

LANGUAGE DETECTIVE

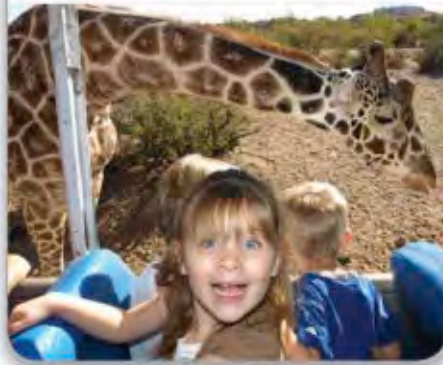
Talk About the Writer's Words

Work with a partner. Choose one of the Vocabulary words. Add words to the sentence below it to explain more details about the photo.

Vocabulary in Context

1 astonished

People may be **astonished** at seeing wild animals. The sight can be amazing.



2 nerve

He was scared, but this boy worked up the **nerve**, or courage, to handle the snake.



3 bared

This lion opened its mouth and **bared** its teeth. Everyone could see its fangs.



4 banish

The leader of a wolf pack will **banish** a defeated challenger. The loser must leave.



- ▶ Study each **Context Card**.
- ▶ Use a thesaurus to determine a synonym for each Vocabulary word.

5 **reasoned**

Scientists **reasoned**, or logically figured out, how to assemble these fossil bones.



6 **envy**

People may watch seals with **envy**. They are jealous of the seals' swimming ability.



7 **spared**

This cat played with the mouse but **spared** its life and did not harm it.



8 **margins**

You can sometimes see deer standing in fields at the **margins**, or edges, of the woods.



9 **deserted**

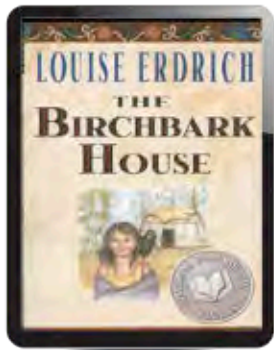
A baby bird that is all alone may seem **deserted**, but its mother may be nearby.



10 **upright**

Meerkats stand **upright**, or straight up, to keep a lookout for nearby predators.

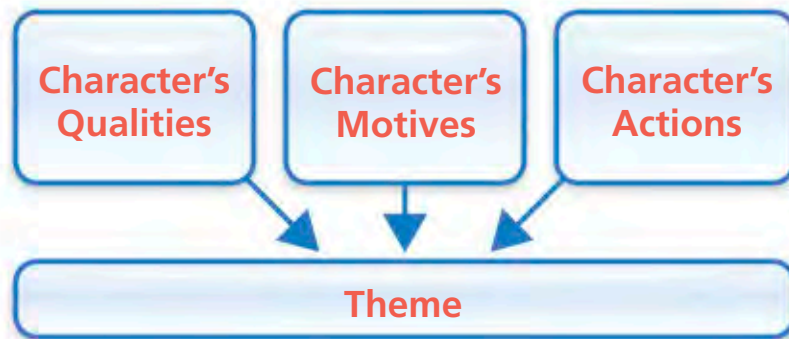




Read and Comprehend

✓ TARGET SKILL

Theme Every story has a **theme**, or message, that runs through it. The main character's actions and responses to challenges can help you determine a story's theme. As you read "The Birchbark House," use a graphic organizer like this one to record details about the main character, Omakayas. Then ask yourself what theme the text evidence suggests.



✓ TARGET STRATEGY

Infer/Predict As you read "The Birchbark House," use text evidence to figure out what the author means or what might happen later in the story. **Inferring** can help you better understand a story's characters, **predict** what they might do, and determine how their actions relate to the theme.

PREVIEW THE TOPIC

Traditions

Every culture has traditions, or special ways of doing things that have been handed down through the generations. The selection you are about to read features some traditions and teachings from the Ojibwe culture.

