

Comprehension

Genre

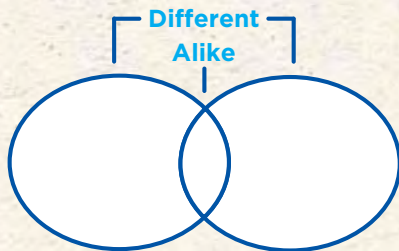
Realistic Fiction tells an invented story that could have happened in real life.



Monitor Comprehension

Compare and Contrast

As you read, use your Venn Diagram.



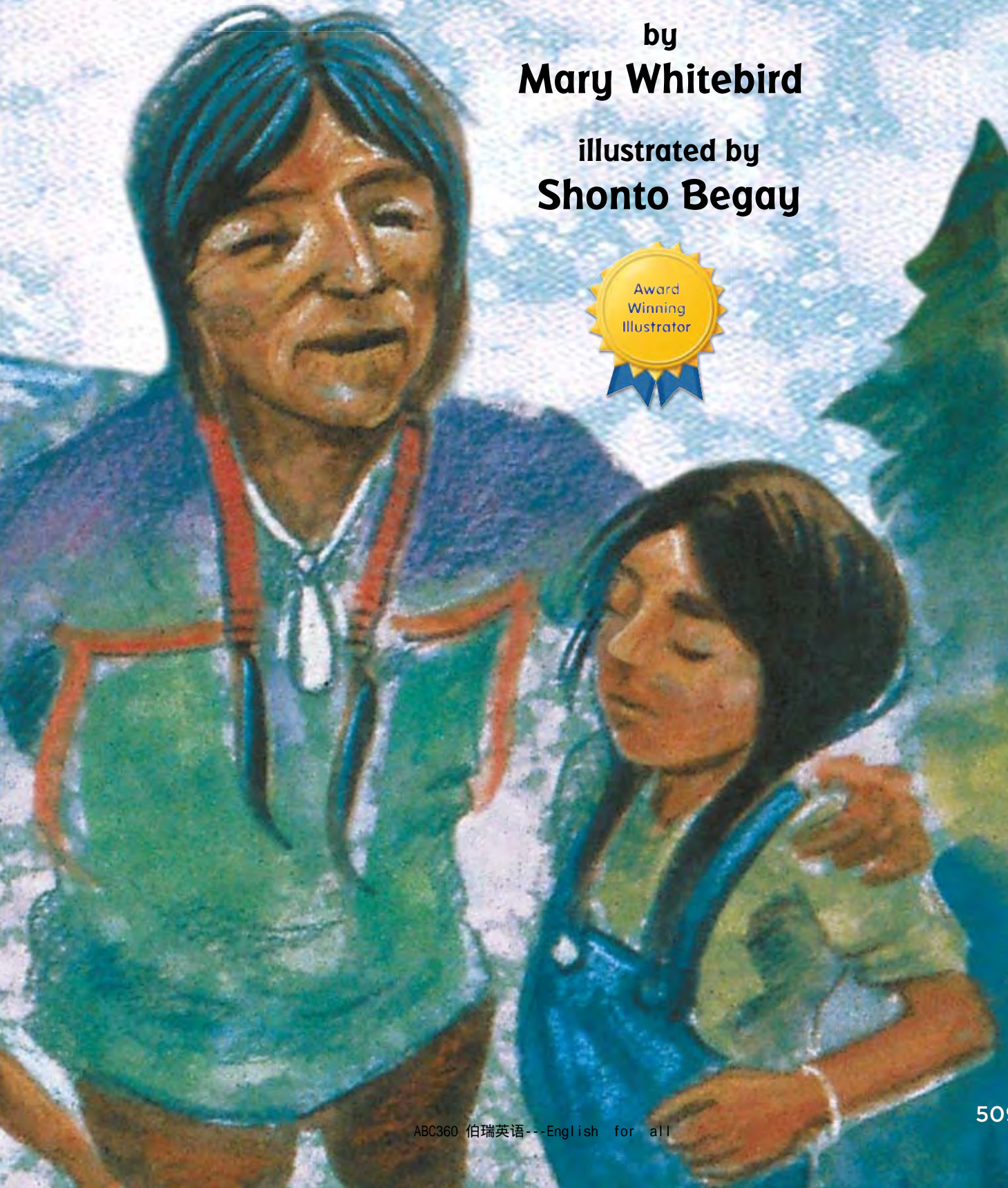
Read to Find Out

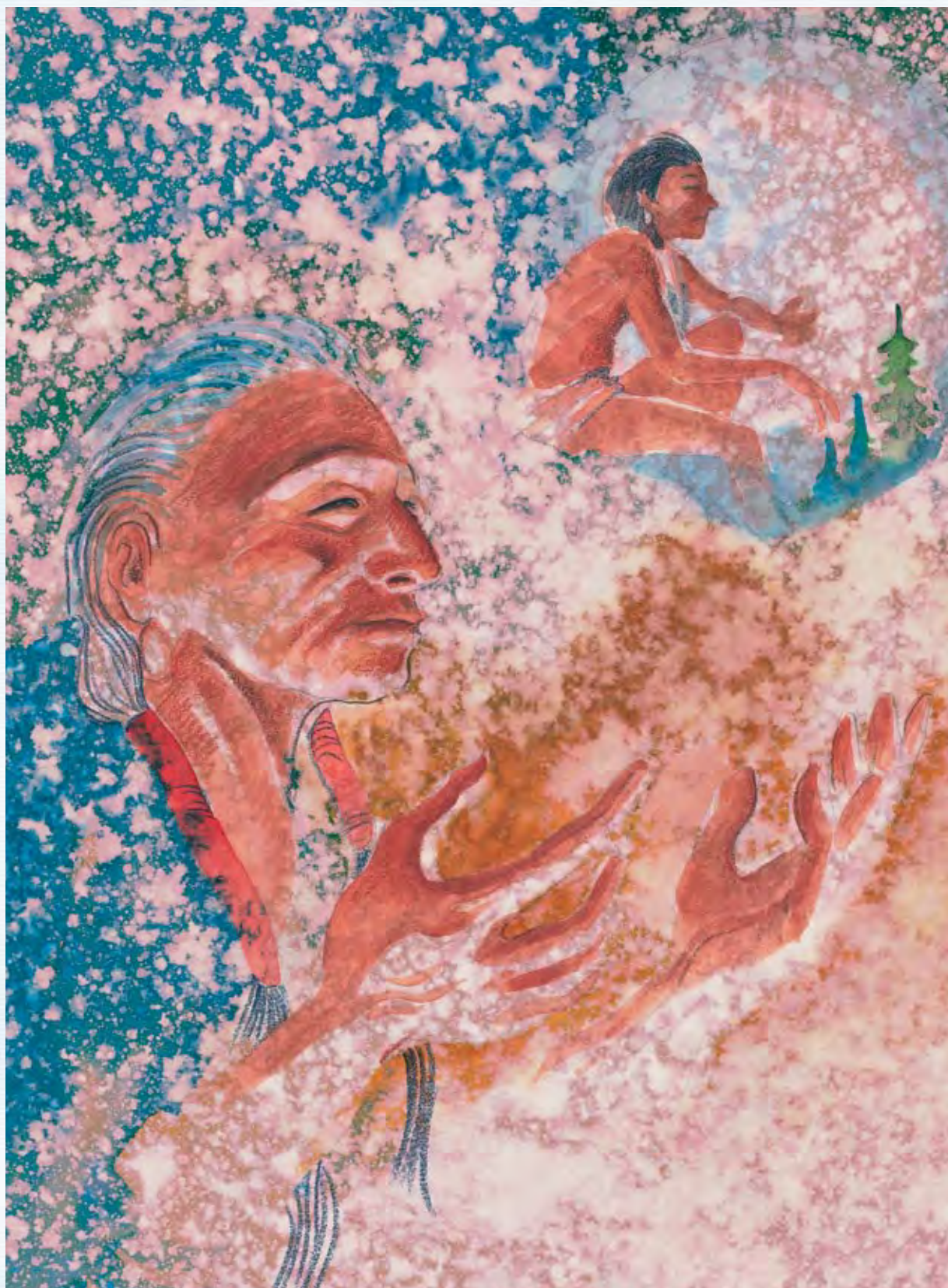
How are Grandfather's ideas different from Mary's?

Ta-Na-E-Ka

by
Mary Whitebird

illustrated by
Shonto Begay





As my birthday drew closer, I had awful nightmares about it. I was reaching the age at which all Kaw Indians had to **participate** in Ta-Na-E-Ka. Well, not all Kaws. Many of the younger families on the reservation were beginning to give up the old customs. But my grandfather, Amos Deer Leg, was devoted to tradition. He still wore handmade beaded moccasins instead of shoes, and kept his iron-gray hair in tight braids. He could speak English, but he spoke it only with white men. With his family he used a Sioux dialect.

