

Having Faith in the Polar Girls' Prison

Teacher's Guide

by Cathleen With

“The great sea
Has set me adrift.
It moves me
As the weed in a great river,
Earth and the Great Weather
Move me,
Have carried me away
And move my inward parts with joy.”

—sung by the ancient shaman Uvavnuk after a meteorite hit her

Before Reading

This novel deals with childhood sexual abuse, teen pregnancy, alcohol and drug abuse, and fetal alcohol syndrome. It's set in Canada's Western Arctic, in a fictional town near Inuvik, Northwest Territories. Trista is a fifteen-year-old who is part Inuvialuit (Inuit) and part white. She's in a youth detention facility with her newborn baby, Faith, who has severe disabilities.

Pre-Reading: Discussion Questions

- How does where you live and where you were raised affect how you live, speak, and see the world?
- Was there ever a time when your dreams for your life were different from your real life? What are some things you would change about your life if you could?
- What are your thoughts on destiny? Do you feel you have control over your destiny and over changes in your life?
- Aside from religious faith, what other things, people, or values can we have faith in? Do you think that having some kind of faith is integral to well-being?
- Who taught you your morals and values? What are some values that have been consistent for humans through time, regardless of culture or place?
- Some Northern towns have chosen to go "dry," meaning no alcohol is sold legally. Do you think this is a good solution? What are the rules governing the selling of alcohol in your community? Are young people still able to get access to it? What are the rules in other countries?
- What coping skills help us deal with personal tragedy?

Post-Reading: Discussion Questions

- The story opens with Trista in the youth facility (or “prison,” as she thinks of it) trying to breastfeed Faith while she reflects back on the Mackenzie River Iceroad and her childhood in Jackfish Bay. How does the beauty and desolation of the Arctic set the scene for her incarceration and contrast with our expectations of new motherhood?
- How do the lives of the other girls in the facility reflect the different problems that girls experience up North? What are some of the issues facing young women and men in your society? Discuss the similarities and differences, and how geography (for example, inner-versus outer-city living) affects young people.
- Trista’s Snow Nanuks had a profound effect on her childhood. How does Trista’s sense of family play into her dreams and hopes for Faith? Come up with some examples of how her Nanuks—as well as her Daduk, mother, uncles, aunts, and cousins—supported her while she was growing up.
- Friendship is a major theme in the novel. How does Trista’s relationship with Keely help or prevent her from getting better?
- As the novel progresses, we realize that Trista is an unreliable narrator and that often her relationship with Tyler is more dream than reality. Why do you think the author chose to have Trista narrate in this way? Can you think of other novels that have a naive or unreliable narrator?
- Trista refers to books that she’s studying in the facility’s school. Based on your prior knowledge of some of these books, how would you say Trista’s story is similar to, say, Scout’s in *To Kill a Mockingbird* or Ponyboy’s in *The Outsiders*?
- How do even minor characters (Lee, for example, or Sherry, the facility’s cook) give Trista hope for her and Faith’s future?

- Trista thinks back on stories she's heard about old times, and imagines what it would be like to live in those times: "I lie against [Snow Nanuk] and feel the shearling against my cheek, she helps me bring Faith out, and Faith latches on to my breast and I fall back, feel I am swimming in Snow Nanuk, me and Faithy swimming, this warm" (p. 69). Would Trista's life have been different had she been a mother at age fifteen up North a hundred years before? How has the North changed?
- Linda and Deb both try in their own ways to help Trista open up in Group and during individual counselling. Which methods do you think are effective? How do the other girls help Trista and Faith?
- Do you think the court ruling for Trista and Jimmy is just? How does your community incarcerate and/or rehabilitate youth?
- At the close of the novel, what are your hopes for Faith and Trista? How is the ending realistic? If you could, would you change the ending?

Post-Reading: Connecting to the Curriculum

1. Explain the significance of the title and its relationship to one of the major themes in the novel.
2. Recognize and explain the meanings of the title.
3. Explain the use of figurative language and rhetorical techniques in the text and how they function.
4. Briefly describe the main characters and explain their purpose in the story.
5. Offer a close reading of the novel and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text.
6. Demonstrate a literal, personal, interpretive, and critical understanding of the text.
7. Explain the central conflicts in the novel, and explain the nature of the internal and external conflicts with which various characters cope.
8. Identify and discuss the following themes:
 - a) the meaning of identity and culture in the North
 - b) loneliness and isolation in the Arctic
 - c) motherhood, teen pregnancy, fetal alcohol syndrome/narcosis addictive syndrome
 - d) nature and survival
 - e) violence
9. Trace and discuss images of the following: weather, grandparents/Nanuks, river, snow and ice, the Iceroad, northern lights, giving birth, animals.
10. Define the term *microcosm* and point out how Jackfish Bay in this novel is a microcosm of the Canadian North and many of its inherent problems.
11. Understand how the past (residential schools, the Canadian and U.S. military, Arctic oil and gas pipelines, Inuit and First Nations culture and migration) has influenced the present lives of Northern (Inuvialuit, Gwich'in, white) men and women.
12. Explain how each of the main characters in the novel deals with the concepts of loneliness,

belonging, and faith.

13. Understand how naive or first-person stream-of-consciousness narration is used in the novel.

Post-Reading: Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. This is a story about dreams and hopes. Describe Trista's dream. How is it similar to the dreams of a new mother? How is the reality of her situation different from that of new mothers in your society?
2. Foreshadowing is used to build suspense and make later actions more credible. Identify and discuss three incidents of foreshadowing in the novel and explain the effect this foreshadowing has on the reader's interpretation of events.
3. Nature is a major theme in the novel. Identify and explain how weather, or another natural element, affects Trista.
4. Examine the relationship between Trista and Tyler. Be sure to focus on both the negative and positive aspects of the relationship. Which aspects are real and which are Trista's fantasy?
5. Choose one of the minor characters in the novel (for example, Linda, Deb, Keely, Deanne, Lee) and explain the purpose he or she serves in the story. How would the story change if this character wasn't a part of it?
6. The novel explores child sexual abuse as well as drug and alcohol abuse. Explain how you feel these issues are portrayed, using specific evidence from the text to support your answer. Then, explain whether or not you believe Trista's past behaviour was inevitable, again using specific evidence from the text to support your answer.
7. Using any pairing of characters, explain how the novel explores one person's responsibility to another.
8. Explain how animal or weather imagery is used to convey the emotional states of the characters.
9. Using specific examples from the novel, explain whether or not the reader should feel

sympathetic toward Trista, Tyler, Jimmy, and Faith.

10. Compare and contrast the death of Trista's mother with Trista's attempt to break out of the facility with Faith. What does each event add to the novel's themes of motherhood, faith, redemption, and grief?