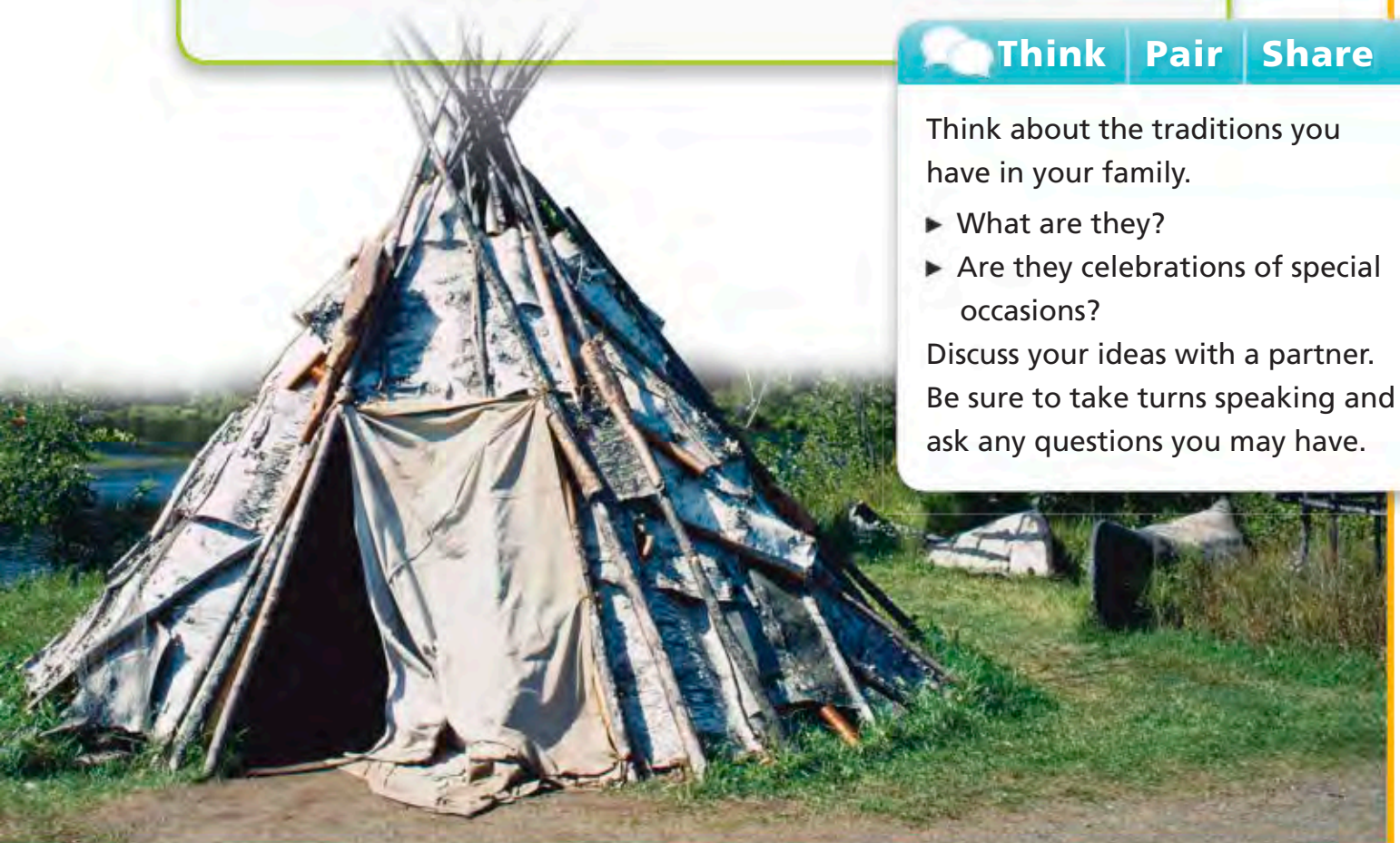
The Ojibwe lived on the shores of the Great Lakes until United States expansion forced most of them out in the mid-1800s. They lived in dome-shaped homes called wigwams, which were supported by saplings and covered in birchbark. During the growing season, the Ojibwe lived together in large groups. In winter, these villages were abandoned for smaller hunting camps. "The Birchbark House" takes place in the early summer, when an Ojibwe girl picking strawberries encounters two bear cubs.

Think | Pair | Share

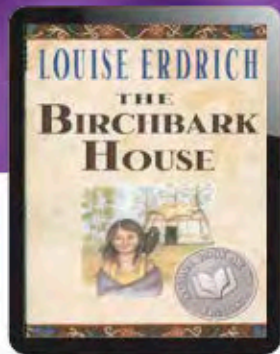
Think about the traditions you have in your family.

- ▶ What are they?
- ▶ Are they celebrations of special occasions?

Discuss your ideas with a partner. Be sure to take turns speaking and ask any questions you may have.



ANCHOR TEXT



✓ GENRE

Historical fiction is set in a real time and place in the past. As you read, look for:

- ▶ realistic characters and events
- ▶ details that show the story took place in the past

MEET THE AUTHOR

Louise Erdrich

Louise Erdrich is a member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Ojibwe. While she was growing up in North Dakota, her father often recited memorized poetry to her and her six siblings. She was inspired to write *The Birchbark House* while she and her mother were researching their own family history.