Grandfather was one of the last living Indians (he died in 1953 when he was 81) who actually fought against the U.S. Cavalry. Not only did he fight, he was wounded in a skirmish at Rose Creek—a famous **encounter** in which the celebrated Kaw chief Flat Nose lost his life. At the time, my grandfather was only eleven years old.

Eleven was a magic word among the Kaws. It was the time of Ta-Na-E-Ka, the “flowering of adulthood.” It was the age, my grandfather informed us hundreds of times, “when a boy could prove himself

to be a warrior and a girl took the steps to womanhood.”

“I don’t want to be a warrior,” my cousin, Roger Deer Leg, confided to me. “I’m going to become an accountant.”

“None of the other tribes make girls go through the endurance ritual,” I complained to my mother.

“It won’t be as bad as you think, Mary,” my mother said, ignoring my protests. “Once you’ve gone through it, you’ll certainly never forget it. You’ll be proud.”

I even complained to my teacher, Mrs. Richardson, feeling that, as a white woman, she would side with me.

She didn’t. “All of us have rituals of one kind or another,” Mrs. Richardson said. “And look at it this way: How many girls have the opportunity to compete on equal terms with boys? Don’t look down on your heritage.”

Heritage, indeed! I had no intention of living on a reservation for the rest of my life. I was a good student. I loved school. My fantasies were about knights in armor and fair ladies in flowing gowns, being saved from dragons. It never once occurred to me that being an Indian was exciting.



But I've always thought that the Kaw were the originators of the women's liberation movement. No other Indian tribe—and I've spent half a lifetime researching the subject—treated women more “equally” than the Kaw. Unlike most of the sub-tribes of the Sioux Nation, the Kaw allowed men and women to eat together. And hundreds of years before we were “acculturated,” a Kaw woman had the right to refuse a prospective husband even if her father arranged the match.

The wisest women (generally wisdom was equated with age) often sat in tribal councils. Furthermore, most Kaw legends revolve around “Good Woman,” a kind of super-squaw, a Joan of Arc of the high plains. Good Woman led Kaw warriors into battle after battle from which they always seemed to emerge **victorious**.

And girls as well as boys were required to undergo Ta-Na-E-Ka.

The actual ceremony varied from tribe to tribe, but since the Indians' life on the plains was dedicated to survival, Ta-Na-E-Ka was a test of survival.

“Endurance is the loftiest virtue of the Indian,” my grandfather explained.

“To survive, we must endure. When I was a boy, Ta-Na-E-Ka was more than the mere symbol it is now. We were painted white with the juice of a sacred herb and sent naked into the wilderness without so much as a knife. We couldn’t return until the white had worn off. It wouldn’t wash off. It took almost eighteen days, and during that time we had to stay alive, trapping food, eating insects and roots and berries, and watching

out for enemies. And we did have enemies—both the white soldiers and the Omaha warriors, who were always trying to capture Kaw boys and girls undergoing their endurance test. It was an exciting time.”



Compare and Contrast

How is the grandfather’s opinion of Ta-Na-E-Ka different from Mary’s opinion?



“What happened if you couldn’t make it?” Roger asked. He was born only three days after I was, and we were being trained for Ta-Na-E-Ka together. I was happy to know he was frightened, too.

“Many didn’t return,” Grandfather said. “Only the strongest and shrewdest. Mothers were not allowed to weep over those who didn’t return. If a Kaw couldn’t survive, he or she wasn’t worth weeping over. It was our way.”

“What a lot of hooey,” Roger whispered. “I’d give anything to get out of it.”

“I don’t see how we have any choice,” I replied.

Roger gave my arm a little squeeze. “Well, it’s only five days.”

Five days! Maybe it was better than being painted white and sent out naked for eighteen days. But not much better.

We were to be sent, barefoot and in bathing suits, into the woods.

Even our very traditional parents put their foot down when Grandfather suggested we go naked. For five days we’d have to live off the land, keeping warm as best we could, getting food where we could. It was May, but on the northernmost reaches of the Missouri River the days were still chilly and the nights were fiercely cold.

Grandfather was in charge of the month’s training for Ta-Na-E-Ka. One day he caught a grasshopper and demonstrated how to pull its legs and wings off in one flick of the fingers and how to swallow it.

