FATTY LEGS: A True Story

by Christy Jordan-Fenton and Margaret Pokiak-Fenton • illustrated by Liz Amini-Holmes

Genre: non-fiction

Themes: memoir; Inuit; Native peoples; arctic; self-esteem; abuse; prejudice; courage/bravery; right vs. wrong; bullying; memoir

Suitable for: Grades 9 – 12

Fatty Legs

Eight-year-old Margaret Pokiak has set her sights on learning to read, even though it means leaving her village in the high Arctic. Faced with unceasing pressure, her father finally agrees to let her make the five-day journey to attend school, but he warns Margaret of the terrors of residential schools.

At school Margaret soon encounters the Raven, a black-cloaked nun with a hooked nose and bony fingers that resemble claws. She immediately dislikes the strong-willed young Margaret. Intending to humiliate her, the heartless Raven gives gray stockings to all the girls — all except Margaret, who gets red ones. In an instant, Margaret is the laughingstock of the entire school.

In the face of such cruelty, Margaret refuses to be intimidated and bravely gets rid of the stockings. Although a sympathetic nun stands up for Margaret, in the end it is this brave young girl who gives the Raven a lesson in the power of human dignity.

ACTIVITY IDEAS

The following activity ideas are only a start. There are many possibilities for helping students construct meaning from text.

Comprehension activities:

- help readers to extend their general knowledge from prior experience
- develop reading strategies for comprehension
- bring relevance to the act of reading
- foster discussion and reflection through response to the text

BEFORE STARTING THE BOOK

Activities to build the context and introduce the topic of the book, and to establish prior knowledge and interest and develop predictions of what the text will be about.

1. Why do you go to school?
2. Would you go to school if you didn't have to?
3. What does the word education mean to you?
4. What kind of qualities do you think a teacher should have?
5. What does it mean to be an outsider?
6. What does your family have to do if they need food or supplies?
7. What do you really wish you knew how to do? (i.e. learn to play the guitar)
8. Do you think a person needs to be brave to be curious? Explain.
9. Why do you think that this book is called *Fatty Legs*?

WHILE READING THE BOOK

Activities to check on comprehension, stimulate interest, involve readers in reflection as they read, and encourage consideration of other readers' reactions.

CHAPTER 1

1. Why did the outsiders "pluck" the students from their homes?

2. When most of us want or need something we will often just go to the store to get it. What did Olemaun and her family have to do to trade and get supplies?

3. What did Olemaun think was the key to the outsiders' mysteries and who did she think held it?

4. Why do you think Rosie, Olemaun's half-sister, would not share anything about her four years at school?

5. Why did Olemaun think Alice was chasing the rabbit? Why do you think she had a hard time understanding?

6. Do you think that Alice was brave to chase the rabbit?

7. What does Olemaun think it must have been like at the outsiders' school? After persisting what does Rosie say about the school?

8. What does it mean to take everything?

9. Why do you think that Olemaun's father told the outsiders "no" the previous four summers when they had come for her?

10. Why do you think that the outsiders want to take the children?

11. When did this book take place?

12. How did Olemaun's family travel?

13. When Olemaun's father told her "no" how did she respond? How do children these days often respond when their parents say no?

14. What does Olemaun's father tell her about the schools and the outsiders?

15. How does Olemaun feel about the outsiders' songs and dances compared to her own?

16. Olemaun has heard that she would be asked to kneel and pray for forgiveness a number of times, what does she think about that?

17. Why do you think that Olemaun stops bugging her father about going to the school for a while?

18. What quality does Olemaun possess that her father says the outsiders don't like? Why do you think this is the case?

19. At the end of Chapter One, Olemaun's father uses a rock to demonstrate the change that will happen to her at the school. What comparison does he make and what is the significance? Does Olemaun understand his message?

20. Why does Olemaun's father finally agree to let her go to the school?

CHAPTER 2

1. At the beginning of Chapter Two Olemaun describes her family's spring migration. How many schooners were traveling with them? How many families were on each schooner? How many days was the trip?