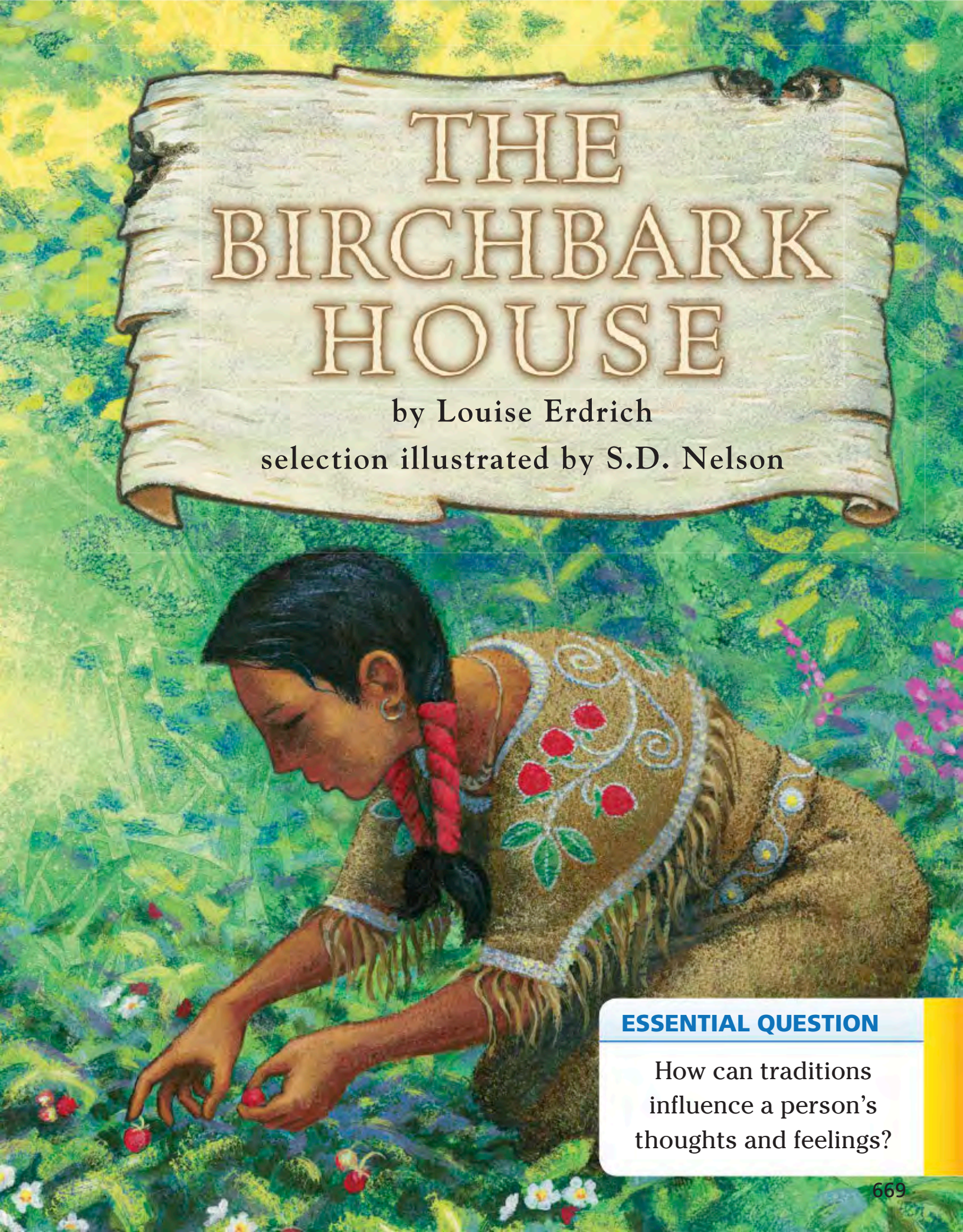


MEET THE ILLUSTRATOR

S.D. Nelson

When he was young, S.D. Nelson's Lakota/Sioux mother told him traditional Coyote stories. Now he is a storyteller. He is the author-illustrator of many books for young readers, including *Coyote Christmas*, *Gift Horse*, *Quiet Hero*, and *The Star People*, winner of the Western Writers of America Spur Award.



The background of the cover is a vibrant, textured painting of a young Native American woman with dark hair in a red braid, wearing a brown fringed garment with red floral patterns. She is kneeling in a lush green field, carefully picking red raspberries. The scene is filled with various flowers and foliage, creating a rich, naturalistic setting.

THE BIRCHBARK HOUSE

by Louise Erdrich
selection illustrated by S.D. Nelson

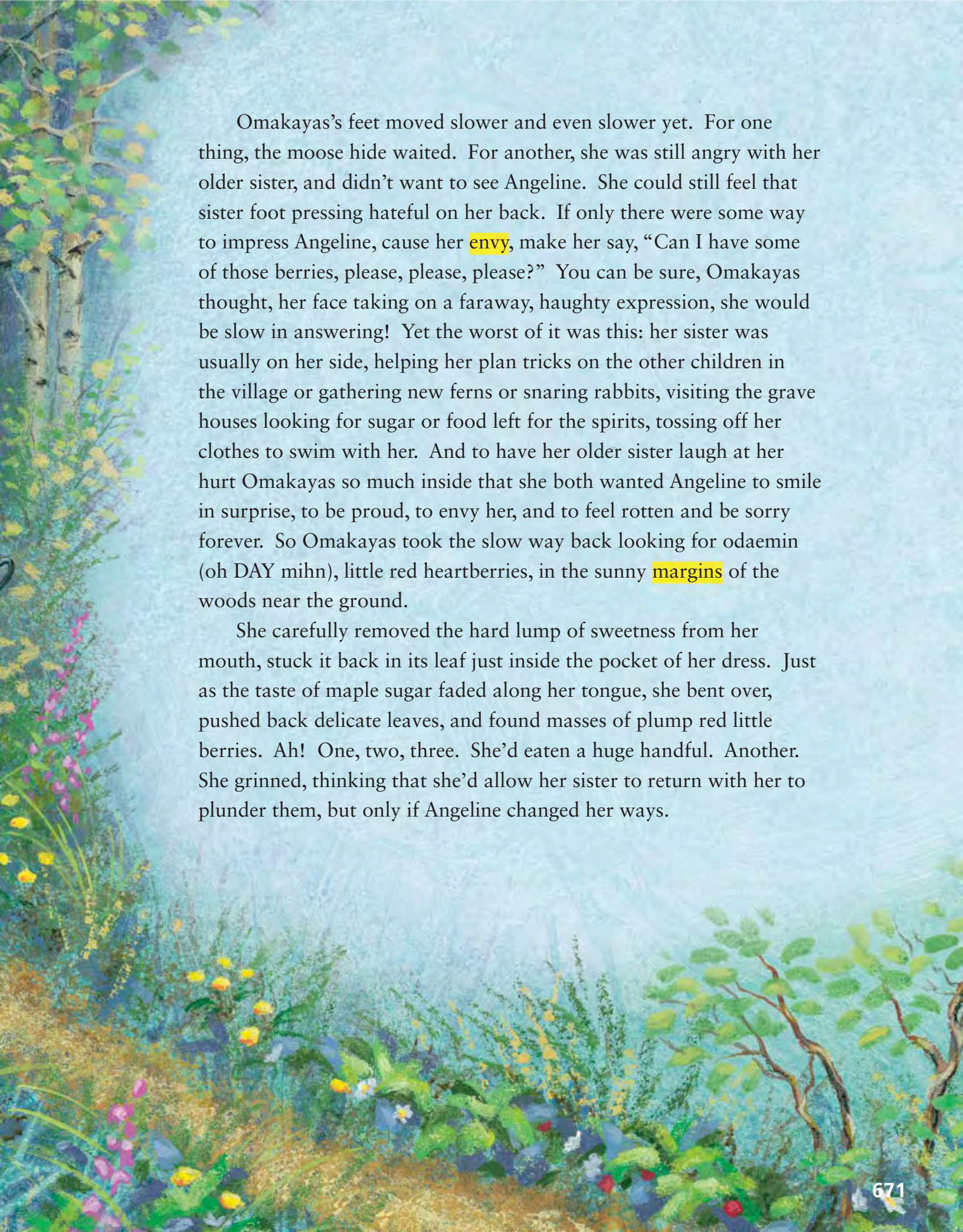
ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How can traditions influence a person's thoughts and feelings?