I felt sick, and Roger turned green. “It’s a darn good thing it’s 1947,” I told Roger teasingly. “You’d make a terrible warrior.” Roger just **grimaced**.

I knew one thing. This particular Kaw Indian girl wasn’t going to swallow a grasshopper no matter how hungry she got. And then I had an idea. Why hadn’t I thought of it before? It would have saved nights of bad dreams about squooshy grasshoppers.

I headed straight for my teacher’s house. “Mrs. Richardson,” I said, “would you lend me five dollars?”

“Five dollars!” she exclaimed. “What for?”



“You remember the ceremony I talked about?”

“Ta-Na-E-Ka. Of course. Your parents have written me and asked me to excuse you from school so you can participate in it.”

“Well, I need some things for the ceremony,” I replied, in a half-truth. “I don’t want to ask my parents for the money.”

“It’s not a crime to borrow money, Mary. But how can you pay it back?”

“I’ll babysit for you ten times.”

“That’s more than fair,” she said, going to her purse and handing me a crisp, new, five-dollar bill. I’d never had that much money at once.

“I’m happy to know the money’s going to be put to a good use,” Mrs. Richardson said.

A few days later, the ritual began with a long speech from my grandfather about how we had reached the age of decision, how we now had to fend for ourselves and prove that we could survive the most horrendous of **ordeals**. All the friends and relatives who had gathered at our house for dinner made jokes about their own Ta-Na-E-Ka experiences. They all advised us to fill up now, since for the next five days we’d be gorging ourselves on crickets. Neither

Roger nor I was very hungry. “I’ll probably laugh about this when I’m an accountant,” Roger said, trembling.

“Are you trembling?” I asked.

“What do you think?”

“I’m happy to know boys tremble, too,” I said.

At six the next morning, we kissed our parents and went off to the woods. “Which side do you want?” Roger asked. According to the rules, Roger and I would stake out “territories” in separate areas of the woods and we weren’t to communicate during the entire ordeal.

“I’ll go toward the river, if it’s OK with you,” I said.

“Sure,” Roger answered. “What difference does it make?”

To me, it made a lot of difference. There was a marina a few miles up the river and there were boats moored there. At least, I hoped so. I figured that a boat was a better place to sleep than under a pile of leaves.

“Why do you keep holding your head?” Roger asked.

“Oh, nothing. Just nervous,” I told him. Actually, I was afraid I’d lose the five-dollar bill, which I had tucked into my hair with a bobby pin. As we came to a fork in the trail, Roger shook my hand. “Good luck, Mary.”



“N’ko-n’ta,” I said. It was the Kaw word for *courage*.

The sun was shining and it was warm, but my bare feet began to hurt immediately. I spied one of the berry bushes Grandfather had told us about. “You’re lucky,” he had said. “The berries are ripe in the spring, and they are delicious and **nourishing**.” They were orange and fat and I popped one into my mouth.

Argh! I spat it out. It was awful and bitter, and even grasshoppers were probably better tasting, although I never intended to find out.

I sat down to rest my feet. A rabbit hopped out from under the berry bush. He nuzzled the berry I’d spat out and ate it. He picked another one and ate that, too. He liked them. He looked at me, twitching his nose. I watched a red-headed woodpecker bore into an elm tree, and I caught a glimpse of a civet cat waddling through some twigs. All of a sudden I realized I was no longer frightened. Ta-Na-E-Ka might be more fun than I’d **anticipated**. I got up and headed toward the marina.

“Not one boat,” I said to myself **dejectedly**. But the restaurant on the open shore, “Ernie’s Riverside,”

was open. I walked in, feeling silly in my bathing suit. The man at the counter was big and tough-looking. He wore a sweatshirt with the words “Fort Sheridan, 1944,” and he had only three fingers on one of his hands. He asked me what I wanted.

“A hamburger and a milk shake,” I said, holding the five-dollar bill in my hand so he’d know I had money.

“That’s a pretty heavy breakfast, honey,” he murmured.

“That’s what I always have for breakfast,” I lied.

“Forty-five cents,” he said, bringing me the food. (Back in 1947, hamburgers were twenty-five cents and milk shakes were twenty cents.)

“Delicious,” I thought. “Better ’n grasshoppers—and Grandfather never once mentioned that I couldn’t eat hamburgers.”

