

Book Club Discussion Guide



The Barren Grounds by David A. Robertson, Page 1 (May 2022)

The Barren Grounds

By David A. Robertson

About the author:

DAVID A. ROBERTSON (he, him, his) was the 2021 recipient of the Writers' Union of Canada Freedom to Read Award. He is the author of numerous books for young readers including *When We Were Alone*, which won the 2017 Governor General's Literary Award and the McNally Robinson Best Book for Young People Award. *The Barren Grounds*, the first book in the middle-grade *The Misewa Saga* series, received a starred review from Kirkus, was a Kirkus and Quill & Quire best middle-grade book of 2020, was a USBBY and Texas Lone Star selection, was shortlisted for the Ontario Library Association's Silver Birch Award, and was a finalist for the 2020 Governor General's Literary Award. His memoir, *Black Water: Family, Legacy, and Blood Memory*, was a Globe and Mail and Quill & Quire book of the year in 2020, and won the Alexander Kennedy Isbister Award for Non-Fiction as well as the Carol Shields Winnipeg Book Award at the 2020 Manitoba Book Awards. *On The Trapline*, illustrated by Julie Flett, won David's second Governor General's Literary Award and was named one of the best picture books of 2021 by the CCBC, *The Horn Book*, *New York Public Library*, *Quill & Quire*, and *American Indians in Children's Literature*. Dave is the writer and host of the podcast *Kíwew*, winner of the 2021 RTDNA Praire Region Award for Best Podcast. He is a member of Norway House Cree Nation and currently lives in Winnipeg.

Source: Author's website: (<https://www.darobertson.ca/>)

Book Club Discussion Guide



The Barren Grounds by David A. Robertson, Page 2 (May 2022)

About this book:

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.

Source: Author's website: (<https://www.darobertson.ca/>)

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?

Book Club Discussion Guide



The Barren Grounds by David A. Robertson, Page 3 (May 2022)

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?

Book Club Discussion Guide



The Barren Grounds by David A. Robertson, Page 4 (May 2022)

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?

Source: Tundra Books website (<https://tundrabooks.com/>)