

# The Sign of the Beaver Study Guide

by Lisa Leep

For the novel by Elizabeth George Speare



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## Synopsis

Although Matt is only twelve years old, he faces challenge and danger in the Maine wilderness where his family are the first settlers in a new township. Matt and his father have come to Maine territory to establish a home for their family. After the two of them build a log cabin, Matt's father returns to Massachusetts to bring back the rest of the family: Matt's mother, his sister, and a new baby. While his father is gone, Matt stays alone in the cabin to guard their home and care for the corn that will be a large part of the family's food for the winter.

Matt knows that he will miss his family, but he expects to enjoy his independence and freedom. What he does not expect, however, is the arrival of a stranger who is both friendly and treacherous. When the stranger disappears along with his father's gun, Matt knows that he now faces much greater danger and considerably more work simply to feed himself. Then, a few days later, a bear enters the cabin, and what little food Matt has left is destroyed.

Soon temptation gets the better of the twelve-year-old, and Matt decides to harvest honey from a beehive that he and his father had discovered. He knows that there is a risk of being stung by a few bees, but the honey will replace molasses lost to the bear. But instead of just a few bees, Matt is attacked by a large swarm. Matt tries to save himself by jumping into a pond, but is so severely stung that he begins to drown.

He is rescued by two Indians, an old man and his grandson. Saknis, the grandfather, recognizes that Matt needs food. He agrees to have food provided for Matt if Matt will teach his grandson, Attean, to read. At first, the two boys barely tolerate each other's presence, but slowly a friendship forms. Over the coming weeks, Matt discovers the problems of communicating with, depending upon, and understanding people from a different culture.

## Chapters 6–11

### Vocabulary:

The *synonym* of a word is a word with a similar meaning. The *antonym* of a word is a word with an opposite meaning. For each vocabulary word, write a synonym and an antonym.

	<u>Synonym</u>	<u>Antonym</u>
1. abruptly	_____	_____
2. nonchalantly	_____	_____
3. disdainful	_____	_____
4. incomprehensible	_____	_____
5. wary	_____	_____
6. glowered	_____	_____
7. disgruntled	_____	_____
8. dumfounded	_____	_____
9. finicky	_____	_____
10. contemptuous	_____	_____

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**Fact and Opinion:**

A *fact* is a true statement about something. It can be proven, and is not based on personal feelings. An *opinion* cannot be proven; it merely states what a person feels or thinks about something or someone.

In *The Sign of the Beaver*, both Matt and Attean have to learn the difference between the opinions they have heard about each other's culture and the facts. Below are a number of passages containing thoughts or statements made by characters in the story. For each passage indicate whether the underlined portion is a fact or an opinion.

Example: Matt licked his fingers. His resentment had vanished along with his hunger. "Golly," he said, "that was the best fish I ever ate."  
\_\_\_\_\_ opinion \_\_\_\_\_

1. When [Saknis] saw that Matt was awake, his stern face was lighted by a wide smile. "Good." It was half word, half grunt. "White boy very sick. Now well."  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. Three days later Saknis brought him a pair of moccasins. . . . "Beaver woman make," Saknis said. "Better white man's boots. White boy see."  
Matt took off his one boot and slipped on the mocassins. Indeed they were better!  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. His dark stare went from the book to Matt's face. . . . "White boy read what white man write here?"  
"Yes," Matt admitted. "I can read it." \_\_\_\_\_
4. When Matt hunched himself onto the other stool, the boy's scowl deepened. Plainly he did not like having the white boy so close to him. Attean had no need to be finicky, Matt thought. He smelled none too sweet himself.  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. Suddenly the boy broke his silence. "White man's book foolish," he scoffed. "Write *arm, arm, arm* all over paper." \_\_\_\_\_

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**Thinking About the Story:**

8. Matt describes Attean's eyes as having a "nasty little gleam" (Chapter 6) and Attean's smile as a "horrid grin" (Chapter 10). What do you think Attean was feeling at those times? What was Matt feeling?
  
9. Why did Matt lie about what happened in the book *Robinson Crusoe*? Do you think this shows a friendship between Matt and Attean?
  
10. What else, other than lying, could Matt have done in this situation?
  
11. When Matt learns that the carving on the tree near the beaver dam is a sign that the beavers belong to Attean's tribe, he wonders if Ben would respect the sign. Do you think Ben would? Why or why not?
  