2. Who owned Olemaun's schooner and why was it significant?

3. Who was Old Man Pokiak and why was he significant?

4. What was Olemaun playing with after her father sold his winter catch of furs?

5. What place did Olemaun feel was magical and why?

6. What did Olemaun's mother say to her to try to convince her not to go to school?

7. Why does Olemaun think her mother wants her to stay home from the school? Do you think that Olemaun is correct in her thinking?

8. What things does Olemaun's mother buy her at the Hudson's Bay Company?

9. What do you think was in the white tube that Olemaun's mother bought her?

10. Olemaun's parents wanted to wait until after the first of July to send her to school: what was important about this date and what took place on that day? What reasons does she give for that day being a festive time?

11. What was Olemaun playing with on the first day of the games?

12. Why do you think that Olemaun thought the kids in the garden were "naughty"?

13. Why do you think that the children who got off the boats were feeling so solemn and, as Olemaun's mother said, "didn't want to go to the outsiders' school"?

14. Why do you think that Olemaun's mother's words stung?

15. Olemaun thinks it will be fun to work at the hospital like a nurse. Do you think it would be fun? What kind of things do you think Olemaun will have to do as a nurse?

16. Why do you think that Olemaun will not be allowed to talk to the boys, even if they are her cousins?

17. Why was the school starting to seem less inviting?

18. Do you think that Olemaun should have changed her mind about going to the school? Why? Make a prediction about what would happen if she goes to the school. Make a prediction about if she was to go home.

19. Why does Olemaun decide that she should go to the school?

20. How long does Olemaun say she stays at the school for and why?

21. What do you think that Olemaun meant when she said that the "Sisters, the Fathers and the Brothers ... were not family; they were like owls and ravens raising wrens"?

22. What do you think that the hooked-nose outsider meant when she told Olemaun's father that "you certainly can't teach her the things she needs to know"?

23. What kind of imagery is recurring by the end of Chapter Two?

CHAPTER 3

1. What did the nuns do to most of the girls' hair? Why do you think they did this?

2. What is the significance of the word "sever"?

3. Why do you think that the nuns cut Olemaun's hair?

4. How did Olemaun know that the tall girl who entered the room was Gwich'in?

5. What did Olemaun think about the clothes that she was given? What were some of the items?

6. Olemaun said that the nuns, "knew nothing of living in the North, nor how to dress for it." (p. 34) What kind of education do you think the students will be receiving since it clearly wouldn't be about the north?

7. What was the nun's reaction when Olemaun tried to wear her own stockings? Why do you think she reacted this way?

8. How do you think Olemaun felt about her name? How can you tell?

9. What did Olemaun's name mean and where did it come from? What is her new, Christian name?

10. What did Margaret discover about the stuff in the tube? What did she say it tasted like?

11. Why did Margaret feel that the girls were laughing at her mother?

12. Why did Margaret decide to try the new nun's toothpaste?

13. What was the new nun's name and what did Margaret think she looked like?

14. Margaret was hoping to learn to read on her second day, was did she learn instead?
15. What was Margaret supposed to pray for on page 42? What does she pray for instead?

16. Do you think the Raven is picking on Margaret? Explain your answer

CHAPTER 4

1. What did the Raven want Margaret to do at the beginning of Chapter Four? Was this fair? Explain.

2. Why did the kids laugh when the Raven made Margaret clean the boards?

3. What did Margaret decide that she would teach the Raven? How do you think that she planned to do that?

4. How did Margaret feel about the food they were feeding the kids at school?

5. Why did the hatchlings start laughing at the Raven?

CHAPTER 5

1. Margaret eventually turned the Raven's cruelty into a game. How did she "play"?

2. What news did Margaret receive when a boat delivered a letter from her father? Explain.

3. Why do you think that Margaret had the dream about being locked beneath the Raven's habit?

4. What reasons does Margaret give for the nuns wanting to keep the children at the school?

5. Why did classes have to be halted in October?

6. What did Margaret think about having to call the men who were hired to do the chores the children couldn't do "Brothers"?

