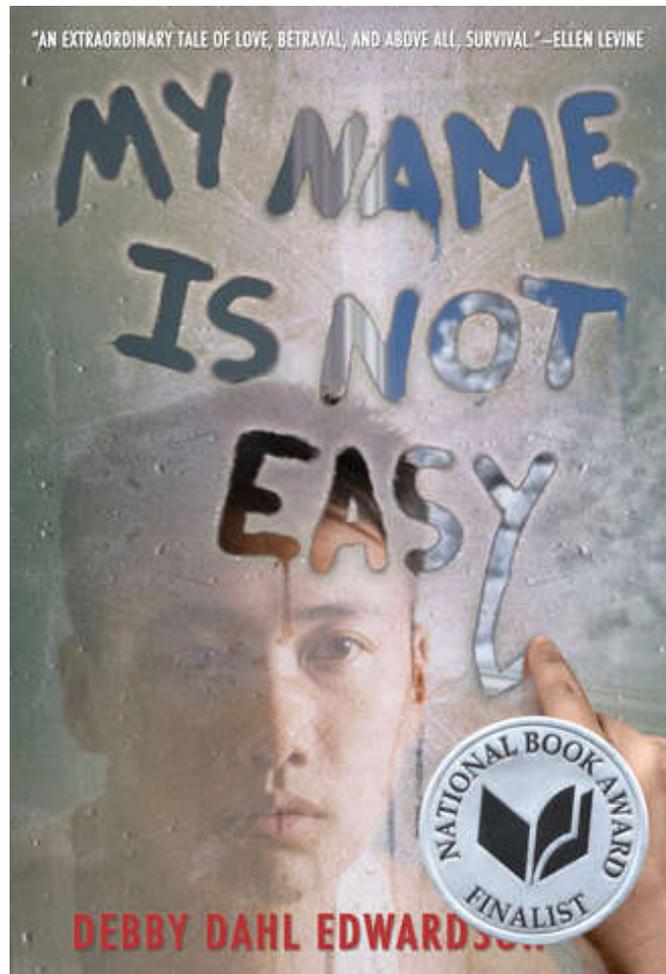


Literary Guide for Debby Dahl Edwardson's

My Name is Not Easy



by Robin M. Huntley

Summary

Told from multiple perspectives, Debby Dahl Edwardson's *My Name is Not Easy* is a narrative of the hard, culture-crippling truths of the boarding schools that native Alaskans attended during the early 1960's. The characters in Edwardson's story attend the fictional Sacred Heart School, a Catholic institution whose structure and methodology is fierce, brutal, and deeply rooted in the idea that native students needed to be re-trained in order for their communities to succeed. The characters are fictional, but just like their school, they each present carefully designed portraits of "typical" students at such schools, and their experiences give literary life to the real life experiences of unnamed others.

The students at Sacred Heart have been sent there from villages all over Alaska, and while each one's story of why they've wound up there varies, each native Alaskan student's story shares the same undercurrent: their presence at the school forces them to let go of their language, their landscape, and their people, and it is assumed by those in charge that this is necessary in order for native Alaskans to survive. On top of the clashes between students from self-identified Eskimo villages and Indian villages are emotional and physical abuse from school staff, forced consumption of radiation-filled iodine for government testing, and the adopting out of students not deemed appropriate for school life.

Despite the violence and fear that plagues life at Sacred Heart, each narrator teaches readers about the culture and landscape that they call home. Descriptions of hunting practices, traditional foods, ways of thinking, and other aspects of local and native culture add depth to each character and contrast heavily with life at Sacred Heart – giving readers an even deeper understanding of the effects of the school culture on its student body.

My Name is Not Easy is appropriate for mature tweens and teens, as it addresses complex themes and includes some violence. Readers should approach the book with some knowledge of the history of Native American boarding schools in the United States. (See “Resources for Further Learning” for suggestions.) The book can be used in a study of Native American history, an exploration of anti-Native policies during the 20th century, or as a lens through which to explore cultural change and power dynamics.

Critical Thinking Questions

Designed for use while the story is still being read, each of these critical thinking questions can help readers to add depth to their understanding of the story. Questions are written in chronological order, and can be used both in formal and informal studies of the story.

- Luke is about to embark on a major adventure as he leaves for Sacred Heart, but he doesn't seem to want to go. How does he share that with us?
- When Chickie first arrives at school, she is afraid – and the root of her fear is surprising. Explain what is bothering her and why.
- Isaac wasn't old enough to be at Sacred Heart yet. What do you think happened to him when he left?
- Chickie thinks that she has come to Sacred Heart for very different reasons than those around her, but she discovers that she has more in common with her peers than she expected. Explain her discovery and how she feels about it.
- Going home doesn't feel the same to any of the students when it happens for the first time. Explain their experiences, and the reasons for their discomfort.