12. Matt had only two books in his cabin. If you could only have two books, what two books would they be? Why?

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**Dig Deeper:**

13. Matt struggles with learning to give respect to other people, and he discovers that historically, people have not always received the respect they deserve. Look up the following verses and explain what each says about showing respect:

Romans 12:10

Romans 13:7

1 Peter 2:17

14. Matt discovers that in *Robinson Crusoe*, Crusoe does not show Friday the respect that he probably deserved, and that the author made Friday seem to be very foolish for someone who had always lived on the island. Attean notices immediately that Crusoe is the master and Friday the slave, but Matt had never thought deeply about that part of the book. Do you think that Europeans showed respect to the Native Americans when they made the treaties for land that Attean's grandfather refers to? Explain your answer.
15. Look up Genesis 1:27. In light of this verse, why do all people deserve respect?

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### *Chapters 12–15*

#### *Vocabulary:*

1. chagrined: embarrassed; 2. flimsy: fragile; 3. sinew: tendon; 4. indignant: resentful; 5. goaded: driven; 6. shrewdly: cleverly; 7. mocking; scornful; 8. tribute: recognition

#### *Questions:*

1. Attean helps Matt find the right wood, trim it, treat it with bear fat, and make a bowstring of spruce root. Matt had never made a bow meant as a serious hunting weapon.
2. Attean leaves the fox in the trap because the trap is on the hunting grounds of the turtle clan.
3. Attean is speaking English with more ease, and has increased his vocabulary.
4. Matt decides to tell Attean Bible stories.
5. Matt distracts the bear by throwing a dead rabbit at the bear's head.
6. Attean kills the bear with his knife.
7. The bear belongs to Attean, since he has killed it, and Attean leaves the bear to tell the women of the beaver clan to cut up the meat and carry it back to the village. Attean says it is "squaw work."

#### *Thinking About the Story:*

8. Matt must do all of the work that needs to be done around the cabin because there is no one else to do the work. In addition, cultural differences between settlers and Indians were reflected in differences between what the women did.
9. Answers will vary. Matt feels uncomfortable and resentful at what appears to be Attean's life of leisure.
10. Answers will vary.
11. Matt earns Attean's respect by moving quickly, "like an Indian", when threatened by the bear.
12. As far as Matt was concerned, the most serious harm done by the trapping was the injury of the fox. For Attean, to free the animal would have violated the rights of the turtle clan, which was much more serious.
13. The iron trap is symbolic of the violation of the Indian culture by white settlers. Before the white men had come, Indians had not used iron traps, but the settlers had begun to pay Indians for furs and provided iron traps to use, which were more cruel than the snares the Indians traditionally used. Use of the traps was a part of the problem that led to animals becoming scarce, and the animals were the source of survival for the Indians. White men only trapped for furs, not using the meat.
14. Answers will vary. Most people are uncomfortable with criticism of groups with which they identify.
15. Answers will vary. It is often more difficult to be criticized than to listen to others be criticized.
16. The clash between Matt's and Attean's cultures leads to Matt having to rethink many things he has taken for granted. Attean is often openly critical of Matt and other whites, and scornful of Matt's abilities. If Matt were to stop seeing Attean, he would not be forced to constantly reevaluate his own beliefs.
17. Matt would like a share of the meat as a recognition of his part in saving Attean and himself. He would like a bear claw for the same reason, and additionally as a way to show his father how much he has grown up and learned to cope with the wilderness.
18. Matt has finally received Attean's respect.

#### *Dig Deeper:*

19. Answers on chart may vary slightly, but should contain the following information:

Attean's flood story—person: only identified as an Indian; no purpose given; means of safety: the Indian goes to a very high hill and then climbs a very tall tree; what is saved: only the Indian; length of flood: many days; sign to leave the tree: Gluskabe brings three ducks to the Indian. Each day the Indian releases one. The first two do not return, but the third comes back with mud in its mouth; first action: makes animals, grass, and other Indians.

Genesis account—person: Noah and his family; purpose: God is grieved because of men's wickedness; means of safety: an ark with three decks; what is saved: Noah's family, seven of every clean animal, and two of every unclean animal, excluding sea animals; length of flood: a hundred and fifty days; sign to exit the vessel: first a raven was sent out which did not find land but continued to fly, then a dove which could not find land and returned to the ark, then finally the third time the dove was sent and returned with an olive leaf, indicating that there was dry land; first action after leaving vessel: sacrifice a burnt offering to God.

20. Answers will vary, but should include that in general the flood stories include a universal flood as a judgment against evil, a pious man is saved, a boat is used as shelter, the third bird released finds dry land, and a response of devotion to God is the first act once the flood is over.