Omakayas (oh MAHK ay ahs) is returning home from an errand. She carries scissors for her mother and a lump of sweet maple candy for herself. Both the scissors and the candy are rare and valued items in her Ojibwe village in 1847. She is not eager to return home to the chore of tanning a moose hide and to her older sister, Angeline, who made fun of her earlier in the day. Her feelings are hurt, and she wants nothing but to be respected by Angeline.

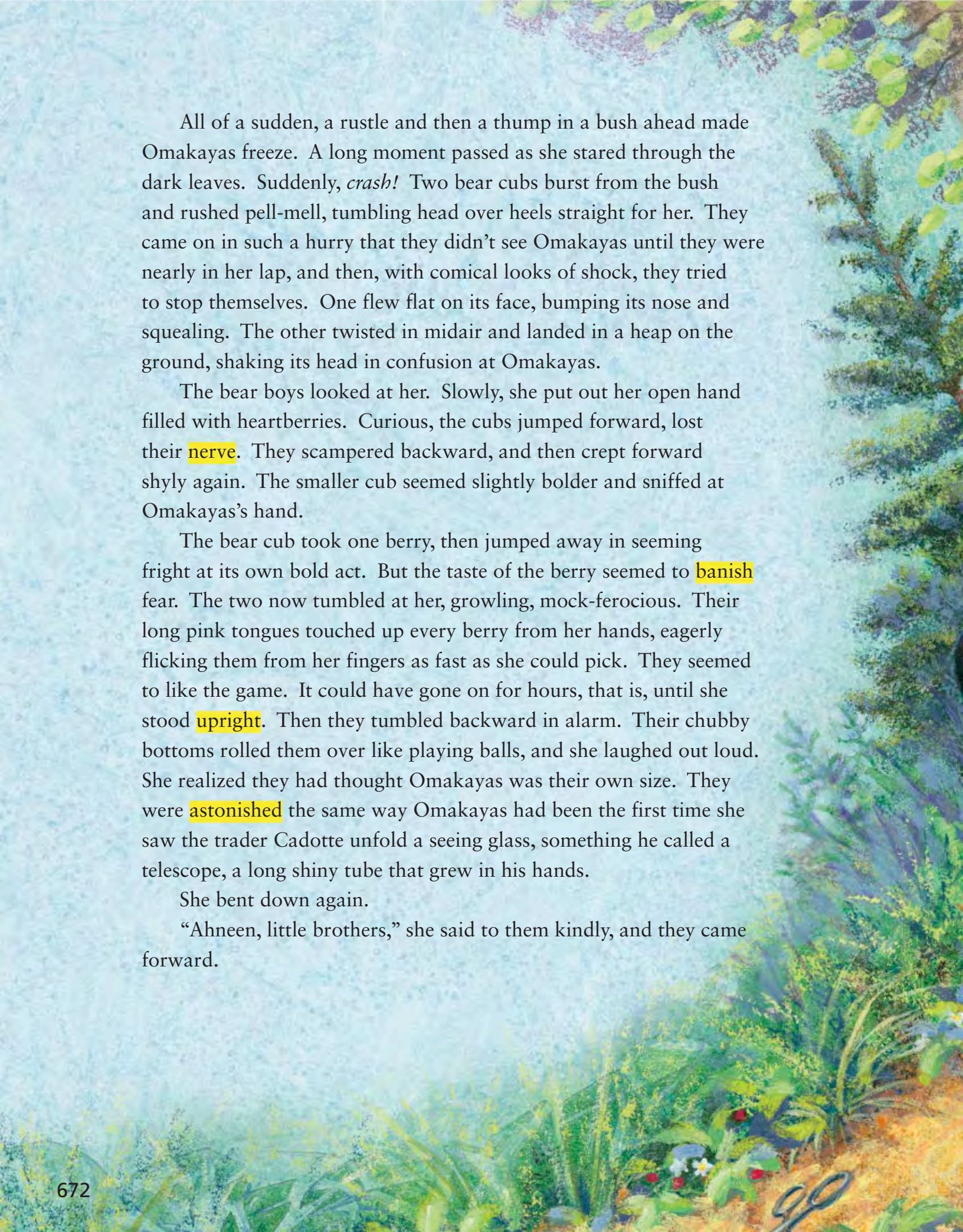
Before she went back on the trail, Omakayas rinsed off the old candy lump in the lake. It came out beautifully, creamy-golden, translucent and grainy-dark. And sweet. She started walking, her treasure now wrapped in a leaf. As she walked, Omakayas thought. There was no way to share such a tough nut of sweetness. How would she divide it? Omakayas decided she did not want to cause trouble at home. Furthermore, it suddenly made sense to her that at least one person in the family should get the full effect of the maple sugar. She would pop the whole thing into her mouth. All at once! This would save problems. Aaaaah. The lump was delicious, tasting of spring sweetness and the inside of trees. Besides, Omakayas **reasoned**, as she walked contentedly along, the taste of the sugar would save her from eating every one of the berries she was sure she would find on the path.