While I was eating, I had a grand idea. Why not sleep in the restaurant? I went to the ladies’ room and made sure the window was unlocked. Then I went back outside and played along the riverbank, watching the water birds and trying to identify each one. I planned to look for a beaver dam the next day.

The restaurant closed at sunset, and I watched the three-fingered man drive away. Then I climbed in the unlocked window. There was a night-light on, so I didn't turn on any lights. But there was a radio on the counter. I turned it on to a music program. It was warm in the restaurant, and I was hungry. I helped myself to a glass of milk and a piece of pie, intending to keep a list of what I'd eaten so I could leave money. I also planned to get up early, sneak out

through the window, and head for the woods before the three-fingered man returned. I turned off the radio, wrapped myself in the man's apron, and in spite of the hardness of the floor, fell asleep.

"What the heck are you doing here, kid?"

It was the man's voice.

It was the morning. I'd overslept. I was scared.

"Hold it, kid. I just wanna know what you're doing here. You lost?"



You must be from the reservation. Your folks must be worried sick about you. Do they have a phone?"

"Yes, yes," I answered. "But don't call them."

I was shivering. The man, who told me his name was Ernie, made me a cup of hot chocolate while I explained about Ta-Na-E-Ka.

"Darnedest thing I ever heard," he said, when I was through. "Lived next to the reservation all my life and this is

the first I've heard of Ta-Na whatever-you-call-it." He looked at me, all goosebumps in my bathing suit. "Pretty silly thing to do to a kid," he muttered.



Compare and Contrast

How are Mary's experiences similar to and different from what she expected during Ta-Na-E-Ka?



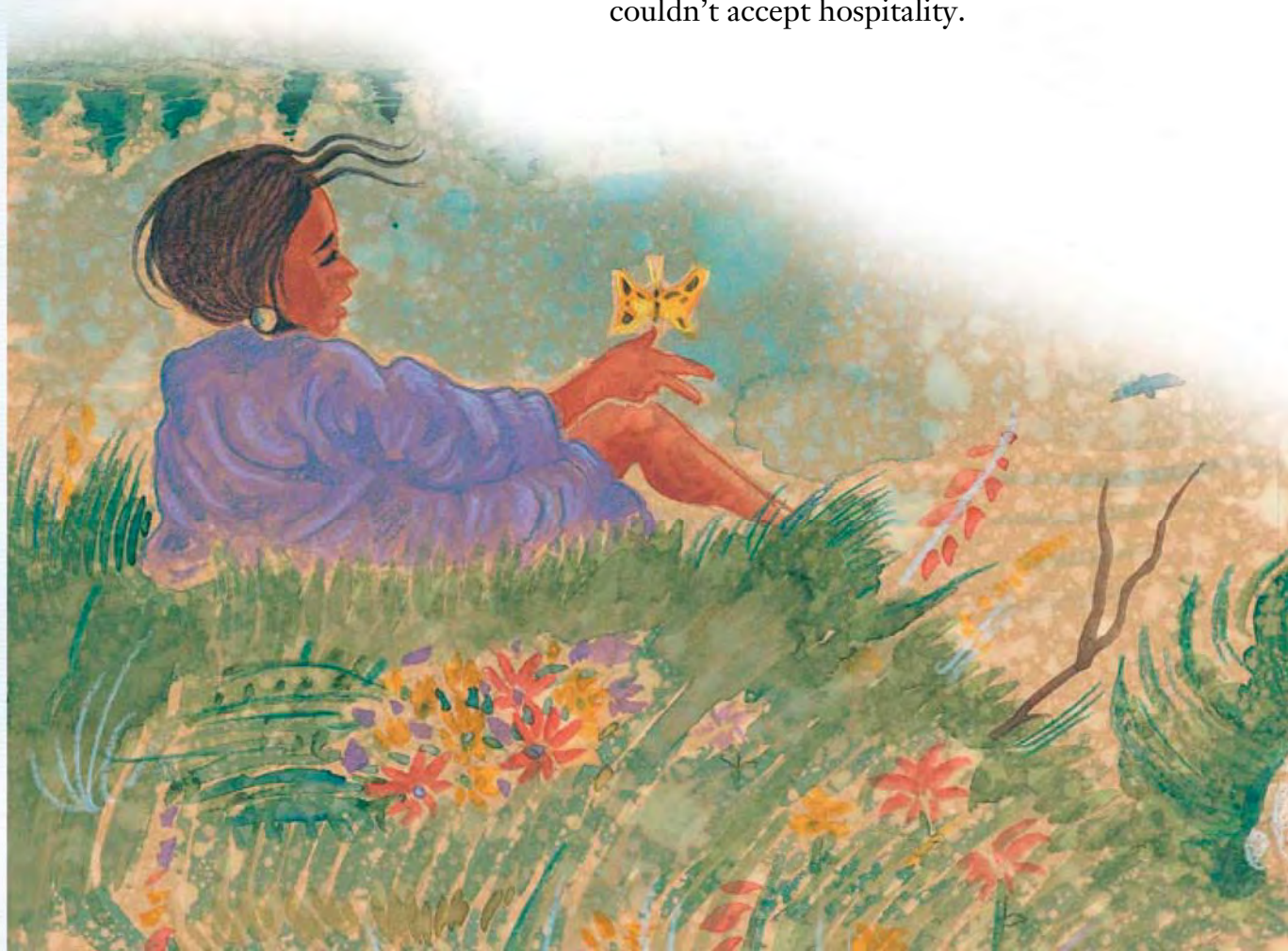
That was just what I'd been thinking for months, but when Ernie said it, I became angry. "No, it isn't silly. It's a custom of the Kaw. We've been doing this for hundreds of years. My mother and my grandfather and everybody in my family went through this ceremony. It's why the Kaw are great warriors."

