

A Penguin Readers Guide

Through Black Spruce

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ABOUT THE BOOK

How far do you have to go to escape your past? How far do you have to go to protect your family? How far do you have to go to find yourself?

As Will Bird lies deep in a coma, his heart and mind reach out to his niece Annie—to explain to her his troubled past, and the path of escalating violence that put him there. Sitting by her uncle's bedside, Annie also has a story to tell, of her harrowing search to find her missing sister in the big city, and how she found a protector in the most unexpected place. These two unique characters in Joseph Boyden's powerful new book, *Through Black Spruce*, draw the reader back to the world of his multiple award-winning first novel, *Three Day Road*.

Will is an aging bush pilot who seems content to live out his days as a bird who no longer flies. As long as he has his friends, his family, and his rye whisky, life is good for him in Moosonee. When Marius Netmaker, a local drug runner, suspects Will of being an informant for the police, he taunts Will with a series of increasingly violent episodes that culminate in a fateful confrontation. Taking to the skies one more time, Will flees to the contemplative solitude of the far wilderness, where he immerses himself in the old ways, struggling with nature and his own demons for survival.

Annie's sister Suzanne has fled to Toronto with Marius's brother Gus, a move that provokes concern in the Bird family and anger in the Netmakers. She becomes a successful model, but Gus's ties to the seedy world of illegal drugs and biker gangs lead to her mysterious disappearance. Fearing for her sister, Annie follows her trail, first to the disorienting streets of Toronto and Montreal and then to the intoxicating but heartless club scene of New York City. There she finds herself drawn into a world of image and exploitation, of fast times and shallow friends, and discovers that the only person she can trust is a street-smart Anishnabe mute named Gordon.

Some journeys are hard but must be taken, and true knowledge must be earned. Even though their paths lead them far from home and family, both Will and Annie return to Moosonee physically transformed and richer in spirit, having learned what lies through black spruce. ■

- Q • How did the incredible success of *Three Day Road* affect the writing process for *Through Black Spruce*?

I'd be lying if I said that the success of *Three Day Road* didn't give me reservations when beginning *Through Black Spruce*. For a while, I worried about reader expectations and sometimes, deep in the night, a little voice whispered, "Your first novel was a fluke. You won't be able to do that again." But then, when much of the travel for my first novel was finished, much kinder voices began to whisper to me. These eventually became Will and Annie Bird, and as soon as I began writing in earnest again, all my worries burned away like morning mist in the sun. I think sitting down to write a novel is daunting for any writer, but the day-to-day, page-at-a-time process takes over and grows into something I can only describe as a little miraculous. ■

- Q • After writing a novel so rich in historical research, was it refreshing to write a novel set in the here and now?

There are certain parameters, certain facts that can't be ignored when writing a historical novel. Those parameters don't exist nearly so rigidly when writing about the contemporary world. That world is your oyster, but it's a big oyster, indeed. And so I was forced to make careful decisions about where my characters would go that were both realistic and often surprising, especially when my characters began to develop. Will flees to the desolate north while Annie tracks her missing sister in the big cities down south. The research for this novel was clearly much different from the research for *Three Day Road*. Yes, it was refreshing not to have to pore over historical texts but rather to look at the contemporary world with as keen an eye as I could. ■

- Q • *Through Black Spruce* shares with its predecessor a dual-narrator structure. What does this format provide that a more traditional single narrator does not?

Utilizing two points of view rather than one is a bit of a balancing act. And there has to be a clear reason for a dual narrative that is organic to the story, or else it will feel false. The decision to once again use this structure wasn't even all that conscious. Apparently, the Bird Clan need one another to talk to when it feels as if the rest of the world is against them. Ultimately, the use of two perspectives offers a much wider scope, and just as importantly, a sort of call and response that I hope grows and echoes as the novel progresses. ■

- Q • Both of your novels explore the long-reaching effects that violence has on the soul. Why do you think this is such a common theme in Canadian literature?

I think that the exploration of violence and its effect on all of us isn't just a common Canadian theme but a universal one. Violence is an uncomfortable reality, I imagine, for most writers to explore, and it's in this dark place that much tension exists. And I believe tension is a very important ingredient in good fiction. On a more personal note, I've unfortunately witnessed my fair share of inexplicable violence, and exploring the most depraved of human actions in my writing acts as a small exorcism. ■

- Q • Why do you think that the theme of exile leading to self-discovery is such an important part of Canadian literature?

