

heart berries



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Recommended Grades: 11-12

Subjects/Courses: Social Studies, English Language Arts

ERAC Review

DESCRIPTION

This memoir traces the First Nations author's coming-of-age story from the difficulties of her life on a B.C. reserve, to her dysfunctional upbringing, her family situation and issues, her time in foster care, her many rocky relationships, her unstable mental health, and ultimately her search for her voice and identity. In telling her story, Mailhot recounts her struggles with mental health, substance abuse, self-harm, poverty, and sexual situations. Given the mature content of the memoir, it is best suited for smaller novel study groups or for individual novel study by mature senior students. Social considerations noted; pre-teaching may be required.

CURRICULUM FIT

Does the resource support BC curriculum? Extensively

This product supports the Core Competencies of the BC curriculum:

- Communication
- Creative Thinking
- Critical thinking
- Positive Personal and Cultural Identity
- Personal Awareness and Responsibility
- Social Responsibility

Comments:

CURRICULUM FIT

Heart Berries by Mailhot connects to the following Big Ideas of the English Language Arts 11-12 Curriculum: the exploration of story that deepens understanding of diversity, and complex ideas about identity, others, and the world. It also links to world view and different world perspectives. As well, it looks at social, cultural, and historical constructs. The text also links to the Big Ideas from English First Peoples 10-12 by utilizing voice, providing insight into key aspects of Canada's past, present, and future, and lastly by fostering authentic self-representation of First Peoples texts to foster justice and reconciliation.

SOCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Age:	Parents are often represented as being unreliable and violent. Adults are often seen as failing figures and children are often left to their own devices.
Gender Roles, Identity & Sexual Orientation:	"Heart Berries" has some more traditional ideas of gender roles and some gender stereotypes, for example the mother staying home to look after the children or the father being the typical bad guy. The book also discusses the idea that women are over-emotional and hysterical.
Indigenous Peoples:	This memoir is written from the perspective of a First Nations woman and she discusses the difficulties of life on the reserve and uses derogatory language for First Nations people throughout the memoir. Indigenous women are discussed as being forgotten by the larger society, and knowing pain more clearly than most people. However, this is often done in reference to her own struggles with mental health, which reflects her self-doubt. She is very honest about her struggles as a First Nations woman: her struggles with education, and how past trauma affects her family, community, and identity.
Multiculturalism:	"Heart Berries" looks at life from the perspective of a First Nations woman and only looks at her perspective of the world. She often stereotypes the men in her life, who are often Caucasian men. She discusses her struggles in reference to those of white people, making comments that "self-esteem is a white invention", and that "only white people call [struggle] resilience".
Belief System:	"Heart Berries" has some discussion of prayer and spiritualism. Some Indigenous beliefs are portrayed negatively by the author, such as the belief that if an Indian is sick it is because they are possessed by spirits. She is also advised as a child to turn her shirt backwards to confuse the spirits when she complains about having nightmares. She is told by her mother, when a child, that school is a choice, and that experiencing misfortune in life is a choice.
Socio Economic:	The author discusses being very poor, not always having food to eat, or a safe place to live (a bug-infested dwelling). The author also talks about being taken into foster care as a child and that her mother was on welfare which greatly affected her family. The author talks about always wanting more as an adult and young person; often she manipulated people in order to get what she wanted from them. The people she often sees as being able to get her what she wants are white men, as they seem to have more money than she does. She talks about being on welfare, and how the limited resources provided by the system often forced her to choose between necessities.

SOCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Violence:	Violence is present in "Heart Berries" in a number of situations. Not only does the author talk about abuse she faced as a young person, but there is also discussion of spousal abuse where the author herself abuses her partner. She also talks about violence towards herself in the form of cutting and other forms of self-harm.
Ethical:	"Heart Berries" discusses the removal of children from households and also looks at how the author herself had a child taken from her. At one point the narrator describes kissing a boy on a date out of obligation rather than desire. Topics of abortion, foster care, abuse, and mental health are ethical topics that could cause some students some distress or cause a lot of questioning.
Safety:	The author discusses putting herself and her children into situations where she is not always safe or that her children are not always under proper care. The author discusses spending time with men who don't have her best interest in mind and often talks about those relationships being user relationships. Her father is described as a violent criminal, and after he is thrown out for raping her, the family waits with weapons in case he returns. Her parents often leave the children at home unsupervised, which is why they are taken into foster care. When the narrator is pregnant she has violent thoughts of hurting herself and others. She also has sex with multiple partners, as does her partner.
Language:	"Heart Berries" uses profanity and sexual language throughout that would not be appropriate for younger or immature students. The author also continually refers to herself as a "squaw" when she is feeling particularly weak and broken.

