indians are slow learners, scary, dirty and the book uses a word that you have been taught is a bad word. How will you look at your teacher now? How will your parents react if they should read this book?

- Imagine yourself as a Native Child. You don't know much of anything about other Indian People, you know that under their breath your family has told you that you are Indian, when the light clicks on that you are Indian and that all your friends think of you as the Indian that is a slow learner, scary, dirty and "savage" How does this make you feel?

**Passages to consider:**

*"It was a good life, with only a few small annoyances buzzing like mosquitoes inside his head. One of these was the thought of Indians. Not that he feared them. His father had been assured by the proprietors that his new settlement would be safe. Since the last treaty with the tribes, there had not been an attack reported anywhere in this part of Maine. Still, one could not entirely forget all those horrid tales. And he just didn't like the feeling he had sometimes that someone was watching him."*

The tone of this book is that "Indians" are sneaky and inferior and is set as early as page 9 in paragraph #2.

So with this on page 9 the reader starts preparing for the "scary" Indians to appear in the story.

When Saknis and Attean do arrive in the story they not only save Matt from drowning, they save him from starvation and loneliness for several months and ensure his well being by teaching him how to use things from the environment to survive. Yet all Matt can do is think of the competition between himself and Attean, and how he could do better than the Indian boy.

Attean and Saknis speak in grunts and broken English. P.26 "Good." It was half word, half grunt. "White boy very sick. Now well."

*Once again it was impossible to tell whether Attean understood. Presently Matt slowed down. It was discouraging, reading to a wooden post.*

In Chapter 8 it is again presented to the reader that the Attean must be slow, unable to learn and uninterested because he didn't respond.

In Chapter 14 Matt has finished reading Robinson Crusoe to Attean, and finds that Attean has been retelling the story to his "brothers." So he decides to read him stories from the bible, because they are even better than Robinson Crusoe.

*The ancient Bible stories were filled with adventure. And they were told straight out in simple language that didn't need skipping."*

Does this insinuate that Attean did not understand the Robinson Crusoe story? When on page 37 Matt reads about the storm and sinking of the ship and notices that Attean did not show interest and tries to explain that the book gets better. Attean asks "*White man get out of water?*"

P 69 & 70. Matt reads the story of Noah and the Great Flood. Attean smiles with recognition for he knows a story that is about a great flood. Attean tells the story and Matt can't figure out how the Indians in the forest would know about a great flood? In the last paragraph a label is assigned to a "creation story" of a people within a culture and the label is that of a folktale, less than a bible story and surely not true.

*"With an ugly chill against his backbone, Matt stared at the hideously painted face."p76 "The Indian boy had washed his body, and it shown with fresh grease. He had combed his tangled black locks. Down his cheeks on either side and on his forehead ran broad streaks of blue and white paint. On a cord around his neck dangled a row of new bear's claws."*

Chapter 16, p 76 – 77, Again the reader shown how scary an Indian is and how unclean or unkept...

The use of the word squaw, and the implying tones of the "free" forest life of the men of the tribe again bring detrimental results to Native children.

**Discussion ideas.** (So you are going to use the book anyway.)

- What was the approximate year that this story was set?
- Why would Matt be afraid of Indians?
- Why would Attean not trust Whites or Matt?
- Saknis asks Matt to teach Attean to read. The only two books Matt has to offer is Robinson Crusoe or the Bible. What are some of the significant ideas behind offering these two books as reading material?
- Tell how you would go about teaching a non English reading student how to read.
- Why was it important to Saknis that Attean be able to read?
- What things does Matt learn from Attean that help him to survive?
- Do you think Matt could have survived on his own without the help of Attean and his grandfather? Why/Why not?
- Why would Matt think of Attean as "hideous" when his face was painted?
- In your opinion which boy needs the friendship the most?
- Matt lived alone with few possessions in the wilderness. If you were in a survival situation, and could only have ten possessions, what items would you choose?

Why would you choose these ten items? Write your list in order beginning with the most important item.

- Why would Matt's parents leave him alone? How did you feel when Matt was left alone for so long? Would your parents do this? How does this make you feel?
- Atteans parents were killed, how many family members do you think helped to raise him?
- Do you know any of the Maine tribes today?
- Did they all move west?
- What happened to the Indian tribes of the East Coast?
- What is a treaty?

**Credentials:**

As a Yurok & Karuk and mother of three children I have gotten an education to increase the success of our Native Students. I have a degree in Native American Studies with an emphasis on Education, and a minor in American Indian Education. I am also the Curriculum Resource Coordinator of the Indian Teacher & Educational Personnel Program at Humboldt State University.

I have had a child come home in tears after a teacher he admired made him read this particular book; a book that made my sons home life scary to his friends, and made him different; that poked fun at and negated his spiritual ceremonies and beliefs.