

The Sign of the Beaver

Recommended for Grades 4-7

Book Summary: The Sign of the Beaver

Twelve year-old Matt and his father went to Maine ahead of the rest of their family to build a cabin on their recently purchased land in 1768. Matt's father leaves him there while he returns to their old home to collect the rest of the family. Matt runs into trouble quickly when a man tricks him and steals his rifle, which was Matt's only way to feed himself. He gets so hungry he decides to steal some honey from a beehive. He ends up getting stung so many times that he nearly dies. He is saved when a Native Indian man and boy rescue him and heal him.

To thank them, he offers one of his only possessions... a book. They end up making an agreement that Matt will teach the boy, Attean, how to read. They both end up learning from each other. Attean learns a little of how to read. Matt learns how to hunt and survive off the land.

[SPOILER] Many weeks have passed... far more than the seven weeks Matt's father said he would be gone. Attean's grandfather offers to take Matt with them when they go on their hunt. He doesn't want to leave the boy alone in the woods, when it is possible that Matt's father will never return. Matt says no, that he must wait for his family. He knows he will never see Attean or his grandfather again because they are moving their tribe to escape the increasing number of white settlers taking their land. After many weeks, Matt's father and family finally arrive and are amazed at how well he has managed to survive.

Author Biography: Elizabeth George Speare

Elizabeth George Speare was born November 21, 1908 in Melrose, Massachusetts. Speare discovered writing at eight years-old. She earned her Bachelor of Arts from Smith College in 1930 and a Master's degree in English from Boston University. She taught high school English from 1932 to 1936. In 1936, she met her future husband, Alden Speare. They moved to Connecticut where they married and raised two children. Speare intended to write, but found the duties of motherhood drained away any free time. She only began to seriously write when her children were in junior high.

Speare published her first novel, *Calico Captive*, in 1957. The next year she completed the *Witch of Blackbird Pond*, which won the Newbery Medal. She also won a Newbery Medal in 1961 for *The Bronze Bow*. In 1984, *The Sign of the Beaver* was published. It received a Newbery Honor, the Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction, and the Christopher Award. In 1989, Speare received the Laura Ingalls Wilder Award for her contribution to children's literature.

Elizabeth George Speare died of an aortic aneurysm on November 15, 1994 in Northwest General Hospital in Tucson, Arizona. She was 84 years old.



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Discussion Questions

1. At twelve years-old, Matt's father leaves him alone for seven weeks. Do you think kids in the 1700s were more mature than kids today or is it just a matter of doing what you have to do to survive? Why do you think so?
 2. Matt tries to do the right thing in cooking for Ben and making him welcome. He ignores his own misgivings (p. 17) and treats him like a guest. Did Matt do the right thing? If you were miles from anyone else and someone needed a place to stay for the night, would you let them? Or would it be better to send them away to fend for themselves? Why?
 3. The more time Matt spends with Attean, the more he realizes that the foolish way the native man in the story of Robinson Crusoe is portrayed is not something that is logical (p. 43, 57). Why does it take living a similar experience for him to realize that?
 4. Matt seems to accept the idea that animals can understand people talking when Attean speaks to the fish he throws back (p. 50) and when he apologizes to the bear's spirit for killing it (p. 73). Do you think that animals can understand? Why or why not?
 5. Attean says they must leave the trapped fox because it is another tribe's hunting ground. Does it seem right that because someone owns something they can do whatever they want and you shouldn't stop them? Or should you do what you think is the right thing, no matter the situation? (p.64)
 6. When Matt realizes that the land his father bought was the Indians' and that they were tricked because they couldn't read what they were signing, how do you think he feels? Consider that he knows his father paid money for the land, but because of it, his friend is leaving his homeland forever. Is there anything he could do about it?
 7. Do the Indians have a right to dislike the white settlers? They were cheated out of their land and many killed. Attean's grandmother hates white people (p. 87). How can these bad feelings be overcome? If there is a solution, why do we still have racism today?
 8. Could Matt have survived the winter without Attean's training and the Indian's gifts? Why or why not?
 9. Does Matt do the right thing in staying behind instead of going on the hunt with the Indians? Why? What would you have done in that situation?
 10. In 2001, at Pinellas County (FL) elementary school someone tried to ban this book because it used the word squaw to refer to Native American women. Should a book use terms that would have used during the time the story takes place or should they use terms that are okay today? Do you think books that use offensive terms like these should still be read? Why or why not?
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