



Soapstone Signs

Jeff Pinkney

illustrated by Darlene Gait

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About the Book

One spring, a nine-year-old Cree boy is visited by a master soapstone carver named Lindy, who gives him four pieces of soapstone. The primary secret to carving, the boy learns, is recognizing that each piece of soapstone already holds its true form inside. Lindy teaches the boy to listen to the soapstone and look to the world around him for signs as to what to carve. As the seasons change, the young boy's experiences lend him opportunities to develop his carving skills and become attuned to the signs around him. He eagerly awaits the following spring, which will bring Lindy's return and a chance to show off his carvings.

About the Author

Jeff Pinkney holds an English degree from Trent University, is a former newspaper columnist, and currently works as a business advisor. *Soapstone Signs*, his first work of fiction, draws on Jeff's experiences while travelling as a development consultant in Canada's James Bay Frontier, where he acquired a deep appreciation for the people and the landscape. Jeff is an emerging poet, writer and an amateur stone carver. He and his wife Leslie share a brood of three story-loving daughters. Learn more at www.jeffpinkney.com.

About the Writing

As a tourism consultant living in South Porcupine, Ontario, Jeff travelled his James Bay Frontier route by train and by plane. He fell in love with the landscape at Moose River Crossing where the train tracks cross the mighty Moose River before the train rolls into Moosonee. It was there that he would dream of opening a birder's lodge. These wonderful memories provide the setting for *Soapstone Signs*. Jeff is also

an amateur soapstone carver, having learned the art from a Cree elder with roots in Moose Factory. He gave Jeff lessons and provided him with his first piece of stone. Jeff carved a bear cub. Jeff is also a conservationist and someone with a deep appreciation for the northern landscape and the people who call the James Bay Frontier their home. All of the above came together and the result is his story *Soapstone Signs*.

Teaching Ideas—Curriculum Connections

This Teacher's Guide outlines activities that promote curriculum integration while supporting a holistic view of the world. *Soapstone Signs* is more than an engaging story, it can be a tool for implementing elements and techniques of creativity, environmental investigation, and appreciation of cultural and linguistic identity. Students will make connections within and between global, social, environmental, and cultural contexts, as well as between personal experiences, scientific inquiry and the arts. Through recognition and respect for the signs that personally link each individual to their physical and abstract environments, students will develop tools to commune and communicate with the world around them.

Prereading Idea

Has your world ever given you a sign? Lindy, the master carver, teaches that a “sign” can be any way that the world around you gives you a message. Signs come to you when your thoughts mix with your senses. What are your senses? Can you think of an example of how a thought can mix with one of your senses to give you a sign?

Classroom Discussion Questions

Chapter 1: A Spring Arrival

1. Have you ever seen a flock of geese overhead? Which way do the geese migrate in Northern Canada? If Lindy travels opposite to the geese, what does that say about him?
2. Have you ever seen a soapstone carving? Why is soapstone called soapstone? How do you turn a raw piece of soapstone into a finished carving?
3. Lindy is asked, “How do you know what you will carve next?” What does Lindy mean when he answers, “Whatever it is going to be, it is already there.”

Chapter 2: A Summer Encounter

1. Have you ever eaten a blueberry? Have you ever been bitten by a blackfly? In chapter 2 we learn that “Without the insects, there would be no blueberries or belugas.” What does this statement mean? What is a food web or food chain? Are humans part of a food chain?
2. Have you ever seen a beluga whale? Beluga whales have all the senses that humans do but they have one more than us, called echolocation. What is echolocation and how does it work? Why do belugas need it?

Chapter 3: A Fall Journey

1. Have you ever followed footprints? At the hunting grounds, why does the boy's

dad tell him to watch for footprints from his grandfather's grandfathers? Would those footprints really be on the path?

2. The boy who tells the story learns that he is a very good shot with his hunting rifle. When it is his turn to shoot, why does he move the gun barrel and miss the goose? What are the feelings that are fighting inside him when he is at the community feast?

Chapter 4: A Winter Discovery

1. Have you ever seen an otter? What are otters like? When the brothers chase the hockey puck around the bend and come upon the otter family, why do think their hockey puck is nowhere to be found? And why do you think it is right there when they go back again to look?
2. Have you ever been teased? Have you ever had to be brave? What is the otters' "example" that the boy keeps in his heart? How might this help him deal with the teasing?
3. If you were the coach of the Saturday morning hockey league, what would you say to the teasers who called the boys "river weasels"? What would you say to the boys who were teased?

Suggested Activities

1. Have you ever made your own carving? Pretend that you have your very own piece of soapstone. (It could be a real bar of soap or a piece of modeling clay.) Whatever the carving is going to be, it is already there. Take your piece of soapstone (or soap) home with you and be aware of your signs. When you come back to class, discuss what your signs were. Have your signs helped you to see the carving that waits inside?

Soap can be carved with a variety of safe tools found about the house, like butter knives and teaspoons, bolts (use the threaded part to carve the soap), keys or files without points. There are many dull or rounded carving tools designed for modeling clay available at most art supply stores.

2. Have you ever illustrated a story? The pictures are a very important part of *Soapstone Signs*. The illustrator Darlene Gait has drawn many signs into her artwork. Can you find any special signs in her illustrations? Choose a page in the book that is not illustrated and draw a picture for that page. What special signs will you include in your illustration?
3. Can you speak Cree? There are 4 words in the book from the Cree language. The story uses the L dialect or Moose Factory Cree. Practice saying the words.

Meegwetch—thank you

Wapameg—beluga whale

Wapamegawak—group of beluga whales, or more than one

Wapask—the white bear, or polar bear

Look up the Cree words for otter, snow goose or blueberry. Think of some animals or plants that you know in English and look up the Cree words.

4. Where does food come from? Research and draw a food web for a beluga whale, an otter, a black bear, a snow goose or a human.
5. This story could have happened in many Canadian places, but is based on the author's travels in Northern Ontario, Canada. Have you ever been to Moosonee or Moose Factory? Find Moose Factory and Moosonee on the map of Canada. How far is it from where you live? If there are no roads to get there by car or truck, how might you travel there?
6. Have you ever had a boat ride or been a passenger on a ship? Did you know that Moose Factory Island is one of Canada's first marine ports? The first ships came from France and England. Find France and England on a map or a globe. Trace a route with your finger that a ship could take between England and Moose Factory. Do you think ships could get to Moose Factory all year round?

Other Titles and Websites of Interest

Books

Northwest Passage by Stan Rogers, Groundwood Books, 2013 (Grades 4+)

The Stowaways by Meghan Marentette, Pajama Press, 2013 (Grades 3-6)

Websites

Art

www.wikihow.com/Make-a-Soap-Carving

Cree Language

<http://kids.creedictionary.com>

www.wmpub.ca

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cree_language

Snow Geese

www.hww.ca/en/species/birds/lesser-snow-goose.html

Awards and Reviews

The Writers' Union of Canada (TWUC) Writing for Children Competition winner

"In this gentle, engaging story of a young boy creating his first soapstone carving, Jeff Pinkney builds narrative one detail at a time, starting with the familiar—the carvings of northern animals—and progressing back through the process from the look of the stone to finding the animal in the stone through one's senses...With skillful dialogue, warm interactions among characters in a small northern community, language and pacing that create a slow, elegiac feel, the storyteller wields the tools of a writer's craft as deftly as the soapstone carver wields his rasp-file." —TWUC Jury