Omakayas's feet moved slower and even slower yet. For one thing, the moose hide waited. For another, she was still angry with her older sister, and didn't want to see Angeline. She could still feel that sister foot pressing hateful on her back. If only there were some way to impress Angeline, cause her **envy**, make her say, "Can I have some of those berries, please, please, please?" You can be sure, Omakayas thought, her face taking on a faraway, haughty expression, she would be slow in answering! Yet the worst of it was this: her sister was usually on her side, helping her plan tricks on the other children in the village or gathering new ferns or snaring rabbits, visiting the grave houses looking for sugar or food left for the spirits, tossing off her clothes to swim with her. And to have her older sister laugh at her hurt Omakayas so much inside that she both wanted Angeline to smile in surprise, to be proud, to envy her, and to feel rotten and be sorry forever. So Omakayas took the slow way back looking for odaemin (oh DAY mihn), little red heartberries, in the sunny **margins** of the woods near the ground.

She carefully removed the hard lump of sweetness from her mouth, stuck it back in its leaf just inside the pocket of her dress. Just as the taste of maple sugar faded along her tongue, she bent over, pushed back delicate leaves, and found masses of plump red little berries. Ah! One, two, three. She'd eaten a huge handful. Another. She grinned, thinking that she'd allow her sister to return with her to plunder them, but only if Angeline changed her ways.



All of a sudden, a rustle and then a thump in a bush ahead made Omakayas freeze. A long moment passed as she stared through the dark leaves. Suddenly, *crash!* Two bear cubs burst from the bush and rushed pell-mell, tumbling head over heels straight for her. They came on in such a hurry that they didn't see Omakayas until they were nearly in her lap, and then, with comical looks of shock, they tried to stop themselves. One flew flat on its face, bumping its nose and squealing. The other twisted in midair and landed in a heap on the ground, shaking its head in confusion at Omakayas.

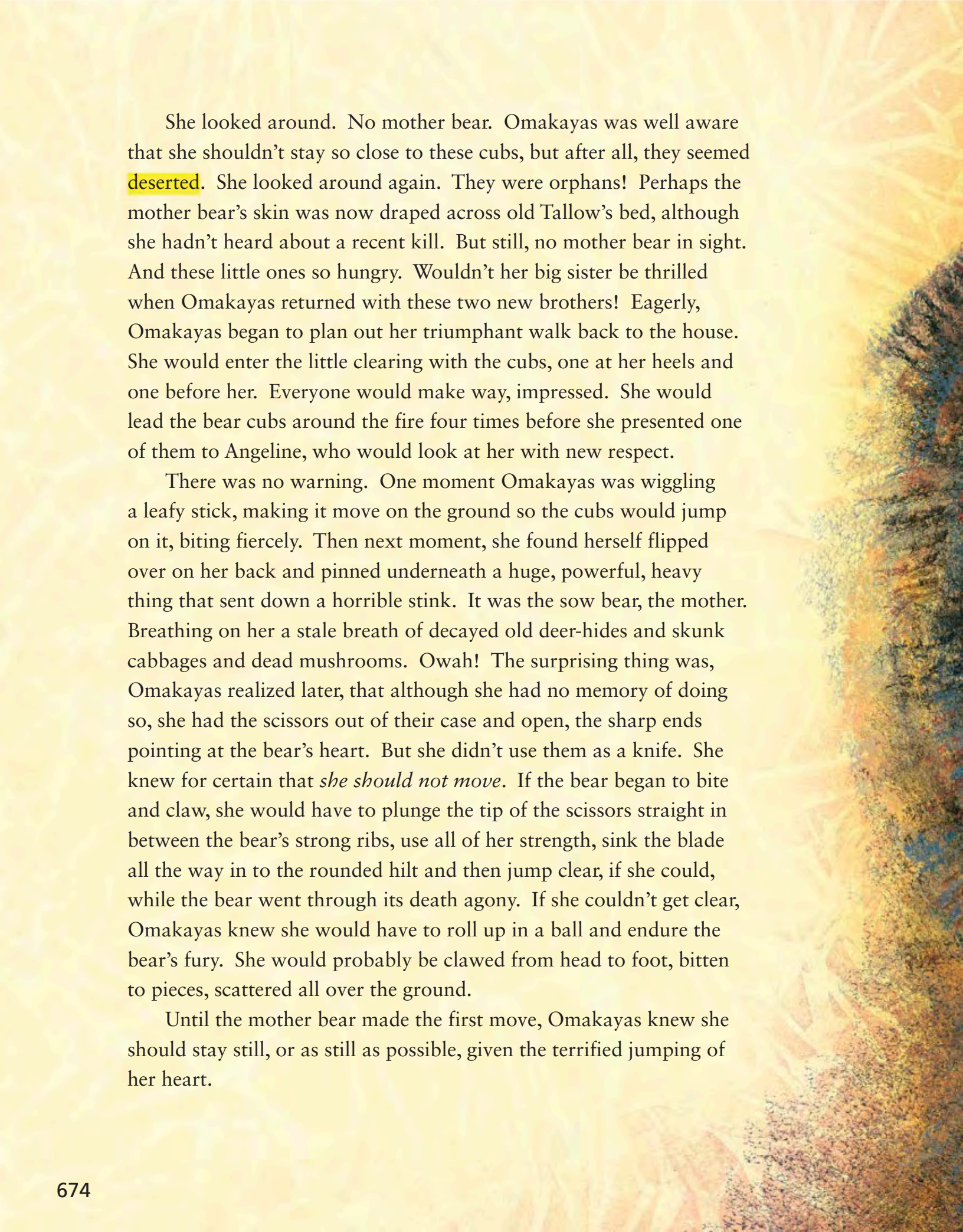
The bear boys looked at her. Slowly, she put out her open hand filled with heartberries. Curious, the cubs jumped forward, lost their **nerve**. They scampered backward, and then crept forward shyly again. The smaller cub seemed slightly bolder and sniffed at Omakayas's hand.

