



The Orenda by Joseph Boyden

About the author:

Joseph Boyden became widely known in Canada following the publication of his debut novel *Three Day Road* in 2005, which won numerous awards and was nominated for a Governor General's Award. His second novel, *Through Black Spruce*, won the 2008 Scotiabank Giller Prize and was named the Canadian Booksellers Association Book of the Year. Joseph Boyden is of Irish, Scots, and Métis descent and the son of a highly decorated medical officer of World War II (Raymond Wilfrid Boyden). In 2012, Boyden received the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal for his contributions to Canadian art and culture. He divides his time between Louisiana, where he teaches creative writing at the University of New Orleans, and the James Bay area of Ontario, where he is an accomplished hunter, trapper, and bushman.

Source: Penguin Random House Canada (<http://penguinrandomhouse.ca>) & The Canadian Encyclopedia (<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca>)

About this book:

The Orenda was a finalist for the Governor General's English Language Prize (2013), the Scotiabank Giller Award (2013), won the Libris Book of the Year Award (2014) and the 2014 Canada Reads competition.

Ambitious in scope yet deeply intimate in its execution, *The Orenda* is a riveting saga of the first encounters between the native populations of New France and the Jesuit missionaries who attempt to convert them. This defining moment of human history is rendered in exquisite detail, told through the alternating perspectives of a young Iroquois girl, a Huron warrior, and a French missionary.

April 2016



In prose as luminous as it is brutal, their stories illuminate the great moral complexities that arise when these cultures are forced to co-exist.

Jesuit missionary Christophe arrives to the New World in the seventeenth century with dreams of spreading the word of God to the “sauvages” of this unknown wilderness. One year into his mission, the native guides with whom he has traveled are ambushed by the Iroquois, forcing Christophe to flee for his life. Weakened and injured, Christophe and a young Iroquois girl, Snow Falls, barely escape the violence before they are captured by Bird, a Huron warrior. Bird takes Christophe and Snow Falls to his village as prisoners, ultimately deciding to use Christophe as an emissary in trade negotiations between the Huron and Champlain’s Iron People, and Snow Falls as a surrogate daughter following the tragic deaths of his own. As time passes, their relationships evolve and become more complex, often in reaction to the intense social upheaval of the time. From bloody battles that rage between tribes to illnesses that cripple populations in the most devastating ways, Christophe, Bird, and Snow Falls face tremendous challenges as they navigate this new society. And as the Huron hurtle toward an all-out war with the Iroquois, conditions worsen, ultimately leading Bird, Christophe, and Snow Falls to re-evaluate themselves and their cultural assumptions entirely.

With unwavering perceptiveness, *The Orenda* is a tale for the ages—an epic journey of bloodshed and triumph, of misery and defeat and, ultimately, the extremes of humanity.

Source: Penguin Random House (<http://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/>)



Discussion Questions:

1. The Orenda is told from the alternating perspective of three narrators, but is periodically punctuated by the voice of an omniscient narrator. Discuss the significance of this voice. Who or what does this represent? Compare the passage that begins the book with the one at the end of the novel. What do these passages assert about the legacy of the Huron people? The influence of the Jesuits?
2. Discuss the Jesuit's mission to bring Christianity to the New World. Are Christophe's intentions pure? Would you classify his attempts at converting the Hurons as successful? What tensions arose in the community because of his efforts?
3. How does the Jesuit's mission to bring Christianity to the New World coincide with Champlain's vision for conquering the area? How does it conflict?
4. The relationship between Bird and Snow Falls fully evolves over the course of The Orenda. When it begins, Snow Falls's hatred of Bird is unabashed, yet by the end of the novel she thinks of him as her father. How does this change occur? What challenges did their relationship face before Snow Falls came to terms with her role as daughter?
5. The Orenda takes place over the course of several years, showcasing Snow Falls's development from pre-pubescence to motherhood. How is womanhood marked in the Huron culture? How do other women in the village help to guide her?
6. How does the relationship between Bird and Christophe evolve over time? Do you think the men respect each other, despite their differences?



7. Christophe admits that he wrestles with “the grave worry that our work is being exploited by those who wish not for the souls of the sauvages but for the riches of the land.” Relate this statement to the scene in which Christophe and the Huron journey to Champlain’s settlement. How do Champlain and his people take advantage of the Huron?

8. Death is a constant theme throughout *The Orenda*. How does the Huron culture approach death? How do they honor their deceased relatives? Compare their attitudes toward death as opposed to that of the “charcoal.” How do their differing attitudes about spirituality affect the way they perceive the afterlife?

9. The acquisition of power is a central theme throughout *The Orenda*, and it manifests itself in various ways throughout the plot. How does Christophe try to obtain power over the natives? How does Bird try to maintain a position of power over his enemies? How is rape and torture used as a means of obtaining power?

10. Discuss the concept of the “oki.” How does this belief differ from the tenets of Christianity? How are these differences in beliefs reflected in both cultures’ approach to living, dying, nature, and family?

11. Though undeniably brutal, the process of torturing one’s enemies in the native cultures serves an almost ritualistic function. Discuss the various means in which captives are “caressed,” and the spiritual element to this process. Why do you think the torturers provide food and water to their captives? What is the expectation of captives in facing their fate? Explore the natives’ approach to death by torture in comparison to the Christian idea of martyrdom.

12. As the novel progresses, illnesses play an increasingly significant role, wreaking havoc on the social structure of the villages. How do illnesses affect how the community functions? Explore the role of “healers” in the Huron community.



13. What are the expected roles of males compared to females in the Huron community? In what respects do women have power? Explore the relationship between Bird and Gosling. How would you characterize their coupling?

14. Throughout the novel, Christophe oscillates between being shocked and appalled about the natives' way of living and showing curiosity about their traditions. What does he admire about their culture? And does he participate in it? Would you say that his participation comes out of respect or out of obligation?

15. Did it shock you when Isaac murdered Snow Falls? Why do you think he chose to take others' lives in addition to his own?

16. As a reader, what did you find most revealing about *The Orenda*? Did the novel challenge any of your opinions about colonization of North America? About the native populations?

Source: Penguin Random House (<http://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/>)

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