

TEACHER RESOURCE GUIDE

English 12 First Peoples

APRIL 2008



first nations education
steering committee

www.fnesc.ca

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UNIT 12: MÉTIS LITERATURE

OVERVIEW

This unit on Métis literature is presented in six parts: Introduction, Novel Study I, Novel Study II, Poetry, Drama, and Humour.

The introduction will give students and teachers a sense of Métis history and culture from the historic fur trading days to contemporary times as well as raise broader questions about nationhood and personal identity. Teachers may wish to use part or all of this section.

The extensive novel study introduces students to Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed*, a groundbreaking work not only for the Métis, but also in terms of raising awareness of issues for all Canadian Aboriginal peoples. Questions of identity in the novel link to history and family, and in more contemporary times to extended social community.

The third part looks at selections from *In Search of April Raintree* by Beatrice Culleton Mosionier, and examines how Métis people establish identity when their ties to history, family, and community have been cut by foster care and alienation. This part also examines the tragedies that occur when identity is lost.

The poetry study looks at how Métis poets tackle the question of identity in many different ways. Poems that have similar stylistic or formal characteristics have been paired for study. Poets Emma LaRocque, Joanne Arnott, Joan Crate, Marilyn Dumont, and Gregory Scofield are featured. The question of two-spiritedness is examined with regard to Scofield's work.

The drama study features selections from *Age of Iron*. Playwright Marie Clements has been described as using cutting-edge and unusual theatrical techniques in her plays. This avant-garde play crosses time and history to link Aboriginal people to world themes without losing sight of their particular struggles.

This final section examines humour in Ian Ross's *Joe from Winnipeg* series that allows for a gentle and personal criticism of social conditions.

LESSON PLANS IN THIS UNIT:

Part I: Introduction – Métis History and Culture

Who are the Métis?
What is a Nation? Group Research Assignments
Research Time (may be extended to two classes)
Research Presentations and Summary (may be extended to two classes) Introduction
Reflection (80 marks)
Cultural Day or Guest Speaker

Handouts and Assessment Tools:

Research Evaluation
Métis Contributions to Canada
The Métis People of Canada
Time Line – Métis History, Early Years

Part II: Novel Study: *Halfbreed* by Maria Campbell

A Living, Personal Sense of Métis History

A Living, Personal Sense of Métis History: Chapter Questions
Summary of Novel Study and Section Assignment

Handouts and Assessment Tools:

Ancestral Chart

**Part III: Novel Study: Selections, In Search of April Raintree by Beatrice Culleton
Masionier**

Concepts of Métis Identity, Lost Identity, and History
Themes in the Novel
Presentation of Oral Assignments

Part IV: Poetry Study: Métis Poets

Emma LaRocque and Joanne Arnott
Joan Crate and Marilyn Dumont
Gregory Scofield

Handouts and Assessment Tools:

Poetry Poster Assignment—"Can You Hear Me?" and "Leather and Naughahyde"
Two-Spiritedness

Part V: Drama Study: *Age of Iron* by Marie Clements

Aboriginal Connections, Avant-garde
Presentation of Theatre Assignments

Handouts and Assessment Tools:

Humour: Performance Piece

Part VI: Humour: *Joe from Winnipeg* by Ian Ross

Student Presentations

Handouts and Assessment Tools:

Cold and Sorries by Ian Ross
Global Warming by Ian Ross

Bibliography and Further Resources

Special thanks to Aboriginal Education, School District 68 Nanaimo Ladysmith and the Mid Island Métis Nation for permitting the use of materials developed by Donna Elwood Flett when she served as Métis Liaison 1999-2001.

**PART III: NOVEL STUDY: SELECTIONS FROM *IN SEARCH OF APRIL RAINTREE*
BY BEATRICE MOSIONIER**

Concepts of Métis Identity, Lost Identity, and History

Learning Outcomes: A1-5, possibly A6 &7 in activity 2, A9-13, possibly B3, B5, B8, B9, B11, C1, C2, possibly C4, C8, C10, C11

Resources

Préfontaine, Darren R. “Métis Writers.” The Virtual Museum of Métis History and Culture: Gabriel Dumont Institute of Native Studies and Applied Research.
<http://www.Métismuseum.ca/media/document.php/00733.pdf>

Teacher Information

Selections from *In Search of April Raintree* are found on pages 280-291 of *An Anthology of Canadian Native Literature in English*, 3rd Edition.