"Okay, great warrior," Ernie chuckled, "suit yourself. And, if you want to stick around, it's okay with me." Ernie went to the broom closet

and tossed me a bundle. "That's the lost-and-found closet," he said. "Stuff people left on boats. Maybe there's something to keep you warm."

The sweater fitted loosely, but it felt good. I felt good. And I'd found a new friend. Most important, I was surviving Ta-Na-E-Ka.

My grandfather had said the experience would be filled with adventure, and I was having my fill. And Grandfather had never said we couldn't accept hospitality.



I stayed at Ernie's Riverside for the entire period. In the mornings I went into the woods and watched the animals and picked flowers for each of the tables in Ernie's. I had never felt better. I was up early enough to watch the sunrise on the Missouri, and I went to bed after it set. I ate everything I wanted—insisting that Ernie take all my money for the food. "I'll keep this in trust for you, Mary," Ernie promised, "in case you are ever desperate for five dollars." (He did, too, but that's another story.)

I was sorry when the five days were over. I'd enjoyed every minute with Ernie. He taught me how to make western omelets and to make Chili Ernie Style (still one of my favorite dishes). And I told Ernie all about the legends of the Kaw. I hadn't realized I knew so much about my people.



But Ta-Na-E-Ka was over, and as I approached my house, at about nine-thirty in the evening, I became nervous all over again. What if Grandfather asked me about the berries and the grasshoppers? And my feet were hardly cut. I hadn't lost a pound and my hair was combed.

"They'll be so happy to see me," I told myself hopefully, "that they won't ask too many questions."

I opened the door. My grandfather was in the front room. He was wearing the ceremonial beaded deerskin shirt which had belonged to his grandfather. "N'g'da'ma," he said. "Welcome back."

I embraced my parents warmly, letting go only when I saw my cousin Roger sprawled on the couch. His eyes were red and swollen. He'd lost weight. His feet were an unsightly mass of blood and blisters, and he was moaning: "I made it, see. I made it. I'm a warrior. A warrior."

My grandfather looked at me strangely. I was clean, obviously well-fed, and radiantly healthy. My parents got the message. My uncle and aunt gazed at me with hostility.



Finally my grandfather asked, “What did you eat to keep you so well?”

I sucked in my breath and blurted out the truth: “Hamburgers and milk shakes.”

“Hamburgers!” my grandfather growled.

“Milk shakes!” Roger moaned.

“You didn’t say we had to eat grasshoppers,” I said sheepishly.

“Tell us about your Ta-Na-E-Ka,” my grandfather commanded.

I told them everything, from borrowing the five dollars, to Ernie’s kindness, to observing the beaver.

“That’s not what I trained you for,” my grandfather said sadly.

I stood up. “Grandfather, I learned that Ta-Na-E-Ka is important. I didn’t think so during training. I was scared stiff of it. I handled it my way. And I learned I had nothing to be afraid of. There’s no reason in 1947 to eat grasshoppers when you can eat a hamburger.”

I was inwardly shocked at my own audacity. But I liked it. “Grandfather, I’ll bet you never ate one of those rotten berries yourself.”

