

## The Sign of the Beaver Book Club Questions

Attean considered squaw work (women's work) to be menial and unimportant. It was the work of the hunters (men in his tribe) that he admired and considered to be of prime importance.

1. Which role do you think is more important? The hunters who brought back meat, or the squaws who grew, picked, cleaned and prepared the food, and utilized the rest of the animal?

2. Are the roles equally important? Think about the roles men and women played in Attean's tribe and, using ideas and information from the book and from your own experiences, share and support your opinion.

**3. You are faced with the decision of your lifetime. Should you go with Attean and his Native American tribe or should you remain at your family's homestead? Consider:**

- **The geographic layout of the land in Maine and seasonal changes.**
- **The amount and type of available food in the late 1700's.**
- **The health and safety concerns you might possibly face.**

*The Sign of the Beaver* is a masterful title for [Elizabeth George Speare's](#) historical frontier novel about the developing relationship between young Matt Hallowell and an Indian youth named Attean. In the novel, the words *sign* or *signs* come to symbolize the different communication systems of the two boys, and these communication systems, in turn, reveal the boys' contrasting cultural values.

The importance of signs as expressed in Matt's *langue*, especially in his written language system, is shown early in the book. Soon after twelve-year-old Matt has been left to guard his family's new cabin in the Maine woods while his father returns home to bring the rest of the family, he encounters various difficulties. These problems include a dishonest visitor named Ben, who steals his rifle; a marauding bear, who scatters his flour and eats his molasses; and a swarm of bees, whose poison might have killed him if he had not been befriended by Attean and his grandfather Saknis. In return for the Indians' kindness, Matt offers them the only thing he has to offer -- his worn copy of [Robinson Crusoe](#). Almost immediately, Matt regrets his gift, for he realizes that the Indians cannot read. However, Saknis realizes that the book holds a kind of power, for it contains the *signs* -- the written words -- that have stolen his people's land. Eagerly, he proposes that Matt teach his grandson the "signs" in the book:

It is only after Matt begins to read him [Robinson Crusoe](#), which shows the language system in action, that Attean becomes interested enough to begin to learn.

When he decides to alter the written signs in [Robinson Crusoe](#), Matt has allowed his *parole* to alter the *langue* he is using. That is, he has learned to place his own personal experience and friendship above preconceived cultural biases. He now sees Attean as an individual and views his culture through the lens of humanity rather than through that of a specific cultural system.

But Matt's language is not the only communication system described in [The Sign of the Beaver](#). Whereas [Speare](#) emphasizes Matt's written language, she emphasizes Attean's oral language. Matt *reads* the story of *Robinson Crusoe* to Attean; Attean, in turn, *tells* this and other stories to the people of his village. In fact, this quality of oral storytelling is essential to the Indians' culture. The contrasting methods of expression --written for Matt and oral for Attean -- also reveal basic cultural contrasts.

Indeed, as representatives of their cultures, Matt and Attean do see and feel the world quite differently. For example, Matt and his father have "bought" the land where they have built their cabin. However, Attean does not understand the concept of ownership of land because his culture views the land itself as a separate entity like the sky or the sea:

Matt and Attean have each learned more about the other's *langue*-- about the language or sign system with which each society communicates. And in so doing, each boy has also learned to understand and respect the culture of the other.