

BOOK ONE OF **THE MISEWA SAGA**



THE **BARREN** **GROUND**S

DAVID A. ROBERTSON

WINNER OF THE GOVERNOR GENERAL'S AWARD

EDUCATOR'S GUIDE



THE BARREN GROUNDS

DAVID A. ROBERTSON

is the author of numerous books for young readers including *When We Were Alone*, which won the 2017 Governor General's Literary Award and was nominated for the TD Canadian Children's Literature Award. *Strangers*, the first book in his Reckoner trilogy, a young adult supernatural mystery, won the 2018 Michael Van Rooy Award for Genre Fiction (Manitoba Book Awards). A sought-after speaker and educator, Dave is a member of the Norway House Cree Nation and currently lives in Winnipeg. For more information, visit his website: www.darobertson.ca and follow him on Twitter: [@DaveAlexRoberts](https://twitter.com/DaveAlexRoberts)

This guide was created by **APRIL WATERS**, a Métis educator from Treaty One territory in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. She has been a classroom teacher and Indigenous Education teacher for over a decade, and provides instructional support and professional development for educators in bringing authentic Indigenous perspectives, culture and history into their classrooms.

Narnia meets traditional Indigenous stories of the sky and constellations in an epic middle grade fantasy series from award-winning author David Robertson.

Morgan and Eli, two Indigenous children forced away from their families and communities, are brought together in a foster home in Winnipeg, Manitoba. They each feel disconnected, from their culture and each other, and struggle to fit in at school and at their new home – until they find a secret place walled off in an unfinished attic bedroom. A portal opens to another reality, Askí, bringing them onto frozen, barren grounds, where they meet Ochek (Fisher). The only hunter supporting his starving community, Misewa, Ochek welcomes the human children, teaching them traditional ways to survive. But as the need for food becomes desperate, they embark on a dangerous mission. Accompanied by Arik, a sassy Squirrel they catch stealing from the trapline, they try to save Misewa before the icy grip of winter freezes everything – including them.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The main character, Morgan, is a thirteen-year-old girl who lives with a foster family. Describe her personality. What has Morgan's life been like up to this point?
2. Describe Morgan's feelings towards her current foster family. How does she express these feelings? How is her current situation different from her past foster experiences?
3. Describe Morgan's relationship with Eli, the twelve-year-old boy who is also being fostered in the same home. How has Morgan's childhood differed from Eli's childhood? How have they been similar? Why do both of them feel so different from other students at their school?
4. Morgan is an avid reader, especially of fantasy novels, and Eli is a gifted artist. Why do you think they connect with one another? Why do you think these interests are so important to them?
5. How do you think Morgan feels about being Indigenous? Why do you think her foster parents Katie and James try so hard to connect her to her Indigenous culture? How does Morgan react to that?
6. Why do you think the residents (the animals) of Misewa refer to the Cree language as "the good words"? Why do you think the author, David Robertson, uses so many Cree words throughout the novel?
7. In the novel, Ochek states, "All things are connected. Your world and this one, the sky and the land. All that is." Cree Elders and Knowledge Keepers talk about "misewa" – all that is. Why do you think the author uses "Misewa" as the name of the community?
8. What do you think is the significance and meaning behind Morgan's dreams? Why do you think her mother repeats "kiskisitotaso" over and over again in her dream?
9. Why do you think Morgan and Eli helped to save the lives of Arik and, later, Mahihkan?
10. *The Barren Grounds* contains Cree teachings around sustainability and the land. What are some of these beliefs and concepts? What does the man represent? How does this connect to issues in the world today?
11. Mistapew is a giant being in Cree stories that, according to Ochek, "takes your soul and leaves only flesh and bones behind." How does the author use Mistapew in the story? Does Mistapew remind you of similar creatures in other stories?
12. Why does connecting to and learning to live off the land become so important to Eli and eventually Morgan as well?
13. Identity and knowing who you are is something that Morgan struggles with throughout the novel. What kinds of things make up and impact your identity? What has disrupted Morgan's sense of identity? How does this lack of identity affect how Morgan interacts in the world?



FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

1. Read *Tipiskawi Kisik: Night Sky Star Stories* by Wilfred Buck. Have students compare and contrast Cree constellations and star stories to ancient Greek and Roman mythological stories. Why is it important to learn about Cree stories? Why do you think we have only usually ever heard about Greek and Roman stories in school?
2. Learn about the history of the land you are currently on. Whose traditional territories are these? What treaties were signed so that you could share space there? What Indigenous languages are spoken in your area? As a class, think of ways to honor this and share this knowledge within your school community.
3. Invite an Indigenous Elder or Knowledge Keeper from a local Indigenous community into your classroom. Ask them if they would be willing to share their teachings and knowledge around the land and sustainability. Connect this knowledge to environmental justice projects that are currently taking place within your school community.
4. Two of the main characters, Morgan and Eli, are children who have been placed in care (the foster system) for different reasons. Investigate the current situation and statistics of children in care in your area. Why do you think there are so many Indigenous children within the foster system? Has this been true of previous generations? Why do you think this is? Have students think about and discuss how historical events and colonization have contributed to this.
5. Imagine that *The Barren Grounds* is turned into a movie. In small groups, have students create movie posters that theaters would use to advertise. Who would the students choose (which actresses/actors) to play Morgan and Eli? What imagery and words/phrases would they include on the poster to entice viewers without giving away the story? How would they honor the Cree culture within the movie and on the poster?