Here is what Darren R. Préfontaine wrote in his article entitled “Métis Writers” about Mosionier and *In Search of April Raintree*:

Beatrice Culleton

*White Man, when you first came, most of our tribes began with peace and trust in dealing with you, strange white intruders. We showed you how to survive in our homelands. We were willing to share with you are our vast wealth. Instead of repaying us with gratitude, you, White Man, turned on us, your friends. You turned on us with your advanced weapons and your cunning trickery.
As Long As the Sun Shall Rise...*

Beatrice Culleton, a Manitoba Métis author, playwright and novelist, was born on 27 August 1949 in St. Boniface Manitoba, to Louis and Mary Clara Mosionier. Beatrice was the youngest of four children in a dysfunctional and broken home. At age three she was taken away from her parents and raised in a series of foster homes, and away from her family and Métis heritage. Taunted and increasingly abused, she began denying her Aboriginal heritage after she was ten and wholeheartedly embraced Euro-Canadian values. This odyssey wrecked havoc on her personal identity and she went from foster home to foster home and it eventually destroyed two of her sisters: they committed suicide. She eventually settled in Toronto, where she currently resides. As a trained accountant, Ms. Culleton never envisioned that she would become a writer. However, the suicide of her sister in 1980 spurred her to write about her and her family's inner torment.

Ms. Culleton[’s] first novel *In Search of April Raintree*, which was published in 1983, was given the new title *April Raintree* in 1984. The novel, which is highly psychological, was largely auto-biographical and dealt with the painful experiences which many young Aboriginal people face trying to discover who they really are. The theme of the book articulated the necessity of community and self-healing, and as such it was given wide acclaim by both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal population.

April Raintree is set in Winnipeg and it tells the story of two sisters who have alcoholic parents who are oblivious to the destruction of their family, and this led to tragic consequences when the family's baby dies and the two sisters are sent to a number of foster homes. The two sisters grow apart and become gradually estranged from the other: the one sister grows up hating and denying her Métis heritage and the other sister embraces it. Later the two sisters meet when they are adults and the older sister, who looks white, tells the younger sister, who looks more visibly Aboriginal:

I am ashamed... I can't accept being Métis. That's the hardest thing that I've ever said to you, Cheryl. And I'm glad you don't feel the same way I do. I'm so proud of what you are trying to do. But to me, being Métis means that I'm one of the have-nots. And I want so much. I'm selfish. I know it, but that's the way I am. I want what white society can give me.

The two sisters go their separate ways and the Métis-hating sister, April, moves to Toronto and becomes successful and married, while the pro-Métis sister, Cheryl, becomes radical, sullen, inward-looking, and withdrawn from society. Eventually, the lives of the two sisters turn for the worst: April's marriage falls apart and she moves back to Winnipeg and she is brutally assaulted. Cheryl commits suicide, as her mother had. These tragic circumstances force April to come to terms with her Métis heritage. Written in a lamentable but emotional prose, the story is a poignant reminder of the inner pain and struggle, and self hate, which many Métis face when analyzing their heritage. It has become widely read in Europe and elsewhere as "Native" and not "Canadian" literature, and like Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed* is a scathing indictment of an uncaring society which allows its children to suffer and of the colonization of its Aboriginal peoples.

Suggested Activity Sequence

Pre-Reading Activities

1. Introduce the new work to be studied and read the selection from Préfontaine's essay.
2. The class can discuss some of the statements Préfontaine makes in light of the search for identity that students examined and explored in *Halfbreed*. Campbell had a very direct connection to her history, people, and culture, whereas the Raintree sisters did not. This raises several questions about how important history and culture are in identity formation. How does Cheryl Raintree rediscover her history, and was it enough for her? If not, why not? If modern Métis individuals are now separated by time and space from their traditional culture and history, how are their identities as Métis formed? It is often interesting to form a physical "opinion line or graph" concerning such questions that gets students on their feet and gives a quick visual image of class opinions. An opinion line is simply a line of students where those with one opinion stand at one end and those with the opposite stand at the other end and those with opinions that vary or depend on different influences situate themselves in between. A physical opinion "graph" is similar except that the poles are on opposite sides of the classroom and allow for accurate visual representation where students hold stronger and more diametrically opposed opinions because those students bunch at opposite sides of the room. Students with opinions that depend on influences and circumstances will locate themselves somewhere between the two sides of the room. Both activities require students to physically move and to talk to each other.

