PRE-READING QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

This book is set in the inner city and depicts the difficult circumstances encountered by Aboriginal boys as they grow to be men. Discuss with the class some of the problems that are prevalent in this community (e.g., violence, crime, and alcoholism). Do students see these problems in their own community?

This book uses the terms Aboriginal and First Nations. Using a dictionary or online resources, look up the strict definitions of these names, as well as comments on the use of these different terms. What do the different terms imply? Have their meanings changed over time? Has the frequency of their use changed?

Discuss with the class the features of a graphic novel. How is a graphic novel different from a regular novel? How is it different from a comic strip? What are the elements that make up the graphic novel (e.g. art, layout, panels, text) and what information do they convey to the reader? What are the strengths of this format? How is reading a graphic novel different from reading a text novel? For a great explanation of how to read a graphic novel, review this PDF at Get Graphic: http://www.getgraphic.org/resources/HowtoReadaGraphicNovel.pdf

Vocabulary

As students read the book, have them make note of new words and phrases that are unfamiliar or have special meaning to Aboriginal culture. After defining the word from context, have them consult reference materials to clarify the literal meaning, the part of speech, and the etymology of the word or phrase. Come together to
discuss the words students have identified. How does the author’s choice of words impact the meaning and tone of the book?

POST-READING QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

A Question of Character

*The Outside Circle* is the tale of Pete, a young Aboriginal man whose life of violence leads him to prison, where he finally takes the first steps to begin rehabilitation and make a new life for himself. Break students into small groups and have them review the text to identify the ways that Pete grows and changes. Have students create a chart with four columns to track these events. Use column one to record quotes or descriptions of major events in his life; column two lists the role other characters play in this event; column three is for Pete’s reaction or response; and column four identifies how he changes as a result. Instruct students to cite specifics from the text. Come together to discuss the events students have identified and integrate them into one list in chronological order. What themes emerge from these interactions and Pete’s growth over the course of the novel? How does the Pete at the beginning of the book compare to his character when the story ends?

The Passage of Time

Pete’s growth doesn’t happen overnight; he goes through his journey over the course of many months. How does this book show the reader the passage of time? What specific visual techniques are used? How does the text convey to the reader that time has passed? Does its nature as a graphic novel give the creators tools that are missing from a traditional text?

Multiple Story Lines

While the overarching storyline of this graphic novel is Pete’s growth and development, there are smaller sequences and interactions that contribute to the overall narrative. As a class, list the different smaller story lines and plot threads that comprise Pete’s story (e.g., Pete’s interactions with Uncle Ray, the death of Pete and Joey’s mother Bernice, Pete’s falling out with the gang). After you have
listed these story lines, break students into groups and assign each group a plot line to analyze. Have each group create an outline or summary of their plot line, describing each event on a separate card. Be sure each group uses a distinctive colour card or piece of paper. Come together as a class and go over the plot line summaries. Working as a group, lay these summary cards out on a table or secure them to a display board. Arrange the cards to show the sequence of events. How did the author make these different sub-plots interact with each other to create a compelling text and advance the plot? What themes are exemplified by the different plot lines? Do these themes interact with each other, or give the reader different impressions when the stories are juxtaposed? How do these plots and themes interact and work to illuminate each other? What decisions did the author make about the story structure, and how does the arrangement of these elements contribute to the overall meaning of the story? How does Pete change through these different events? How do his experiences in one of these sub-plots impact his actions in another (e.g., how does what he learns about his personal and cultural history influence his decisions about his own daughter)?

**Universal Ideas**

While Pete's circumstances may be unfamiliar to the reader, the themes this book addresses are universal. Come together as a class and create a list of the major themes in this book. Have students select a theme or themes as the subject for an essay. The essay should analyze the theme in detail and follow its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and how it is shaped and refined by specific details over the course of the text. Identify and analyze this theme from the book as it applies to Pete's journey. How does this same theme apply to students and their lives?

**Telling Stories**

Violet and Ray tell very similar stories about their families, their upbringing, the way their families were disrupted and the process of healing that they both have gone through. However, their stories are told in very different fashion. We learn Violet's story through her explanation of her family tree to her group at the healing center. Pete's Uncle Ray tells his story as a personal narrative, illustrated by panels framed with streams of tears. As a class, compare these passages in the book. What does each approach do well? What does the reader learn from Violet's story? What
feelings does Ray's story evoke? How do these approaches work together to help the reader understand the challenges facing Aboriginal Peoples? How do the layout and graphics work with the text to convey these meanings to the reader? How does the story of Pete's family tree, as he knows it compare to these rich, if tragic, family histories?

