Jan Hudson's *Sweetgrass* is a Canadian Library Association Book of the Year for Children. This historical fiction story about a Blackfoot Indian girl is based on events experienced by the tribe during the winter of 1837 – 1838. The book is discussed in two chapters of Literacy for Life. Chapter 2 (p. 76) suggests that the book may be used to teach symbolism and figurative language. In Chapter 10 (p. 419) the book is included under historical fiction about Native Americans/Canadians as a text that fosters an understanding of Native American values and beliefs. The text is also excellent for authentication.

I chose the book because the author's style develops an appreciation for and an understanding of symbolism and figurative language, especially as it relates to the character's closeness to nature and to her Blackfoot culture. You may expand students' understandings of symbolism in this book by reading selected quotes from the book and asking students to discuss answers to questions such as: "What is the author telling us about the various characters when she compares the characters' actions and personalities to nature? Why do you believe that comparisons to nature are appropriate for a book about Native Americans? How does the author's choice of comparisons increase our understanding of Sweetgrass and the Blackfoot culture? How does Sweetgrass change in the course of the story? Why do you believe that Hudson used this symbolism in a story about a Native American girl? Is Sweetgrass a symbolic title? If it is do you believe that it is a good title? Why? or Why not?"

The following quotes or summaries are in chronological order. The page numbers are from Philomel Books hard cover edition. The pages vary slightly in the paper back edition.

p. 10 - "All things moved as they should. Our lives seemed fixed as in a beaded design or the roundness of an old tale told on winter nights."
p. 10 - When picking strawberries dainty hands are compared to a deer plucking grass in a meadow.
p. 12 - Characterization related to symbolic title: "That is my name, Sweetgrass. It's ordinary to look at but it's fragrant as the spring."
p. 25 - "...sweetgrass has the power of memories."
p. 29 - "How good it felt to be me....I felt mightier than a brave on the warpath. I felt I was holding the future like summer berries in my hands."
p. 41 - Foreshadowing of an enemy attack through a description of the reeds, the silence, and the mist over the water that seemed threatening.
p. 44 - Symbolism of the safety found in the circle of the tipis.
p. 71 - The importance of power and honor symbolized by her wish to help at the Sun Dance because she wanted to thank the Sun for the gift of power.
p. 98 - Sweetgrass laments the conflict between male and female roles by describing her brother's dreams and his choices to do great things.
p. 106 - The author's introduces the white man's sickness--smallpox.
p. 124 - Sweetgrass burns the Blackfoot omen of decay so that Otter and Litter Brother can live.
p. 151 - Sweetgrass breaks a Blackfoot taboo by catching, cooking, and serving a certain kind of fish so that she can feed her starving family.
p. 151 - When her father returns, Sweetgrass tells him: "I tried hard to feel which trail to follow. Father, I am not a warrior!" Father replies: "Not a warrior...But you now are a woman." Father's eyes were shining, clear, and proud.

If desired, the bibliography in the book may be used to trace the references used by the author or to authenticate the life of the Blackfoot Indians and their struggle with smallpox. An article in the "New York Times Magazine" (September 22, 2002, p. 100), "A Pox on Our House," by Susan Burton, retells the story of the ancestors who "lived through its horror."

-- Donna Norton

**IDEAS FOR SCHOOL CLASSROOMS**

For this book I would make sure the students knew something about the Dakota Indians before they started reading this book. I would also do a fairly good review of the Dakota Indians so they could be ready to understand what each of the characters, especially the main character, were experiencing.

I would have them do a character portrait of Sweetgrass to help them see how she evolved into her maturity.

I would have them make a list of the many things she did to help her family members overcome the fever and other hardships she encountered along the way as her father was away.

I would talk about courage with my class and I would have them tell me the different ways Sweetgrass showed much courage. I would have them give me examples.

