

Literature Circle Guide to INDIAN CAPTIVE by Lois Lenski

Book Summary

Based on a true story, *Indian Captive* tells the story of Molly Jemison, a young girl captured by Seneca Indians from her family's farm in eastern Pennsylvania. After a long journey by foot with her kidnapers, Molly is sold to two sisters, Shining Star and Squirrel Woman, as a replacement for their brother who was killed in battle. The two women begin to introduce Seneca life to Molly, but she is broken-hearted in her new situation, and attempts to run away. After a journey to Fort Duquesne in which Molly is almost reclaimed by the white settlers, Molly is taken on another long journey, this time to a Seneca village on the Genesee River. Molly is depressed and in ill health, so a kind Seneca woman named Earth Woman nurses her back to health and gives her hope for her future with the Senecas. Gradually Molly becomes friends with many of the Seneca and grows accustomed to their ways. After about two years with the Seneca, Molly learns that her family is dead, and she must make a choice to stay with the Indians or return to the world of white men. She chooses to stay with the Seneca, who have shown her much love and kindness, and whose ways she has grown to understand and respect.

Author Information

Lois Lenski was born in 1893 in Springfield, Ohio, to a Lutheran minister and his wife. Though Lenski's father wished for his daughter to become a teacher, Lenski instead moved to New York City to study art and soon began to make a living with her illustrations. In 1921, she married Arthur Covey, one of her former teachers, and together they raised Covey's children from a previous marriage along with a son, Stephen, they had together. Lenski decided to write her own stories and illustrate them after several publishing companies told her that although they liked her drawings, they did not have suitable books for her to illustrate. In her long career, Lenski wrote and illustrated more than ninety books, including *Strawberry Girl*, a Newberry Medal winner, and *Phebe Fairchild: Her Book* and *Indian Captive*, both of which were Newberry Honor books. Lenski died in 1974 at the age of eighty.

Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions

1. When the Indians who captured Molly hand her the deerskin moccasins, what does this mean?
This is the sign that the Indians have chosen to take Molly with them as a member of their tribe.
2. As Molly is taken away, what are Mrs. Jemison's last words of advice to her daughter?
Mrs. Jemison tells her daughter to "make the best of things and be happy" if she can (p. 29). She warns her daughter not to try to run away, since she'd be found and killed if she did. She begs her daughter not to forget her family, her language, and her prayers. She also asks her Molly to be brave and not cry (p. 30).

3. Before her capture, Molly spent her time learning to knit, spin, weave, and read from her mother. After her capture, what new skills does Molly acquire through living with the Seneca?

At first, the Seneca have Molly doing jobs such as fetching firewood and water for them. Soon, Molly learns how to plant and tend corn the Seneca way, make a clay cooking pot, and tap maple trees for sap. She also learns how to embroider with quills, care for babies in the Seneca way, and carry heavy loads using a burden strap.

4. Why do Shining Star and Squirrel Woman perform a ceremony once they've taken Molly home? What do we learn about the reasons Molly was kidnapped from this?

The ceremony expressed the mourning of the two sisters, whose brother had been killed on the Pennsylvania border. Molly is the replacement for the dead brother, since the Seneca considered it their religious duty to fill the place of the family member they had lost. The ceremony also expressed the joy of the Seneca as they welcome their new "sister" into their tribe (p. 59).

5. Earth Woman, who lives alone in her tent, becomes an important person in Molly's life. What is Earth Woman like, and how does she help Molly?
Earth Woman is very wise about nature and Seneca ways, and she patiently teaches Molly as much she can. She also knows how to use roots and herbs as medicine, and she nurses Molly back to health after her long journey to Genesee town. She makes Molly a corn husk doll to comfort the girl (p. 149), and she introduces Molly to Beaver Girl, a Seneca girl who becomes Molly's friend (p. 151). She encourages Molly to learn how to make a cooking pot, and learning this new skill gives Molly hope for her future with the Seneca.

6. For Molly, the journey to Genesee town after the brief encounter with the white women at Fort Duquesne is a "second captivity." Explain why this second captivity is worse than the first for Molly.

To Molly, this second captivity is worse because "her hope was gone" (p. 141). Her encounter with the white women reminded Molly of her old life, and afterward she completely lost hope of returning to her family and her old ways. She had briefly seemed so close to returning to her old life, and now her chance is lost.

7. Molly feels like she is "living in two places at once, her body with the Indians, but her spirit where she wanted to be – at home with the white people." Can you explain this in your own words? Have you ever felt like Molly – that you are living in two separate places at once? What was this like for you?

Students will have many different views on this, but most will recognize that it is through immersing herself in hard work that Molly is able to cope with her new life. She makes a great effort to remember her family and her old

ways, dreaming of them often at night, but during the days she is so busy working that she does not have time to think of her family.

8. Imagine yourself in Molly's shoes, kidnapped by strangers with unfamiliar customs and language. How would you deal with your situation? Would you be as brave as Molly?

Students will notice Molly's inner strength, but might wonder why she does not make more attempts to run away. Lenski's maps depicting Molly's journeys with the Seneca help to show the great distances and difficult terrain she was traveling, explaining why she does not continue trying to escape. Most students will be impressed with Molly's bravery and the way she learns how to live with the Seneca over time.

9. Compare Molly's adopted sisters Shining Star and Squirrel Woman. Describe each woman. How are they different, and how does each woman treat Molly? **The two sisters are foils to each other in nearly every way. Shining Star is described as "beautiful" and "kind," while Squirrel Woman is "plain" and "cross" (p. 53). Squirrel Woman is harsh with Molly, neglecting to feed her at first, while Shining Star keeps watch over Molly and gives her the best portion of food (p. 54). When Molly tries to run away from them, Squirrel Woman pulls a switch from a tree to beat Molly, but Shining Star snatches the switch away (p. 56). Overall, Squirrel Woman is grumpy and even hateful toward Molly, while Shining Star is kind and nurturing.**

10. Molly tells Josiah that she believes the Seneca are kind: "I never knew what kindness meant until I came here—perhaps because I never needed it so much till then." How do the Seneca show kindness to Molly?