Unit 12: Métis Literature

3. Préfontaine says *In Search of April Raintree* "...is a poignant reminder of the inner pain and struggle, and self hate, which many Métis face when analyzing their heritage." Students should discuss this statement. "Self hate" is a very powerful and condemning description. If any Métis students are in the class, they might have strong opinions about this statement. Is it accurate or too broad a generalization? Why or why not?

Assessment/Evaluation

Journal

Students should write a journal entry to demonstrate their understanding of the complexities and difficulties an individual faces in trying to form an identity when there is no direct connection to culture and history. Students can be asked to make connections to other Aboriginal situations and circumstances in which formation of an identity would be similarly difficult. Students might think about

- residential school children
- children put in foster care in non-Aboriginal families that do not allow cultural education
- the Aboriginal individuals jailed at the beginning of the 1900s for continuing to practise their culture after laws had been passed making that illegal (Potlatch Laws)
- Aboriginal children whose parents or grandparents pretended they were not Aboriginal or who refused to pass on the culture, etc.

Students might also wish to tackle Préfontaine's opinion that Métis feels self-hate when analyzing their history; students might ask why Préfontaine might wish to make such a statement and speak for all modern Métis.

10 marks

Home Assignment

Ask students to write or create a poster or to use another method of expression that shows how their identity has been influenced by family, family history, and culture. It is important to note that many students may not identify their biological family members as the strongest influences involved in identity-formation, and may identify individuals to whom they are not biologically related as family members. Students may identify negatively with some or all family members and/or their family history, and others may be in the process of struggling with identity issues for any number of reasons. Teachers will need to exercise professional judgment with regard to how to handle any or all of these scenarios. Some students may wish to show these or perform at next class if their work is performance. Students who do a creative piece should be able to explain orally or in writing how their work demonstrates their identity formation.

10 marks

TOTAL: 20 marks

Themes in In Search of April Raintree

Learning Outcomes: A1-13, B1, B3-5, B7-9, B11, B12, C1-4, C8-12, C13

Resources

Moses, Daniel David and Terry Goldie, eds. *An Anthology of Canadian Native Literature in English*, 3rd Edition. Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Mosionier, Beatrice Culleton. *In Search of April Raintree*. Critical Edition ed. Cheryl Suzack. Winnipeg: Portage & Main P, 1999.

Teacher Information

Selections from *In Search of April Raintree* are found on pages 280-291 of *An Anthology of Canadian Native Literature in English*.

It is helpful to use some of the essay ideas from the Critical Edition of *In Search of April Raintree* for hints about the overall themes and motifs in the novel, and to help students focus on topics for their discussions and section assignment.

In her introductory essay, editor Cheryl Suzack documents what an important impact the novel has had for and on its readers: “The novel owes its success as much to its ability to emotionally engage readers as to its consideration of familiar themes, values, and ideas...It is a novel that crosses disciplinary boundaries to engage with issues of racism and the socialization of Native children, ‘truth-telling’ and the representation of social discourse, and First Nations literary history and the quest for identity.” (2)

Suzack details the publication history of the book, which when the critical edition was published in 1999, had seen continuous and consistent sales, and circulation in three languages.

THEMES AND OVERARCHING IDEAS

Missing Identity, Missing Culture, Missing History

Margery Fee’s essay “Deploying Identity in the Face of Racism” claims that *In Search of April Raintree* “rejects whiteness or Nativeness as simple, clearcut identities.” (2-3)

Janice Acoose’s essay “The Problem of ‘Searching’ for April Raintree” “demonstrates how the novel thematizes the absence of positive narratives of Métis culture and history in her exploration of the Raintree sisters’ quests to recover a sense of self and community.” (3) Acoose says the novel resists readers’ attempts to find within the novel the presence and definition of Métis culture and history and so opens up the possibility for discussion about what constitutes history and culture.

Social Justice Issues

Jeanne Perreault’s “In Search of Cheryl Raintree, and Her Mother” considers social and physical realities facing many people of Native heritage: illness, infant mortality, foster care, alcoholism, rape, domestic violence against women, prostitution, and suicide. (4)

Cultural Dislocation and Affirmation of Aboriginal Identity

Jo-Ann Thom in “The Effect of Readers’ Responses on the Development of Aboriginal Literature in Canada: A Study of Maria Campbell’s *Halfbreed*, Beatrice Culleton’s *In Search of April Raintree*, and Richard Wagamese’s *Keeper’n Me*” claims that contemporary writers (Richard Wagamese for example) reimagine truths of systematic racism and cultural dislocation as narratives of cultural healing. Thom argues that contemporary authors recognize and extend the

work of previous Aboriginal authors, and transform racist discourse into narratives that affirm Aboriginal culture and identity. (6)