I would have the class make a list in groups of the different traditions and customs of the Dakota Indians. If we were reading about other tribes I would have the class do a comparison of the tribes they were reading about.
I would have the class members interview some family member from a different culture and have them ask about some of the similarities noted in this story about the Dakotas to any similarities or differences they may have experienced in their lives. I would then have them do a compare and contrast chart of their cultural experiences based on what they had learned from the family member and the interview and the life portrayed by the Dakota Indians as described by the author of this story. They would need to share this with the class upon completion of this assignment.

I would have the class do a reader’s theatre of some important part of the book and share with the remainder of the students.

I found this book to be well written and a wonderful example of culture and life of the Dakotas. I love that we have learned about the Dakotas through a main character like Sweetgrass.

Historical fiction serves an important role in making history real for children (and college students). It seems many students, elementary and college, don’t have a sense of American history let alone world history. While this is a discussion for another time I found this book valuable for classroom use. My ideas are as follows:

1. Children could study the Blackfoot nation and prepare a visual display of the culture.

2. Children could illustrate parts of the story, for example the Sun Dance, the young men returning with the wild horses, the Grandmother, etc.

3. Children could write what they think it would be like to be Sweetgrass and/or live as Blackfoot child.

4. Children could research/investigate the Blackfoot tribe and/or other Native American peoples.

5. Children could give themselves or their classmates Native American names with reasons why they chose that name to represent themselves or their classmates.

6. Children could research the impact of small pox on our nation.

7. Children could write and present a play about Sweetgrass or the Blackfoot tribe.

8. Children could compare Native American traditions with their own family traditions.

9. Symbols from other cultures could be investigated and illustrated.
10. Students could write the “sequel” to Sweetgrass, describing what comes next in her life.
11. Children could debate the choices Sweetgrass made to save her family.
12. Children could discuss Sweetgrass’ anger and resentment toward her siblings, cousins and parents.

Here in NY State, students in grade four learn about several Native American tribes, mostly those that were located in NY State as this matches with the 4th grade curriculum in SS. My activity for use after reading this novel in a fifth grade classroom would be for students to select a tribe located in another part of the US or Canada (grade 5 SS curriculum in NY state) and compare it with a tribe they learned about in 4th grade. For example, as mentioned in Sweetgrass, the Blackfoot tribe did not farm crops for survival, whereas the Iroquois depended on this.

After reading Sweetgrass, I would use the following two instructional activities:

A) Reciprocal Teaching--
Read the first segment with students and then model how to use the four strategies: first, summarize the section in one or two sentences, writing them on the board; second, ask one or two good questions to be answered by students; third, clarify by identifying the most difficult part of the section and explain it or tell how you could figure it out; fourth, predict what the next section might contain based on what you've already read.

Assign each student in a group a task for the next section:
1) summarizer, 2) questioner, 3) clarifier, or predictor. (Job cards help students remember)

B) Think-Pair-Share-
With students seated in partners,

- Announce a discussion topic. (Example: How did Sweetgrass fight for the survival of her tribe?)
- Give students at least 10 seconds of think time to THINK of their own answer. (Research shows that the quality of student responses goes up significantly when you allow "think time.")
- Ask students to PAIR with their partner to discuss the topic or solution.
- Finally, randomly call on a few students to SHARE their ideas with the class.
I have two suggestions for this text. One would be a “cubing” idea where the students are exploring the topic (Native Americans) from six dimensions or viewpoints. These six dimensions/viewpoints are the following: describe the topic, including shape, color, size; compare it to something else – consider similarities or differences; associate the topic to something else and explain why; analyze the topic – tell how it is made or what it is composed of; apply the topic – tell how it can be used; argue for or against the topic.

The other suggestion would be for the students to write the next chapter or two of the text. The end of the book certainly leaves you hanging as to what happens to Sweetgrass and her tribe. The students could complete further research on the Blackfoot tribe and write the next chapter using some of the new knowledge gained about the tribe after the year that was portrayed in the book.

