

## Literature Circle Guide to *Pocahontas* by Joseph Bruchac

### **Book Summary**

*Pocahontas* is a carefully researched story told in the alternating voices of Pocahontas, daughter of the Powhatan chief, and Captain John Smith. Smith describes the difficult voyage of and interpersonal conflicts among the Virginia settlers as they try to build shelters, grow food, and relate to the native Powhatan people. Pocahontas describes her peoples' fascination with the "Coatmen" who have arrived in their "swan canoes," and their strange way of life. Often the same events are described from different perspectives, highlighting the unique interpretations of the two cultures. In the end, the Powhatans and John Smith make their peace, in part due to Pocahontas's own role. The book concludes with several pages of notes that describe what happened to the historical Pocahontas, John Smith, and Jamestown after the book's end.

### **Author's Information**

Joseph Bruchac grew up in a small town in the foothills of the Adirondacks not far from the city of Saratoga Springs, New York. He was raised by his grandparents, who kept a little general store where Bruchac worked in his free time. He grew up hearing traditional stories and songs told by his grandparents and their friends, and from an early age he knew that he wanted to be a writer. He published his first book of stories in 1975. Bruchac has a Ph.D. from Union Graduate School, and his books have won many awards, including the Parents' Choice Award, the American Book Award, and the Skipping Stones Honor Award for Multicultural Children's Literature. Today Bruchac lives in New York in the same house in which he grew up. Besides writing books, Bruchac loves to write and perform songs in a musical group he formed with his sister and two grown sons.

### **Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions**

1. List five of the challenges the colonists faced on their voyage and settlement of Jamestown.  
**Students might mention the colonists' inexperience as sailors, jealousy and false accusations, incompetent and selfish leadership, difficulties in growing crops and making shelters, hunger and sickness, and corrupt leadership.**
2. Historians have long wondered what happened to the "lost colony" of Roanoke, Virginia. What is Pocahontas's explanation of what became of the Roanoke survivors (page 5)?  
**The Roanoke settlers felt abandoned when their ship returned to England, and after time passed, they began to starve. With the help of the Powhatan people, they were able to survive, and gradually they came to live with the Powhatan people (page 5).**

3. Pocahontas's father is the Mamanatowic, the Great Chief of the Powhatan villages. Describe his position and the role he plays in the lives of the Powhatan people.  
**The Great Chief is very powerful. As the leader of his people, he has "the power of life," that is, the power to judge and punish wrongdoing. He is an absolute ruler, and his word is law among the Powhatan people.**
4. How does John Smith explain the false accusations made against him by Master Wingfield?  
**Smith says that Wingfield was envious of him, because the other settlers admired Smith so much for his courage and natural leadership ability, especially in light of Wingfield's incompetence. To put an end to Smith's leadership, Wingfield falsely accused him of mutiny.**
5. Frequently Pocahontas makes reference to Okeus. Who is Okeus, and what do the Powhatans believe about him?  
**Okeus is the power "who watches over the affairs of humans and judges severely when we do things that are wrong"(page 33). The priests of Okeus are important because they guide humans in everyday matters and help humans escape misfortune with their ability to foresee the future.**
6. Why is John Smith critical of the "gentlemen planters" who are a part of the Virginia colony?  
**These gentleman planters are not used to hard work on ship or land. They "would not dirty their hands," unlike John Smith, who is a hard worker. They are "puffed up," or prideful, because of their own noble births. Also unlike John Smith, they have no experience in battle and so have not proved their courage on the battlefield.**
7. How does John Smith feel that his background as a soldier helps him in his new life as a colonist?  
**He is able to entertain and provide hope for the other settlers with his stories of the hardships he endured on the battlefield. His years as a soldier taught him how to work hard without complaining, and he feels he provides a good example to the other settlers. Also, his training as a soldier has taught him how to be strategic and observant about what is happening around him.**
8. In describing his thoughts about dealing with the colonists, Pocahontas's father tells her, "When you grasp a snake, you have to make sure you hold it firmly and in the right place. Otherwise it will twist around and bite you" (page 74). Explain in your own words what the Great Chief means with this snake metaphor.  
**Mamanatowic is suggesting the importance of establishing control, of getting the upper hand, when dealing with the colonists. Only then are the Powhatan people safe from the deceit and treachery of the Coatmen.**