The bear cub took one berry, then jumped away in seeming fright at its own bold act. But the taste of the berry seemed to **banish** fear. The two now tumbled at her, growling, mock-ferocious. Their long pink tongues touched up every berry from her hands, eagerly flicking them from her fingers as fast as she could pick. They seemed to like the game. It could have gone on for hours, that is, until she stood **upright**. Then they tumbled backward in alarm. Their chubby bottoms rolled them over like playing balls, and she laughed out loud. She realized they had thought Omakayas was their own size. They were **astonished** the same way Omakayas had been the first time she saw the trader Cadotte unfold a seeing glass, something he called a telescope, a long shiny tube that grew in his hands.

She bent down again.

"Ahneen, little brothers," she said to them kindly, and they came forward.





She looked around. No mother bear. Omakayas was well aware that she shouldn't stay so close to these cubs, but after all, they seemed **deserted**. She looked around again. They were orphans! Perhaps the mother bear's skin was now draped across old Tallow's bed, although she hadn't heard about a recent kill. But still, no mother bear in sight. And these little ones so hungry. Wouldn't her big sister be thrilled when Omakayas returned with these two new brothers! Eagerly, Omakayas began to plan out her triumphant walk back to the house. She would enter the little clearing with the cubs, one at her heels and one before her. Everyone would make way, impressed. She would lead the bear cubs around the fire four times before she presented one of them to Angeline, who would look at her with new respect.

There was no warning. One moment Omakayas was wiggling a leafy stick, making it move on the ground so the cubs would jump on it, biting fiercely. Then next moment, she found herself flipped over on her back and pinned underneath a huge, powerful, heavy thing that sent down a horrible stink. It was the sow bear, the mother. Breathing on her a stale breath of decayed old deer-hides and skunk cabbages and dead mushrooms. Owah! The surprising thing was, Omakayas realized later, that although she had no memory of doing so, she had the scissors out of their case and open, the sharp ends pointing at the bear's heart. But she didn't use them as a knife. She knew for certain that *she should not move*. If the bear began to bite and claw, she would have to plunge the tip of the scissors straight in between the bear's strong ribs, use all of her strength, sink the blade all the way in to the rounded hilt and then jump clear, if she could, while the bear went through its death agony. If she couldn't get clear, Omakayas knew she would have to roll up in a ball and endure the bear's fury. She would probably be clawed from head to foot, bitten to pieces, scattered all over the ground.

Until the mother bear made the first move, Omakayas knew she should stay still, or as still as possible, given the terrified jumping of her heart.



ANALYZE THE TEXT

Visual Elements What do you notice about this story's illustrations? How do the illustrations add to the beauty of the text?



For long moments, the bear tested her with every sense, staring down with her weak eyes, listening, and most of all smelling her. The bear smelled the morning's moose meat stew Omakayas had eaten, the wild onion seasoning and the dusty bit of maple sugar from old Tallow stuck to the inside of her pocket. How she hoped the bear did not smell the bear-killing dogs or the bear claw that swung on a silver hoop from Old Tallow's earlobe. Perhaps the bear smelled the kind touch of Grandma and Mama's bone-and-sprucewood comb, her baby brother's cuddling body, the skins and mats she had slept in, and Little Pinch, who had whined and sobbed the night before. The bear smelled on Omakayas's skin the smell of its own cousin's bear grease used to ward off mosquitoes. Fish from the night before last night. The berries she was eating. The bear smelled all.

Omakayas couldn't help but smell her back. Bears eat anything and this one had just eaten something ancient and foul. Hiyn! (HY n) Omakayas took shallow breaths. Perhaps it was to take her mind off the scent of dead things on the bear's breath that she accidentally closed the scissors, shearing off a tiny clip of bear fur, and then to cover her horror at this mistake, started to talk.

ANALYZE THE TEXT

Author's Word Choice Authors use **sensory details** that make readers feel what is happening in a story. Which details of the bear encounter make you feel Omakayas's fear?



“Nokomis,” she said to the bear, calling her grandmother. “I didn’t mean any harm. I was only playing with your children. Gaween onjidah (gah WEEN ohn jee dah). Please forgive me.”

