

Silver River Shadow

A Teacher's Guide



INTRODUCTION

Silver River Shadow by Jane Thomas is suitable for teaching to readers ages 8+, both as a class reader and as a starting point for extracurricular work and discussion. The following questions and activities focus on comprehension, inference and retrieval skills, and there are multiple suggestions for cross-curricular links. Students are invited to investigate the importance of community, friendship, social action, and truth and honesty. The book also lends itself to exploring a range of environmental themes and reveals the reality of living as a Native American in today's world.

While told as an exciting adventure story, *Silver River Shadow* is ultimately a work of creative non-fiction: it looks at a country's hidden shame and is threaded with stark facts relating to deliberate and intentional mercury poisoning in the 1960s. The book has been reviewed for authenticity and accuracy by members of the affected communities, and overseen by the daughter of a prominent couple who served for many decades as activists leading the drive for appropriate compensation.

ABOUT THE BOOK

The beginning is the moment before it all goes wrong...

Nobody ever tells Lizzie anything. Her mother's dead, and her father is buried in his work. So when she heads off into the Canadian wilderness with her new friend Bobby to find out about her family, no one really notices.

The truths she uncovers about her great-grandparents' past are laced with dangerous secrets.

Nobody must be allowed to know what happened. And nobody wants to take the blame.

READING GROUP QUESTIONS

1. What facts do you learn about Lizzie in the first two chapters? What do you learn about her character? Do you think, based on these two chapters, she is someone you would want to spend time with?
2. In Chapter 3, Lizzie goes into her father's study. This is the first time we are introduced to Irene Ward. Why do you think she is important in creating meaning in the book?

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3. Mrs Bingle and Mrs Dabble are the two grown up women in Lizzie's life. How are they different? Why do you think they don't both treat Lizzie the same way?
4. As you read through the book, look for references to shadows. Why do you think the book has been called *Silver River Shadow*?
5. Chapter 13 adds tension to the story. How has the author achieved this?
6. Lizzie has a recurring dream throughout the book, but each time it's mentioned it changes slightly. What do you think is the purpose of this dream?
7. The book often makes comments about the fact Lizzie and Bobby live tucked away in a small town where nothing much happens. After their adventure do you think they prefer life in the town, or outside it? Why?
8. Lizzie and Bobby finally meet the Ojibwe in Chapter 15. What did the book tell you about the Ojibwe before they were introduced, and what did you learn about them and their lives by the end of the book? What differences can you find in their lives before and after the mercury tragedy?
9. Chapter 15 ends on a solemn note; Chapter 16 begins with humour. Why has the author done this? How does this play with a reader's emotions?
10. Look at Lizzie's speech at the end of Chapter 11 when she has finished her sums. How has this been written to have an impact on Bobby - and the reader?
11. The story of the frog is repeated twice in the book. Why is it important, and how is it relevant to the overall story?
12. How does the relationship between Lizzie and her father change over her life, and in the course of the story? For example, in Chapter 10, Lizzie remembers making forts with her dad as a little girl.
13. What is the significance of Mrs Bingle's baby in the final chapter? What is she a symbol of, and how is she linked to what you learn about the Ojibwe people?

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14. At the end of the book there are two sections. How surprised were you by the facts revealed in 'I guess you'd like to know which bits were true?' Do the comments in the Acknowledgements change how you see *Silver River Shadow*?
15. Lizzie finds her first friend in Bobby. How does the friendship change her life – and his?
16. It is never referred to in the story but it is possible to see on the cover and in some of the illustrations that Lizzie has a multiracial background. Why do you think the author has chosen not to mention this?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

Literacy

- Look at the references to water throughout the book. How has the author created a particular feeling with the different descriptions? Now write your own scene where water is the main focus. It could be a hot sunny day at the seaside, or perhaps a cold damp day where a character stares into a puddle.
- The description of Lizzie's father's study is quite precise, and something Lizzie sees in there scares her. We aren't told exactly what. Write your own scene of a character entering a room and then leaving because something they have seen terrifies them.
- In Chapter 7, we learn more about Mrs Dabble. She is, let's face it, a bit of a gossip. Her name is no coincidence. Charles Dickens, a famous author, loved playing with character names: among hundreds of others he created a horrible teacher called Mr Gradgrind, and a miserable old man called Scrooge. Pick a character name that really tells a reader something about that person and then write a short scene describing them.
- Lizzie and Bobby come across many newspaper articles. Write an article for a paper about their trip. Remember to include a dramatic headline: 'Missing Children Home Safe' or 'Ojibwe Still Not Safe', for example.
- There are meanings in the flowers Lizzie encounters on their journey, and the story of the frog is significant. Choose something from the natural world and give it a special meaning. Write a short fable to explain why that meaning has been given.

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- Lizzie remembers playing with her father when she was a little girl. Pick a memory and describe it using the five senses. With which of the senses do you remember events most strongly? Discuss as a class and see if it's different for different people.
- Look at the descriptions of the Canadian wilderness. Create a brochure for a new lodge there, letting readers know different activities they'll be able to do, what they might see, and why they should choose your lodge above all others.
- In 1946, Barney and Marion flew into the middle of nowhere and started a new life. Write a diary entry for one of them on that day, and for the day they left the lodge for the last time.

Philosophy

Class discussion questions

- Change drives the world. How has change driven the lives of the Ojibwe? Should they accept that their traditional way of life is no longer possible, or should they fight for the right to live it?
- Lizzie is ignored at school: nobody knew how to talk to her because her mother had died, and she becomes withdrawn. Do you think our characters are made by the events and people around us, or do we have control over our character?
- Bobby tells a single lie in the story. Is it ever right to tell lies? Are there 'good lies' and 'bad lies'?
- Silver River Shadow reveals that those in power – the government – acted unfairly to the communities of Grassy Narrows and Whitedog. Do you think having power changes the way people act?
- Did Barney and Marion Lamm do the right thing in closing down their lodge, and demanding that other lodges also be closed? It led to many people not having work and still, fifty years later, they are affected by this complete lack of work. Was that fair?

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- Lizzie tries to imagine a city at night, as she stands and looks at the peaceful moon shining over Bobby's lake. Do you think you can know what you might think of a place without going there?
- Lizzie comes from small town America and feels a connection with Joe from rural Canada. Do you think people from very different backgrounds can always find a connection?
- The main purpose of *Silver River Shadow* was to tell people about the mercury tragedy. What other messages, if any, did you get from the story?
- The elders of the Ojibwe community attempt to pass down their traditions to younger members but things are always forgotten. There are over 7000 languages in the world but it is estimated that by the end of the century maybe only half of these will be spoken. What do we lose when we lose a language in the world?
- What, for you, are the best things about meeting and knowing people from different backgrounds?

The Environment

- Deforestation: Logging companies want to cut down the trees around Grassy Narrows, and since 2002 people from the community have been lying in the road to stop the vehicles accessing the land. Investigate the impact of deforestation on animal life and create a poster.
- Water: Look at the diagram at the front of the book, 'Mercury – from barrel to body'. It shows how easily a water pollutant can get into humans. Lizzie mentions many of the effects of mercury pollution on the human body; create a leaflet detailing how mercury pollution, or Minamata Disease, can change a person's life.
- Sustainability: Before their lives were changed, the Ojibwe had sustainable lives, living off the land. Divide the class into groups to give presentations about the Ojibwe and: hunting techniques; boats and canoes; traditional clothing, and food other than meat. Look at how sustainable all of these are.