9. Rawhunt and Amocis describe to Pocahontas the many mistakes made by the “Coatmen,” as they call the English settlers. What are these mistakes?  
**Rawhunt and Amocis criticize the settlers for acting like women; they wear their hair like women and work like women. The settlers show no courage; they beg for food; they do not understand how to grow food, make proper shelter, or show hospitality to guests. They show their fear of the Powhatan people; only their “thunder weapons” make them bold.**
10. In the final chapters of the book, John Smith is brought before Pocahontas’s father, and he feels sure that he is about to be killed (page 143). Instead, the Mamanatowic makes a solemn promise to John Smith (page 145). What is the Great Chief’s promise to John Smith, and why does he make this promise?  
**The Chief promises John Smith that he will avenge the death of his brother, and he welcomes John Smith into his own family, promising to provide food for Smith. The Mamanatowic says that Smith will be as dear to him as his own son. In return for these gifts, Smith will move close to the Powhatan people, treat Pocahontas as his own sister, and provide the Mamanatowic with guns and a grindstone.**
11. As the colonists interact with the Powhatan people, many misunderstandings result due to differences in language and culture. Can you find an example of a serious misunderstanding between the colonists and the Powhatan people? What is the result of the misunderstanding?  
**The final chapters, in which Smith is held hostage by the Powhatan people, contain several examples of this kind of misunderstanding. For example, when Smith gives the Powhatan people a bag of gunpowder as a sign of friendship, the Powhatans make plans to plant the gunpowder in order to grow more. Also, throughout his captivity, Smith thinks that his life is in danger, especially when at the end of chapter 26, the Mamanatowic approaches him holding stones. In the next chapter, we learn that the stones represent a promise of friendship from the Great Chief, and that the Powhatan people have been trying to win the favor of the Coatman, whose courage has so impressed them.**
12. This story is told in the alternating voices of John Smith and Pocahontas. Explain how this storytelling technique affects your reading of *Pocahontas*.  
**This technique helps readers understand the differences between these two characters, highlighting their differing perspectives and worldviews. Many of the book’s events are told from the perspective of both characters, making the reader aware of the importance of point of view.**
13. How does this version of the story of Pocahontas and John Smith differ from other versions you have seen or read? Were there parts of this story that surprised you?  
**Many students will be familiar with the story of Pocahontas and John Smith from the Disney movie and other children’s books. In this version, John**

**Smith is depicted as a man with faults, unlike the Disney version in which John Smith is an idealized hero. Also, in Bruchac's book, the role of Pocahontas as peacemaker is subtly described, in contrast to the drama of the Disney version. In Bruchac's book, Pocahontas observes John Smith from afar and learns to respect him as a good leader.**

14. In chapter 17, Pocahontas describes the ways that her people punish the wrongdoers in their community. For example, she explains that if someone is caught stealing three times, that person is punished by death. What can we learn here about the Powhatan ideas about justice?

**The Powhatan people have firm ideas about justice, and they respond harshly to crimes against those in their own community, especially theft. The crime of stealing is punished in the same way that murder is punished. Even in death, the thief is given the opportunity to prove his bravery one last time. If the method of execution is slow, a thief can prove his worth by remaining quiet and not fighting back.**

15. If you could give some words of advice to John Smith about how to live peacefully alongside the Powhatan people, what would you tell him?

**Students will likely caution Smith to try to understand the Powhatan people on their own terms. They might caution him not to give in to his anger but to maintain his self-control at all times in order to avoid unnecessary conflict. They might also suggest that Smith refrain from bragging about his accomplishments and abilities in order to help keep the peace with his fellow colonists.**

*Note: These literature circle questions are keyed to Bloom's Taxonomy as follows: Knowledge: 1-3; Comprehension: 4-6; Application: 7-8; Analysis: 9-11; Synthesis: 12-13; Evaluation: 14-15.*

## **Activities**

1. Each of the chapters written from the perspective of Pocahontas begins with a short legend, often explaining the origin of an aspect of nature or a Powhatan belief. Experiment with writing your own legend in this style.  
**This assignment asks students to imitate the content and style of the short legends that begin each chapter. Students should be prepared to share their stories with the class.**
2. To learn more about the settlement at Jamestown and to see photos of archaeological excavations, use the Internet to visit the historic Jamestown Web site (<http://www.apva.org/jr.html>). After exploring this Web site, be ready to report what you learned to your class.  
**Students may want to complete this assignment before reading the novel to gain background information about the historical Jamestown. The Web site**

**listed serves as an introduction to the historical Jamestown, complete with photographs of the archaeological digs and drawings of the major characters involved. A timeline is included, along with some primary source descriptions of the original settlers.**

3. Create a reader's theater for two people, using passages from the book that represent both Pocahontas and John Smith. Choose passages that highlight the differences in perspective of these two characters, and practice your reader's theater with another student to present to your class.

**This assignment gives students an experience with dramatic interpretation, as they select passages and practice reading their parts aloud. This activity highlights the two main characters' different interpretations of the same events.**