I didn't set out on a mission to explore the theme of exile and how it can lead to self-discovery, but certainly this novel and these characters comfortably fit into that realm. I originally set out to tell what I hoped would be a good story, an exciting read.

Once again, I think this theme is quite universal. It occurs in so much of our world literature because it includes all three of the conflicts at a writer's disposal: man versus man, man versus nature, and man versus self. It's a natural place for the writer to be drawn to in order to utilize tension, which once again, I believe, equals good fiction. ■

Q • What has been the reaction from the Native community to your books?

Native communities across Canada continue to be wonderfully supportive of my work. That many First Nations accept my writing as their own is an honour of huge importance for me. ■

Q • Some people see Canadian literature through the “Two Solitudes” perspective, whereby a book's place in either French or English culture is the key to exploring its themes and meanings. Where do you think the Native perspective fits in? Do you feel that Native culture is its own “solitude”?

Native culture is what I'd call the first pillar of Canadian culture. My own theory is that four pillars exist in our country's foundation: the English, the French, the Contemporary Immigrant, and the First Nation. Each plays a vital role in supporting and explaining who and what we are. I could go on forever, but I'll keep it as is. Maybe I'll write a book about this one day! ■

Q • What challenges did you face writing in Annie's young female voice?

Annie's voice came really naturally to me. I've mentioned in the past that I'm very comfortable writing in a woman's voice, in part because I have seven older sisters. And I'm incredibly lucky to have a wife who is an amazing novelist and my best editor. When

in doubt about how Annie might act or respond, all I had to do was ask Amanda's advice. She's never shy to point out any inconsistencies or places where a female voice doesn't ring true. ■

Q • Was it a challenge for you to capture the life of a model in New York City?

Admittedly, I don't believe that the world of high fashion is necessarily rocket science. But it certainly has its own complexities and hierarchies. On the surface, we mere mortals glimpse this world of fun and beauty and parties and glamour that all seems so spontaneous and natural. But the preparation, the focused energy, and the planning that happen behind the scenes when creating this imaginary world is rigid and corporate and geared toward making profit. Annie comes to recognize this as she delves deeper into that world, that place where one day she is a shining up-and-comer only to find out that the next day she is an undesirable. I believe the world of fashion is as cutthroat a business as any. ■

Q • You've spoken about writing a third book involving these characters and likened it to Robertson Davies's Deptford Trilogy. Did you originally envision a series of linked books when you started writing *Three Day Road*, or was it an organic decision?

I knew that the Bird Clan had a lot more to say as I neared completion of *Three Day Road*. I've mentioned before that I became a little depressed when I finished that book and came to realize it was because the characters with whom I'd spent years communing had gone silent. And then it struck me that my characters, like real people, can live on in their children and grandchildren. This idea excited me. It made me happy again. So yes, I think the idea of a trilogy was a pretty organic decision. As for the final book in the trilogy, the characters are already beginning to whisper to me. ■

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The gun that Will inherits from his father is described as “a rifle he’d lost but that had come back” and “a burden, not a gift” (p. 50). Discuss the gun’s history and what it represents to Will and his family.
2. When Annie goes to the big city, she is often mistaken for her sister Suzanne. How does this affect her sense of identity and the journey she undertakes?
3. Annie is surprised to find a tight-knit Native community living beneath the overpasses of Toronto and to hear DJ Butterfoot mixing Native songs with modern beats. Discuss the role that old traditions play in contemporary society.
4. “You lose some things,” Will observes, “so you must try and gain some things, too” (p. 89). How is this a theme for both Will and Annie?
5. Will undergoes a significant physical transformation during his time in the woods, and Annie finds herself turning into a shadow of her sister while in New York City. How do their physical changes reflect their spiritual changes?
6. Will tells the stories of his three plane crashes. What do they represent to his character, and to what extent does his own hubris play a part in those crashes?
7. Will comes face to face with two bears, under very different circumstances. Discuss the symbolism of these two bears and what they contribute to Will’s journey as a character.
8. “Fucking stories. Twisted things that come out no matter how we want them” (p. 273). Will and Annie struggle to tell each other their own story. What role does storytelling play in the novel, and why is it important for them to tell these stories to each other?
9. “Everything you need can be taken. Everything you hold dear, it can be taken” (p. 297). How do Will and Annie deal with the losses they face?
10. How has Annie become a healer to both Will and Gordon?