7. Why did Margaret stop complaining about the work?

8. What happened to Margaret when she had to go to the bathroom when she was working in the hospital? Explain.

9. By late November when classes resumed, Margaret said that she discovered that Rosie was right about something, what was it? What does Margaret say that she would have done instead? Why do you think Margaret said what she did?

10. What did Margaret want to tell her father in her letter home? What happened to the letter instead?

11. After the issues with the letter what did Agnes tell Margaret she overheard two nuns talking about? Do you think Margaret would get the chance to share her message? What would you say if you had this opportunity?

12. Did the nuns worry about the health or safety of the children on the way to the station? Why?

13. What message was to be sent home this time? Why did Margaret think that this didn't make any sense? Why do you think the nuns wanted the children to do this?

14. What did Margaret think her silence would accomplish?

CHAPTER 6

1. How did the Raven make Margaret pay for her silence at the station?

2. What was different about the stockings the Raven gave to Margaret? Why do you think she did this?

3. Who did Margaret imagine the Raven as after she got her new stockings? Do you think this is an appropriate comparison? Why?

4. What punishment does Margaret receive after Katherine called her fatty legs and Margaret called her fatty face?

5. What do you think Margaret plans to do to stop "this fatty legs business"?

6. What happened to Agnes after everyone started calling Margaret fatty legs?

7. What did Margaret do with the stockings? Do you think this was a good or bad idea? Explain.

8. How did the Raven react when Margaret came into the refectory with bare legs?

9. How do you think Margaret felt when she told the Raven she couldn't put on her stockings?

10. What do you think Sister MacQuillan whispered in the Raven's ear and what did Margaret think would change as a result?

11. What lesson does Margaret think that the Raven learned by the end of Chapter Six?

CHAPTER 7

1. What did Margaret fear at the beginning of the chapter and what message was delivered to her at the beginning of the summer?

2. How long had it been since Margaret heard her real name?

3. What is the Inuvialuit word for swan? How did Sister MacQuillan react when Margaret called her a swan?

4. Margaret says that she was sure that once she told her father about the Raven that he would never let her return to the school. Do you think she will ever go back? Explain your answer.

5. What was the name of the boat that took Margaret to Tuktoyaktuk?

6. How did Margaret's mother react when they first saw one another? What did she say to the Brothers?

7. What did her mother give to Margaret as a welcome home gift?

8. How did Margaret feel about (react to) the gift?

9. Margaret's parents had very different reactions to Margaret's aversion to the foods. Explain the reaction from both and why you think each reacted as they did.

10. What do you think that Margaret meant when she said that she was "satisfied that I now knew what happened to girls who went down rabbit holes"?

11. What do you predict will happen after Margaret settles in at home? Give reasons for your answer.

AFTER THE STORY

1. What things did Margaret do in the first year of her return home?

2. What happened to Margaret's younger sisters after her return? Are you surprised? Why?

3. Why did Margaret's father agree and how did the government help his decision?

4. What things did Margaret say to the girls to try to talk them out of their decision?

5. What did Margaret decide to do and why? Would you have made the same choice? Explain.

6. Why do you think that Margaret names Sister MacQuillan but refers to the nun who was cruel to her as “The Raven”?

7. Throughout the novel Margaret is seeking an education. What do you think she really learned in this story? Explain.

8. In the beginning of the book Margaret said that she thought Alice was brave to chase the rabbit out of curiosity. Do you think Margaret was brave? Explain.

THE SCHOOLS

1. How did some of the children end up coming to the schools and why did they want to keep enrollment high?

2. What were some of the problems mentioned in this section about the schools?

3. What does it mean to assimilate? How did the schools try to do this to the children?

4. What problems did some of the children experience when they returned from school?

5. What are the people who lived through their experiences at residential schools called?

6. What are some of the ways that former residential school students are trying to heal?

AFTER READING THE BOOK

Activities to inspire continued reflection and response to the text, bring conclusion to the experience of reading this particular text, and stimulate further extensions.

Why do we call “comfort food” comfort food? What kinds of things do you consider comfort foods? How would you feel if you couldn’t eat your favorite foods anymore because they had been taken away from you for so long?

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