In the midst of Molly's sadness, many Seneca treat Molly with kindness. Little Turtle befriends Molly and patiently tries to teach her their language. Shagbark's kind eyes encourage Molly during her first long journey, and his gift of a hand-carved ladle helps her feel like she has a home with the Seneca. Shining Star treats Molly gently, makes her beautiful new clothes, and provides many explanations of Seneca ways. Earth Woman nurses Molly back to health and gives her hope for the future with the promise of someday being able to make a clay pot.

11. Why do you think the Seneca forbid Molly to speak English, "the words of the pale face"?

Several times Molly is reprimanded for speaking English, probably because the Seneca want Molly to forget her old life and embrace the Seneca lifestyle. The Seneca are troubled by Molly's grief, wanting her to be happy with them, so they forbid her to speak English, which reminds her of her old life.

12. Molly's two oldest brothers escaped capture by the Seneca, and when the book ends, Molly has not had contact with them yet. What if Molly were to meet her brothers again years later? What would their reunion be like? What do you think they would say to one another?

Students will have many opinions on this question. Students may wonder whether Molly has much in common with her brothers after so many years of living apart. They might wonder whether her brothers try to get Molly back, or whether she would choose to continue life with the Seneca if they did. And they might wonder how well Molly remembers her old life, after so many years with the Seneca. This also raises the question of the brothers' own feelings toward the Seneca, who were responsible for killing their entire family: Do the brothers still consider the Seneca enemies?

13. In your own words, explain why Molly decides to stay with the Seneca in the end rather than go with Captain Morgan. Were you surprised by her decision? Do you think she made the right choice?

Molly learns from Fallenash that all of her family members, with the exception of her two oldest brothers, were killed right after she was kidnapped, and that their home was burned by the Seneca (pp. 278-9). She knows that she no longer has a family waiting for her, but she does have a "family" with the Seneca. She tells Chief Burning Sky that Red Bird has been a mother to her, and Shining Star and Squirrel Woman have been like her own sisters (p. 292). She also remembers the pain that Running Deer caused to his adoptive mother Earth Woman when he ran away, and she wishes to spare her loved ones a similar grief (p. 292). She has friends who love her, and she has learned to understand the Seneca and their ways, so she decides to remain with them. Many students will be surprised by Molly's decision, but will recognize that the Seneca are Molly's family now. Also, Molly is troubled to learn that if she does go with Captain Morgan, Gray Wolf will receive money from the English as payment for her, and she can not bear the thought of being sold.

14. Compare Molly's upbringing before her capture to the way she was raised by the Seneca. What are some of the differences between the two ways of bringing up children? How would you prefer to be raised?

Before her kidnapping, Molly spent much of her time indoors, learning handcrafts such as weaving and knitting and school subjects such as writing, arithmetic, and the catechism. After her capture, Molly spends much more of her time outdoors, working alongside the Seneca. Before her kidnapping, Molly's life revolved around her own family, and after her kidnapping, Molly's world included her adoptive family as well as the entire Seneca tribe. The Seneca's lifestyle was much more communal; they worked as a group to meet the needs of the group.

15. Besides Molly, who was your favorite character in *Indian Captive*? Why did you like him or her, and what did that character contribute to the story?

Within the Seneca tribe, there are many characters who show much kindness to Molly, such as Shagbark, Shining Star, Little Turtle, Earth Woman, and Beaver Girl, and students may write about one of these. Each of these characters offers encouragement to Molly, shows her real affection, and plays a part in helping Molly understand her role with the Seneca.

Note: These questions are keyed to Bloom's Taxonomy as follows: Knowledge: 1-2; Comprehension: 3-6; Application: 7-8; Analysis: 9-10; Synthesis: 11-12; Evaluation: 13-15.

Activities

1. Illustrate Molly's first year living with the Seneca as a line graph. What are the highest and lowest points of her year? After you've drawn and labeled your line graph, use drawings to depict each of the events in that year. Afterwards, compare your line graph with a classmate's, and talk about why you graphed Molly's year like you did.
This activity helps students review the tumultuous chain of events of Molly's first year with the Seneca, and requires students to gauge Molly's emotional state along the way, as she grieves and begins to adjust to her life with the Seneca. Most students will see the lowest point of Molly's year as the time of her journey to Genesee Town, a time of great physical hardship and despair after meeting the English at Fort Duquesne.
2. Through living with the Seneca, Molly is introduced to many types of utensils and other gear that she had never encountered before – things like baby frames, burden straps, and clay cooking pots. Try to list of as many of these items as you can, and create a mini-encyclopedia to describe them. Use drawings and descriptions to explain the use of these different items.
This activity requires students to pay close attention to the Seneca's way of life by examining the gear and utensils they used. Lenski's drawings of many of these items will help students visualize them. In their mini-encyclopedias, students will likely include items such as bark strip canoes, deerskin leggings, water pails made from bark, baby frames, burden straps, sticks with elk bone for hoeing, carved wood ladles, and a baby mobile called a "spider web."
3. Names have important meanings in the Seneca tribe. In this story, for example, Little Turtle becomes Turkey Feather after he successfully hunts his first turkey, and Corn Tassel becomes Little Woman of Great Courage after she decides to stay with the Seneca. Give yourself a new name with a meaning that shows an important achievement or experience in your life, and write an explanation of your new name.
Students may rename themselves, or they might like to get help from friends and family in choosing a new name.