Sisterhood, Feminism, and Solidarity

Heather Zwicker's "The Limits of Sisterhood" examines sisterhood in order to conceptualize community among women. She poses the following question: How do we celebrate difference without giving up on possibility of solidarity? She argues that disintegration between sisters demonstrates the disintegration of a feminism that fails to respond to a community founded on mutual responsibility and recognition of difference. (6)

[There is an interesting, short essay comparing *April Raintree* and *The Color Purple* for students who are interested in this topic: <http://www.reneemattila.com/A%20Comparison.htm>.]

There is a huge collection of young people's responses to *In Search of April Raintree* as part of an English course, which teachers may find helpful and informative at:

http://pwmartin.blog.uvm.edu/182/archives/discussion_topic_for_in_search_of_april_raintree.php

Teachers can find a wider selection from the book on Google books, should they wish students to do further reading of the text.

Suggested Activity Sequence

1. If students have presentations from the first lesson, it is a good idea to have them at the start of this class before new material is introduced.
 2. Teachers can share the information from the critical edition essays and use the themes identified as focus for student readings. It would be a good idea to allow class discussion or questions related to each theme idea as it is introduced. Students can then read independently, thinking of the theme that appeals most to them, and which can guide their own response to the reading. The selection is short.
 3. Teachers can use the questions and answers below in whichever way best suits their purpose: for comprehension, discussion, journals entries, or projects, etc.
1. Mosionier uses humour in a terrifying situation when the Mother Superior greeted April and Cheryl at the orphanage, much like Campbell used humour in *Halfbreed*. Why do you think Mosionier did this?

Answer: Students might have different suggestions. The belief the nuns were "boogeywoman" strongly reminds readers that the children were very young, as does Cheryl's nickname of "Apple" for April.

2. In the second selection, April is obviously older. Compare Mosionier's statements about what the Métis were and how April was going to be different with the way Campbell portrayed the Métis later in *Halfbreed* and her personal goals.

Answer: Both described the Métis as drunks, weak, dirty and poor; both want to be rich and *not* like the Métis.

3. In the third selection, Cheryl has already committed suicide. Describe how April comes to her Métis self awareness and identity in comparison to Maria's awakening in *Halfbreed*.

Answer: April has an epiphany of sorts and comes to her awareness in the midst of feelings of rage, responsibility, and despair when she seizes the whiskey bottle in Cheryl's room and smashes it. She suddenly cries out her hatred of alcohol, all it represents, and all it has done to not only her family but also to the Métis: "I hate you for what you've done to my sister! I hate you for what you've done to my parents! I hate you for what you've done to my people! Our people!" Maria had a nervous breakdown, having repressed all her feelings; her healing came through the detox program at the hospital, and through the help of friends and the AA.

4. In her journal entry, Cheryl identifies the street Métis as empty, but she also identifies the "white" life she thinks April is living as empty. What is it that gives fulfillment to people in life? Why does Cheryl appear to have such difficulty finding that? Why is it that she has "made" her father into something he cannot be and which she cannot accept?

Answer: Students will have different answers. Some might say riches bring fulfillment; students must back up their opinion and examine what it is that Cheryl sees as empty in a rich person's life. Cheryl, in spite of her philosophy, had wanted her father to be someone other than who he was, though she does not even tell readers if her father was happy in the life he was leading between Josie Pohequitas's house and the bush because she never bothers to find out for herself. It would appear that Cheryl had tied her Métis identity, and the likelihood of living a different life, to her father's identity and life. She had mythologized her past and discovered that it did not exist. See the comment by April later in this section: "That meeting with Dad, maybe it destroyed her self-image...I wondered what sort of image she had built up about our parents?"

5. Does it appear that Cheryl understands that her parents were hurt after losing their children to foster care? Why do you think she appears to blame them for the hurt she and April suffered in foster homes?

Answer: Students should recognize that this is a displaced anger, blame, and guilt for what went wrong. It is what happens when people place responsibility on someone else instead accepting responsibility themselves and trying to change things.

6. What kind of choices does Cheryl make that cause her to end up in skid row, living like the Métis people she criticized and hated? What do you think made her do this? In the novel, Cheryl had been to university and was active in the Native community.