Social Considerations Comments:

Do the social considerations support, rather than detract from, student learning? Moderately

"Heart Berries" is a memoir that looks at struggles with mental health, substance abuse, self-harm, poverty, and descriptive sexual situations that are sometimes violent, and has strong language throughout. Ethical topics such as abortions and foster care are also present in this memoir. It is important to monitor student reactions and to make sure they are aware and prepared for the heaviness of some of the author's personal reflections. Teachers may wish to pre-teach on topics around mental health and the history of reserves and past trauma so students have a basic understanding of where the author comes from and how those ideas affected her upbringing and concepts of family.

GENERAL CONTENT

Content:

Should this product be identified as Canadian?	Yes
Is the resource an Authentic First Peoples Text?	Yes

This resource supports the characteristics of Aboriginal worldviews and perspectives:

- Connectedness and Relationship
- Local Focus
- Emphasis on Identity
- Language and Culture

GENERAL CONTENT

Is the resource engaging?	Moderately
Is the content current for the intended curriculum and grade?	Moderately
Is the content accurate for the intended curriculum and grade?	Moderately
Is the content timely and important for student broad understandings?	Moderately

Audience:

Is the content appropriate to the emotional maturity and cognitive level of students?	Moderately
Does the resource provide opportunities for creative and critical thinking?	Extensively
Is the level of detail appropriate?	Moderately
Is the content of particular interest to male students?	Not at all or slightly
Is the content of particular interest to female students?	Moderately
Is the language use appropriate to the emotional maturity and cognitive level of students?	Moderately

Comments:

This memoir might not appeal to all students as the prose is written like a form of free verse poetry and also includes a lot of flashbacks that can be confusing for the reader to follow. Students reading this memoir should have a high level of maturity in order to handle the topics present in the text. The reading level itself is not difficult, but the format and content could be a road block for some students.

TECHNICAL DESIGN

Does the resource make effective use of the medium?	Extensively
Is the resource easy to use?	Extensively
Is the use of font, text size and presentation uniform?	Extensively

Comments:

The memoir has a table of contents, clear chapter titles, and page numbers. The font is easy to read and the organization of the memoir itself is easy to follow. The font and text size remains consistent throughout.

PRINT NOVEL

Does the text show insight into the complexity of the human condition?	Extensively
Does the text broaden students' experiences and understanding?	Extensively
To what degree is this text stylistically rich?	Moderately

Plot description:

"Heart Berries" is a memoir of a young First Nations woman as she comes of age on a reserve in British Columbia. Mailhot looks at her own dysfunctional upbringing, her family, relationships, and her unstable mental health and identity. Mailhot's memoir is written to her mother and father, and by the end of the memoir she starts to find her own voice, identity, and reconnects to her culture again.

Related Comments:

"Heart Berries" can be a difficult read because of how the author jumps back between past and present. The memoir also has many trigger warnings for students like the author's struggle with mental health, self-harm, and substance abuse. Despite those warnings, the memoir still allows for discussion on those topics which can help students gain a deeper understanding of others' struggles, and possibly their own struggles, around those topics.

PRINT NOVEL

Descriptors:**Genre:**

Autobiography

Literary Highlights:

Complex conflict

Well-developed themes

Effective figurative language

Point of view

Type:

Novel

Poetry

SUGGESTED CLASSROOM USAGE

Comments:

This text could be used to explore different voice, point of view, and prose/creative writing styles. "Heart Berries" would ideally be used for smaller novel study groups or for individual novel study as not every student will be in the right place in their maturity to handle the content of the memoir. The themes of culture, mental health, family, and laws could be explored in more depth to allow for students to connect the themes to their own community and possibly self-reflection on their own lives. Within the Social Studies Curriculum a teacher could make links between past trauma and history affecting the current narrative of Canadian society.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Readability:

At intended grade level(s)

Comments:

"Heart Berries" was a finalist for the Governor General's Literacy Award and for the Hilary Weston Writers' Trust.