- How do the students feel about their return to school? What is each expecting?
- Luke and Bunna learn lots about the school through one single letter from Isaac. What really happened when he left? Why do you think the school didn't let them know?
- Luke and Bunna take part in the iodine-131 testing, but Amiq escapes. Do you think that the testing was ethical? Explain. Do you think that such a thing would take place today? Explain.
- Why do you think the adults at Sacred Heart were either not told about or were afraid to discuss the iodine-131 testing?
- Why is the title of the June 6, 1963 chapter, "Our Uncle's Gun?"
- What is Project Chariot? Do you believe that it was a good idea? Explain.
- Do you think that Father Flanigan understood that Junior wanted to write a newspaper story about Project Chariot? Explain.
- Father Flanagan doesn't think that the school newspaper should be used for stories like the one about Project Chariot. Explain why you think this is.
- The students learn about Civil Disobedience from a story on duck hunting in the newspaper. Do you think that what the hunters did was right? Explain.
- By the end of the story, each narrator has grown lots and learned some powerful truths. Give examples of how each has grown and what they have learned.

Extension Activity: "Perspectives"

The purpose of this activity is for readers to examine the unique perspective that each character brings to a shared experience, and to consider the ways in which the character's perspective determines what their experience will be like. For example, students who do not

share the same cultural background may have the same feelings about an event but for different reasons; similarly, students who have had drastically different life experiences will likely react differently to the same situation.

Understanding characters' perspectives is an essential skill in the reading of complex text, and understanding humans' perspectives is a similarly essential skill in everyday life. By taking on this challenge, readers can hone their skills in considering the role of perspective in the way that those around us interpret, react to, and make sense of things that take place.

Perspectives

Readers should work together to choose a pivotal moment in the story that included multiple characters. Examples of moments that would work well are the iodine-131 testing, arrival at Sacred Heart for the first time, the moose skinning, or any of the meetings in Father Flanagan's office.

Next, readers should break apart that moment: what went on? What was the setting like? Who was there? Create some kind of visual (bubble map, story web, etc.) to connect the event to those who were involved. Leave space to write or draw more near each character's name – you'll be adding lots more information about each character.

After a structure has been created for recording information and showing how it is related, brainstorm the perspective that each character included brings with them. What is their cultural background? What kinds of unique experiences have they had in life? What type of personality do they have? How do they think? Include as much information as you can so as to have as clear an understanding of each character as possible.

Next, consider the actions of each character during the event being examined. Did they get involved in the action, or did they try to hide? Were they violent, or did they stay out of things? What were their emotions like? How did they treat the others involved? Include as much information as possible.

Finally, consider the relationship that the characters' perspective has with their thoughts, feelings, and actions during the event. Did their relationship with their family determine how they reacted? Were they afraid or emboldened because of past similar experiences? Did their way of seeing the world determine how they responded to someone? Use visuals to show the relationship between perspective and actions – color coding, symbols, connecting lines, and other visuals can accomplish this easily.

Leave time to share the visuals that this activity creates with each other, even if each reader explored the same characters and the same moment in the story. Each reader will have some unique insights and an interesting way of combining words and visuals, and these differences present the opportunity for readers to learn from one another's thinking.

Resources for Further Learning

My Name is not Easy is a complex and important story, and it represents only the tip of the iceberg that is the history of Native American boarding schools. Below is a list of resources that can be used to support readers in learning more about native Alaskan culture, Native American boarding schools, Project Chariot, and more.

Web-Based Resources

Inupiaq Language – Alaska Native Language Center, University of Alaska Fairbanks

<https://www.uaf.edu/anlc/languages/i/>

Inupiaq and Saint Lawrence Island Yupik Information – Alaska Native Heritage Center

<http://www.akhistorycourse.org/alaskas-cultures/alaska-native-heritage-center/inupiaq-and-saint-lawrence-island-yupik>

Education of Alaskan Natives – Alaska’s Heritage, Alaskan History Course

<http://www.akhistorycourse.org/americas-territory/alaskas-heritage/chapter-4-20-education>

Indian Boarding Schools – Indian Country Diaries Series, PBS

<http://www.pbs.org/indiancountry/history/boarding.html>

Boarding School History and Culture – American Indian Relief Council

http://www.nativepartnership.org/site/PageServer?pagename=airc_hist_boardingschools

Project Chariot – Lit Site Alaska

<http://www.litsite.org/index.cfm?section=Digital-Archives&page=Government&cat=Making-of-Alaska&viewpost=2&ContentId=3235>

Books With Similar Themes

The Birchbark House and Game of Silence, Louise Erdrich

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian, Sherman Alexie

The Ledgerbook of Thomas Blue Eagle, Gay Matthaehi and Jewel Grutman

The Mourning Road to Thanksgiving, Larry Spotted Crow Mann



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