The Outside Circle

Come together as a class and review the scene where Elder Roy describes traditional Aboriginal community structure and explains the phrase “the outside circle.” How does the community he describes manifest itself in the relationships we see in this book between Pete and his brother; his mother; his girlfriend; his uncle; and the elders who run the healing center? What happened to cause these traditional communities to break down and disappear? How did this contribute to the way so many Aboriginal young men are troubled? How can the concept of being a traditional “warrior” as described by Elder Roy be translated to Pete's circumstances and the modern world?

Making Sense of It All

While The Outside Circle is a work of fiction, it presents a very realistic story, a story that is typical of actual events that happen to real individuals. The tale is set against the background of the official government acts, laws, and policies that proved destructive to the communities and cultures of Aboriginal Peoples. The stories told by the elders to Pete during his rehabilitation were typical events in the lives of Aboriginal families. In addition, the illustrations contain statistics about modern Aboriginal life and the official policies and acts that impacted Aboriginal culture. Have students perform a close reading of the text, including the afterword, to create an outline of the real-world historical events, laws, practices, and statistics that are woven through the text. Drawing on this outline, have students then write an explanatory paper that presents an organized view of the systematic way that traditional Aboriginal culture was treated by the government as Canada developed, using statistical examples contained in the text. In their conclusion, have students articulate the implications and significance of these facts.
Information, Please

There are numerous pages in this book where specifics about the plight of Aboriginal children and families are worked into the story. Violet touches on many problems when discussing her Family Tree — problems like alcoholism, abuse and crime. There is a page featuring a montage of events in Joey’s life that lists specific statistics, such as, “23% of Aboriginal youth drop out of high school.” When Pete gets his tattoo, the artwork lists some of the acts and legislation that had deleterious effects on the First Nations. Have students select one of these statistics, laws, or topics as the subject for a research paper and presentation. Using library or Internet resources, research the topic as it applies to the characters and setting of the novel — that is, Calgary, Alberta — and as it applies on a larger scale. How do they affect the communities in which the students themselves live? What were the intended results of these laws? What unintended consequences resulted? Have these laws been changed or amended? Break students into pairs and have them edit and revise their work on an ongoing basis before publishing their final work and presenting it to the class.

The Sins of the Father

Time and again people in the story discuss how young people repeat the mistakes and problems that their own parents had. Pete is no different. Break students into small groups and have them examine the text. How is Pete part of this cycle? What things does he do that his own parents did, or that other members of the Aboriginal community have done? How is Pete given the chance to break free from this cycle? Do students see similar tendencies in their own lives and communities?

Masks

In the course of the story, there are several instances where a mask is shown instead of a face. Break students into small groups and have them search the text for these instances. Have students record what is happening when the mask appears. Come together as a class and discuss the times when Pete is shown with a mask instead of a face. What sorts of things are happening and how does he feel? At the end of Pete’s time at the center there is an exercise where each man makes a mask, representing himself. How does this mask compare to the symbolic mask the reader has been seeing in the illustrations? Do students think these masks serve the same purpose?
Walk Up Music

Through the course of this book Pete’s character grows and changes. Working independently, have students select a “theme song” or “walk up music” for each phase of his life: his time as a criminal; when he is discovering himself at the healing center; and at the conclusion of the book when he is a confident adult. Have them write a brief essay explaining why each song was chosen. Come together as a class to present and discuss students’ song selections. Were any songs chosen more than once? Create a class playlist for each phase of his life. Which songs best represent these different stages in Pete’s life?

Formatting Fiction: The Illustrated Novel

Review the advantages of the graphic novel format with the class, including its demographic appeal, the way it engages audiences that are more accustomed to multi-media entertainment, and its capacity to convey complex issues in an easily understandable manner. Why do students think this story was told as a graphic novel? After the discussion, have students write an opinion piece about this graphic novel. Would students have preferred to read this story in novel format? Why or why not? What other format could have been used to tell this story? Break students into pairs to share their work and revise it based on peer feedback before creating a final copy.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Article describing the “In Search of Your Warrior” program written by Patti LaBoucane-Benson, author of The Outside Circle
http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/research/forum/e143/143l_e.pdf

A comprehensive scholarly evaluation of the “In Search of Your Warrior” program and its effectiveness
http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/research/r172-eng.shtml

Magazine article about the “In Search of Your Warrior” program and some of the participants
Videos of the “In Search of Your Warrior” program, including therapy sessions with participants. The link also contains interviews with counsellors and provides a history of the program

Analysis on the injustices faced by Aboriginal Peoples from the Center for Social Justice of Aboriginal issues and its impact on Aboriginal culture

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, established to investigate and inform about what happened in Indian Residential Schools, has published two reports:

• “They Came for the Children”— a historical document addressing the issues of Aboriginal Peoples, the residential schools, and the impact on Aboriginal culture

• Interim Report — full findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada in their investigation of the residential school system and the impact on Aboriginal culture

Overview and resources about the First Nations and Aboriginal cultures of Canada.
http://firstpeoplesofcanada.com/