_Sweetgrass_ by Jan Hudson, is an excellent example of _Literacy for Life_ because it is an authentic historical fiction novel about the effects of smallpox on the Blackfoot tribe. To fully appreciate the characters, setting and author’s message, students will need to learn about the Blackfoot tribe and their trial for survival in the year 1837-1836. They will need to have background information and be able to identify with the strong female character, Sweetgrass, and see how she is able to use her intellect and caring nature to help her family survive.

The students might be asked to research using the internet or other resources to find information that will help them appreciate the natural, social and historical impact on societies at various times. They would need to realize the severity of smallpox and the impact on Native American populations. Researching and comparing/contrasting other devastating diseases and their impact on communities such as the plague or malaria would help them see that natural forces have had great impact. Social forces that impact civilizations are a line of research especially relevant for Native Americans. Both situations, natural and man-made, need to be understood in terms of what it takes to sustain a civilization. This might also turn to talks about what is necessary for sustainability of life.

In the beginning of the book, there are interesting cultural customs and traditions described. One idea is to look at how the students were named and the significance of their names and the ways the Blackfoot named people. To encourage engagement, students might be able to interview their parents or older sisters and brothers to compare and contrast courting or dating today or in their parents’ or grandparents’ times with those of the Blackfoot.

I believe that this book might be difficult to read for some students, especially if they are unable to make inferences. On the last page, for instance, Hudson writes:
Sweetgrass thought of Pretty-Girl and her unnamed baby. Little Brother. She-Fought-Them-Woman, my honored grandmother. Her brother Dog-Leg. And others...there were so many others. How could I properly mourn so many?

I think discussion would be needed to help students understand that since we know that Little brother died and the author mentions his name with the others that that means that they also passed. This is the only mention, for instance, that Pretty-Girl and her baby have died also. We don’t know the circumstances of her best friend’s death. The style of writing captures the feeling of Native American culture, but that may be quite foreign to the students reading the book.

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IDEAS FOR COLLEGE CLASSROOMS

I have been very inspired with the book, *Sweetgrass*. I read this book aloud to my elderly, blind aunt. We both enjoyed it very much, and felt that it was a good introduction to understanding the Blackfoot culture. It certainly could be used by youth to begin understanding how the lives of the Blackfoot young girls and modern youth are both similar and still, quite different! Of course, the intense use of symbolism and figurative language was absolutely wonderful! As well, I couldn't help thinking about the modern day story, *Walk Two Moons*, a very different story, but related to Native Americans.

How might my own content reading folks use this book? Wow! It will be a must read for the Social Studies folks and would be important to require reading the suggested reference, from the "NY Times Magazine". The connections with authentic resources will fit perfectly into a present planned assignment to become familiar with good literature for content specific areas.

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I really like the symbolism questions. I found the language in the book to be very beautiful and lyrical.

Being from Western New York, the study of Native American culture is very important.

In my intro to literacy class, I do a lot of modeling of strategies. We read a couple trade books with activities that the college students could actually do once they are teachers in the classroom.

One way I might use this in my college classroom would be to model a modified unit. I would review the fourth grade curriculum (the study of Iroquois--Haudenosaunee) which is a very big part of this grade. I would use this book as a teacher read aloud.
Pre-reading activities would include developing the students' background knowledge of the Blackfoot. Then we would compare that culture with the Iroquois.

Also, prior to reading the book, I would list several of the character names from the book. The students would describe (in writing) what they believe the personalities of the characters will be. After reading the book, students would re-visit this and evaluate how accurate their portrayals were.

Another major activity we would do with the book besides traditional figurative language activities (I spend more than one class period on figurative language because I find my students very weak in understanding the nuances of the phrases--the many meanings of words/phrases is somehow lost on our students. While doing poetry (which I also spend several class periods on) I would use several of the descriptive passages and have the students incorporate the concepts into different types of poems.

This aspect would also have to be addressed in the topic of English Language Learners, as the meanings of the metaphors could very well be lost on children who do not understand the subtleties of our language.