

Happy New Year! Here's to reading more wonderful books together in 2018.

For this month's book club, 4th and 5th grade girls and grown-ups will read *The Birchbark House* by Louise Erdrich. This book is about a young girl named Omakayas who lives with her family among the Ojibwa people in the late 1900s. We read about Omakayas' life over the course of a year full of family, seasonal changes, and ritual. Some of the changes Omakayas goes through are hard to endure, like the loss of her beloved brother to a smallpox epidemic. Other changes are joyful, like the discovery that she has a gift for healing. Omakayas weathers all these changes with a sense of gratitude, especially for the natural world, and with strong bonds to her community.

On the following pages, you will find some suggestions for how your book club meeting might go. Feel free to use whichever of these questions and tips works for you, and substitute as you wish. The best book discussions develop organically as people listen closely and respond to each other.

Munch 'n' Chat, 20-30 minutes

As grown ups and girls arrive, allow some time for snacking and catching up. Snacks don't have to be fancy at all; it can be as simple as a picnic blanket in the backyard, or sitting around the coffee table eating popcorn and lemonade.

Ice-Breaker, 10-15 minutes

If your club has been meeting since the fall (or if this is a continuation of previous years), you probably don't have to encourage people to sit next to someone new. At this point, everyone is probably feeling quite comfortable together - the girls rushing into the house to catch up on all the latest, the grown-ups feeling like they know each other well enough to move past small talk.

There might be some clubs that are just starting out, though, and in those cases, depending on how well all the participants know each other, you might encourage people to sit so that they're not in their grown-up/girl pairs.

Once seated, everyone asks her neighbor a discussion question, like: **"When's the last time you went through a change in your life?"**

Give five minutes for pairs discussion. Then, give 5-10 minutes for pairs to share a bit about each other's answers. It might sound something like, "Julia went through a big change when her family got a puppy."

Book Discussion, 30 minutes or so

These questions about *The Birchbark House* might help you begin your book talk. Some groups might have time to get to all of these questions, but many groups will pick one or two questions and spend the whole meeting discussing those. Feel free to write your own discussion questions.

- What kind of person is Omakayas?
- What do you notice about Omakayas' relationship with her family?
- How do Omakayas' feelings about her brother Pinch change from the beginning of the story to the end? What causes the change?
- Do you see Omakayas' life as being a hard one? Do you think she would say her life was hard?
- How do Omakayas and her family recover from the terrible winter of sickness and hunger?

Leadership Goals, 15 minutes

Participants can talk to each other in pairs or as a whole group about the idea of resilience. We use the term resilience to talk about the super important skill of believing that everything's going to be all right even when life gets hard.

What do you do when life gets hard? What are your resilience strategies? As group members share their resilience strategies, try learning from each other to see if someone else has a strategy that you'd like to try.

Closing, 5 minutes

Before everyone goes off their separate ways, make sure you've chosen a date for your February meeting. Happy reading!

Further Reading

If you really loved this book, and you'd like to read more books like it, here are some suggestions. If there are other books you would like to recommend, we'd love to hear them! Please share them on our **Girls Leadership Book Club Facebook page**, so our community can keep growing our list of great titles.

The *Little House on the Prairie* series by Laura Ingalls Wilder - Many people have compared *The Birchbark House* series to Wilder's well-known series about a family that builds a homestead in the Western United States in the 1900s. Both take place during the same historical time period, and both tell the story of that time through the very personal and domestic lens of family life.

A Gathering of Days, A New England Girl's Journal, 1830-32 by Joan W. Blos - Thirteen-year old Catherine starts this journal to record the events of her life, including helping a runaway slave and losing her best friend. The voice of the character - and the details of the time period - comes to life through the pages of her journal.

Riding Freedom by Pam Muñoz Ryan - Another historical fiction book from the 19th century, this one based on an actual person: Charlotte "Charley" Parkhurst who dressed like a man so that she could have adventures that were reserved for men like riding horses and performing brave feats.