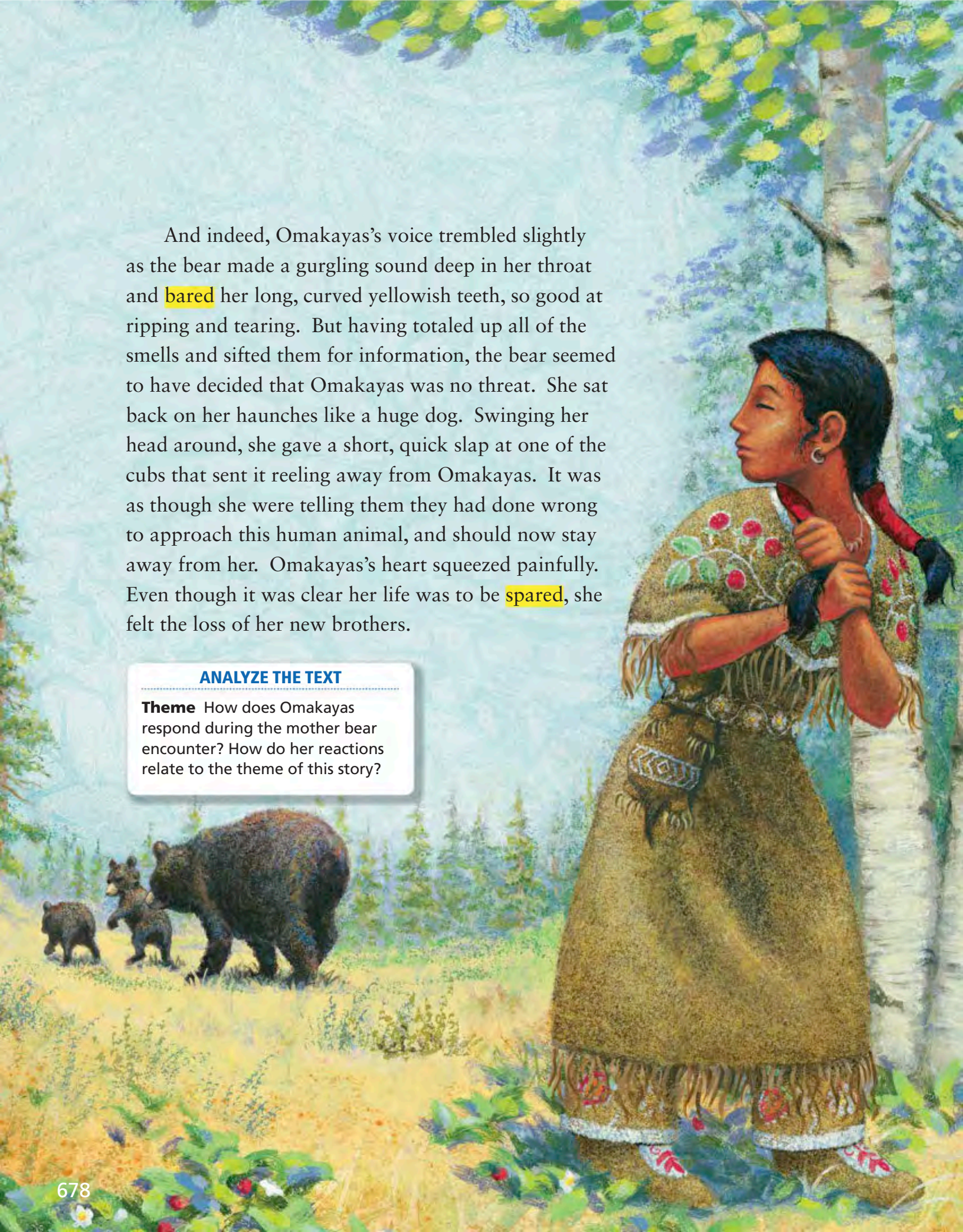
The bear cuffed at Omakayas, but in a warning manner, not savagely, to hurt. Then the bear leaned back, nose working, as though she could scent the meaning of the human words. Encouraged, Omakayas continued.