Grandfather laughed! He laughed aloud! My mother and father and aunt

and uncle were all dumbfounded. Grandfather never laughed. Never.

“Those berries—they are terrible,” Grandfather admitted. “I could never swallow them. I found a dead deer on the first day of my Ta-Na-E-Ka—shot by a soldier, probably—and he kept my belly full for the entire period of the test!”

Grandfather stopped laughing. “We should send you out again,” he said.

I looked at Roger. “You’re pretty smart, Mary,” Roger groaned. “I’d never have thought of what you did.”

“Accountants just have to be good at arithmetic,” I said comfortingly. “I’m terrible at arithmetic.”

Roger tried to smile but couldn’t. My grandfather called me to him. “You should have done what your cousin did. But I think you are more alert to what is happening to our people today than we are. I think you would have passed the test under any circumstances, in any time. Somehow, you know how to exist in a world that wasn’t made for Indians. I don’t think you’re going to have any trouble surviving.”

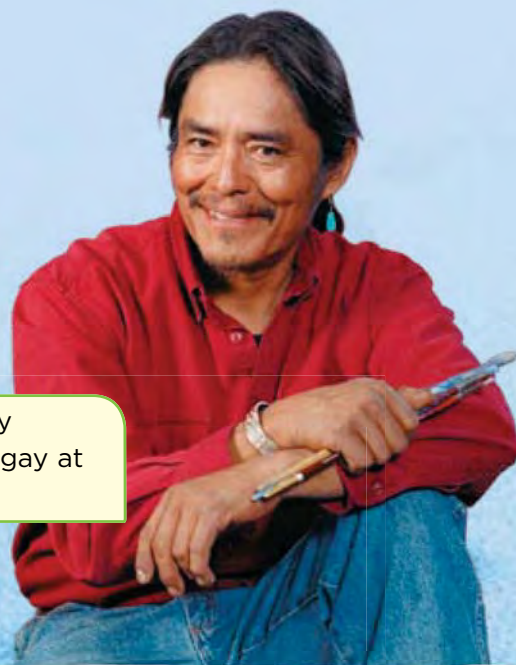
Grandfather wasn’t entirely right. But I’ll tell about that another time.



On a Journey with Mary Whitebird and Shonto Begay

Mary Whitebird is a Native American. She first wrote this story for a young people's magazine. Although the story reflects the heritage of her culture, it is also about the challenges any young person might face in any culture. That makes it a classic coming-of-age story.

Shonto Begay was born on the Navajo Reservation in Arizona. His first canvas was the ground and his first brush a stick. He challenges all young people to find a space where they can think and dream. He calls this place a person's "story rock," where things are created from the heart and from the earth.



Find out more about Mary Whitebird and Shonto Begay at www.macmillanmh.com

Author's Purpose

Mary handled her challenge in her own way. How does the author feel about the way Mary survived Ta-Na-E-Ka? How can you tell?

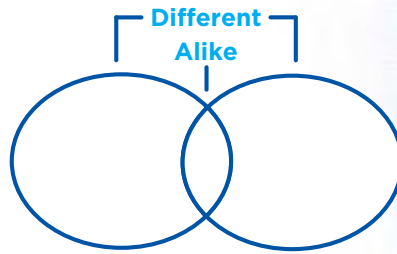


Comprehension Check



Summarize

Use your Venn Diagram to help you summarize “Ta-Na-E-Ka.” How does Mary’s Ta-Na-E-Ka experience differ from her grandfather’s?



Think and Compare



1. Compare and contrast Grandfather’s generation of Kaw people with Mary’s. How do you think the world of 1947 has affected the Kaw’s traditions? **Monitor Comprehension: Compare and Contrast**

2. Mary completes the Kaw endurance test in an untraditional way. In your opinion, is Mary **victorious**? Why or why not? Use examples from the text to support your argument.

Evaluate

3. Think of how you celebrate special occasions. What unique traditions do you have? How have those traditions changed over time? **Synthesize**

4. Mary’s experience with Ta-Na-E-Ka represents a problem faced by many cultures: the desire to hold on to ancient traditions and the impulse to join with modern society. How is it possible to strike a balance between them? **Evaluate**

5. Read “Rites of Passage” on pages 506–507. Which experiences mentioned are the ones that Mary dreaded having to face? Which traditions are different from the Kaw tradition of Ta-Na-E-Ka? **Reading/Writing Across Texts**