

# BIG READ DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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*Through Black Spruce* (2008) is the second novel of Joseph Boyden's trilogy. It is preceded by *Three Day Road* (2003) and followed by *The Orenda* (2013).

## I. Setting

1. What role does the setting play in helping us to understand the cultural encounters in this novel? Will's memories take him North (describe the characteristics of the past and what it means to go north). Annie's journey takes her South (describe the characteristics of the present and the south). Is there a place where a happy balance between past and present, north and south, can be found?

## II. Characters

1. Will and Annie are the novel's two major characters. Which do you think is the protagonist? Discuss the traits and weaknesses of each. Which character portrayal do you prefer and why? Do you agree or not with choices they make throughout the novel? Why do you think Boyden chose to put Will in a coma throughout the novel? We are told that Will is having to make a choice. He can choose whether to come out of the coma and live or to let go and die. What do you think Will considered in this choice and why did he choose to live?
2. Will undergoes a significant physical transformation during his time in the woods while Annie finds herself turning into a shadow of her sister while in Manhattan. How do their physical changes reflect their spiritual changes?
3. Why do you think Will and Dorothy work so well as a couple? What does Dorothy provide for Will that so effectively brings him back to life?
4. Discuss the importance of Will's three plane crashes. What lesson does Will learn with each crash? How do these lessons help to develop his character?
5. Would Annie have been successful without Suzanne having led the way? Is Annie only a replacement for her sister because Suzanne disappeared? Does Annie want to become a celebrity? For Suzanne? For herself? Does her time in NY help her find herself? Or lose herself?
6. Discuss Gordon's role in the novel. Why doesn't he learn to speak? What is his relationship Annie? Why do you think he is so interested in sticking with her, from Toronto and then back to Moosonee?

### III. Symbols

1. Discuss the symbol of the “**Windigo**,” the evil spirit within, represented by Marius. Does the novel suggest that this Windigo Marius is responsible for the tragedies of the community?
2. Will comes face to face with two **bears**, under very different circumstances. Discuss the symbolism of these two encounters. How do the bears represent Will at different times of his life?
3. The **gun** that Will inherits from his father is described as “a rifle he’d lost but that had come back” and a “burden, not a gift.” Discuss the gun’s history and what it represents to Will and his family.
4. One of the most difficult tasks an author faces is choosing a title. What is the significance of each word in the title, *Through Black Spruce*?

### IV. Themes

1. Will sits at the **crossroads** of the Old World (North) of his father and ancestors and the New World (South) of his nieces. He speaks both Cree and English. His coma places him at the in-between state of life and death. How does the constant theme of being “in-between” help us to understand what Boyden wants us to know about the present life of First Nations people?
2. Stories are “twisted things that come out no matter how we want them.” Will and Annie struggle to tell each other their own story. What role does **storytelling** play in the novel? Why is it important for them to tell their stories to each other? What role does storytelling play in the larger indigenous culture? Especially in an oral culture?
3. “Everything you need can be taken. Everything you hold dear, it can be taken.” “You lose some things, so you must try and gain some things too.” How do Will and Annie deal with the losses they face. How do their losses contribute to their characters? Do you consider “**loss**” to be a significant theme of the novel?
4. What role does **silence** play in novel? Consider Gordon, the coma, other examples of silence? Why do you think Gordon never learns to speak? Do you think Will can hear while he is in a coma?