Answer: Students will have to hypothesize here, because they do not know the entire story, but they might rely on their study of *Halfbreed* and Cheryl's reaction to her father's lifestyle. Students might raise issues of despair, constant striving without rest, exhaustion, isolation, a failure to build a strong sense of inner self and worth (self-esteem), etc.

7. Campbell as well as Cheryl and April have trouble talking about their problems and feelings. Do you think it is important to be able to talk about feelings and problems? Why or why not? What do you think can help people get past that barrier?

Answer: Students will have different answers; it is the process of self-examination that is important here in terms of self-identity.

8. At the end of this selection, April seems to have found some sense of identity as a Métis person. What do you think forms that identity?

Answer: Student answers will vary but may include family (her nephew as well as all her lost family members); a sense that there is a community of people to which she belongs.

9. Novels that are constructed using letters and diary entries are called *epistolary* novels. The word “epistolary” comes from “epistle” meaning a letter, often a long one on a serious subject. Not all of *In Search of April Raintree* is epistolary, but key parts from Cheryl’s diary and letters are included. What do you think these epistolary entries tell us that we could not otherwise learn through April’s narrative? What are the benefits and drawbacks of epistolary selections in novels?

Answer: Students should note that Cheryl’s diary entries and letters let us see her true thoughts and feelings, and not just the ones she expressed publicly. They show a hidden, perhaps more real, side of a person. The benefit of such a stylistic device is that it allows us inside a character and shows the more complex personality, the feelings and thoughts that motivate the character. The drawbacks are that letters are often written for effect and when we read them we must try to figure out if there is an ulterior motive the writer had in writing the letter. Diary entries tend to be “true” displays of a person’s inner self; however, a diary left behind for others to find might lead us to ask why it was not destroyed, since it was personal and private.

Assessment/Evaluation

In the critical edition of the novel, Mosionier’s own essay “The Special Time” explores the personal events that have shaped her continuing exploration of issues of racism and suicide. Many of the themes and events in the novel mirror those in Mosionier’s life. In her essay, Mosionier said: “Of the two sisters, Cheryl Raintree was the character whom I most wanted readers to love” (4). Write a one-page essay or a creative piece (poem, monologue, rap poem, song, dance, etc.) that explores the reasons why you think Mosionier said that. Be prepared to orally share your work in the next class.

OR

Write a one-page essay or a creative piece (poem, monologue, rap poem, song, dance, etc.) that explores one of the novel’s themes. Be prepared to orally share your work in the next class.

25 marks

Presentation of Oral Assignments

Learning Outcomes: A6, A7, A13

Teachers may wish to address any outstanding issues or questions with regard to *April Raintree* before proceeding to the assignment presentations. Presentations may take more than one lesson.

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OR

Write a one-page essay or a creative piece (poem, monologue, rap poem, song, dance, etc.) that explores one of the novel’s themes.

25 marks

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<http://www.Métismuseum.ca/media/document.php/00733.pdf>

Further Resources

First Nations, Inuit and Métis Literatures and Cultures
<http://compcanlit.usherbrooke.ca/links.html#Inuit>

This is an informative site with links to an extensive list of Aboriginal authors, publishers, etc.:

Borgerson, Lon and Suntep Theatre. *A Thousand Supperless Babes: The Story of the Métis*. Prince Albert, Sask.: Gabriel Dumont Institute (GDI).

This multimedia theatre work, with both a book and a CD, reveals Métis history through story, song, and dance. Included in the package are the play’s script, sheet music, musical score, and a media presentation of historical images.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This document has been developed under the supervision of project managers Christa Williams (2006-2007) and Karmen Brillon (2007-2008), First Nations Education Steering Committee.

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The First Nations Education Steering Committee would also like to acknowledge the contribution of the English 12 First Peoples IRP Development Team as well as the support and assistance of the English 12 First Peoples Advisory Team.

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LOUISE BERNICE HALFE, SKY DANCER. “I’m So Sorry” Used by permission of Coteau Books.

TOMSON HIGHWAY. “A Note on the Trickster” excerpted from *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. Used by permission of Anchor Canada.

LEE MARACLE. “Yin Chin” excerpt used by permission of the author.

DUNCAN MERCREDI. “Morning Awakening” originally printed in *Spirit of the Wolf*, Pemmican Press, 1990. Used by permission of Pemmican Press.

RITA JOE. “I Lost My Talk” used by permission of the Joe family estate.

IAN ROSS. “Global Warming” and “Cold and Sorries” excerpted from *Joe from Winnipeg*, J. Gordon Shillingford Publishing, 1999. Used by permission of the publisher.

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