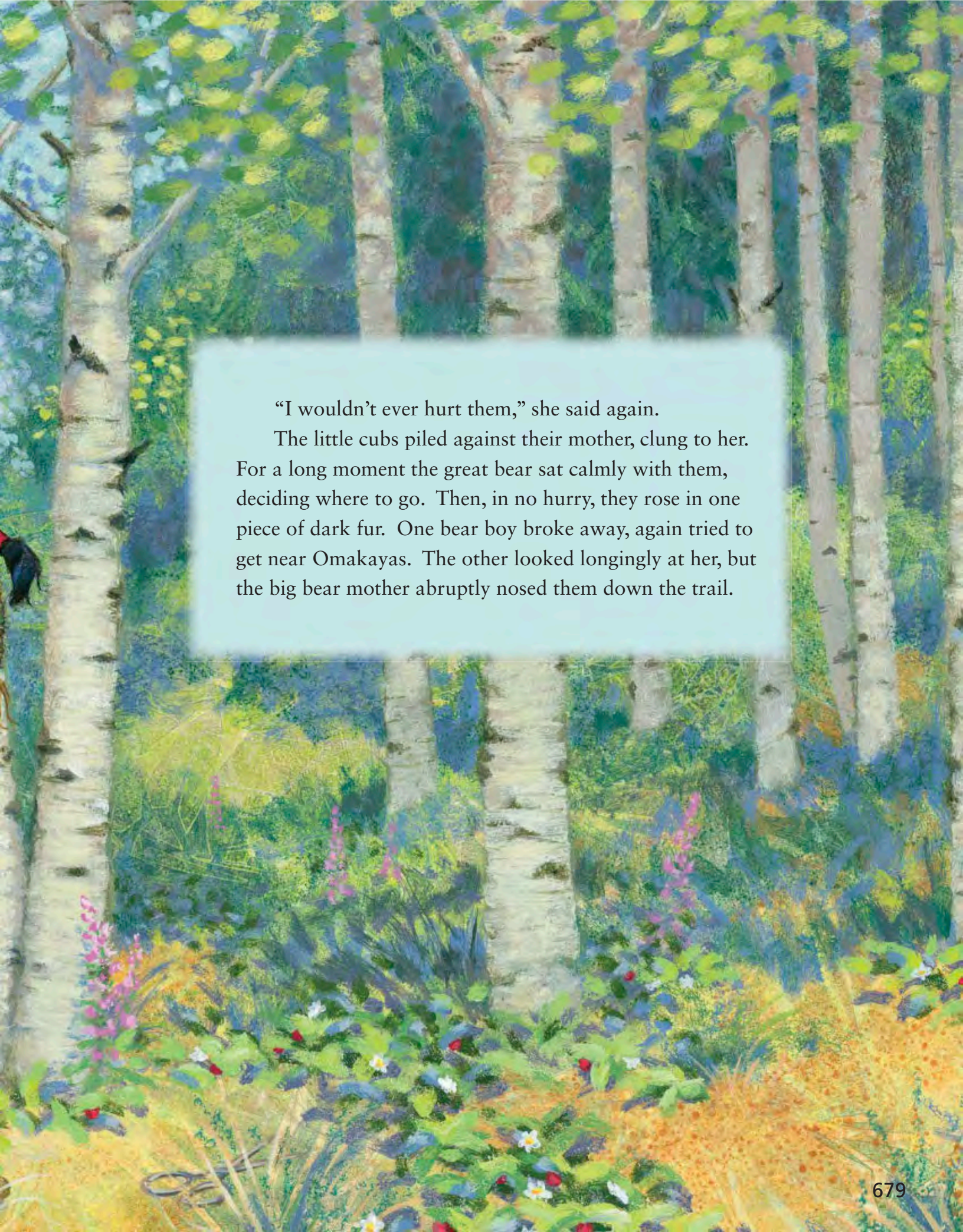
“I fed them some berries. I wanted to bring them home, to adopt them, have them live with me at my house as my little brothers. But now that you’re here, Grandmother, I will leave quietly. These scissors in my hands are not for killing, just for sewing. They are nothing compared to your teeth and claws.”

And indeed, Omakayas's voice trembled slightly as the bear made a gurgling sound deep in her throat and **bared** her long, curved yellowish teeth, so good at ripping and tearing. But having totaled up all of the smells and sifted them for information, the bear seemed to have decided that Omakayas was no threat. She sat back on her haunches like a huge dog. Swinging her head around, she gave a short, quick slap at one of the cubs that sent it reeling away from Omakayas. It was as though she were telling them they had done wrong to approach this human animal, and should now stay away from her. Omakayas's heart squeezed painfully. Even though it was clear her life was to be **spared**, she felt the loss of her new brothers.

ANALYZE THE TEXT

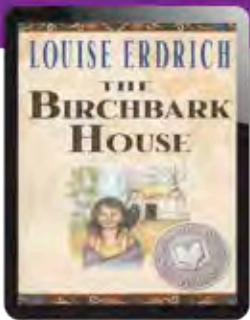
Theme How does Omakayas respond during the mother bear encounter? How do her reactions relate to the theme of this story?





“I wouldn’t ever hurt them,” she said again.

The little cubs piled against their mother, clung to her. For a long moment the great bear sat calmly with them, deciding where to go. Then, in no hurry, they rose in one piece of dark fur. One bear boy broke away, again tried to get near Omakayas. The other looked longingly at her, but the big bear mother abruptly nosed them down the trail.



Dig Deeper

Use Clues to Analyze the Text

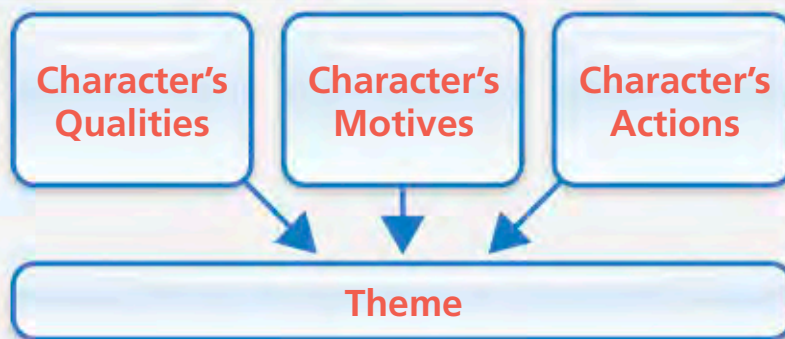
Use these pages to learn about Theme, Author’s Word Choice, and Visual Elements. Then read “The Birchbark House” again to apply what you learned.

Theme

In “The Birchbark House,” Omakayas reacts quickly when she encounters the bears. How a main character responds to challenges or conflict can help you determine theme. **Theme** is the central message or idea of a story.

Authors may state some character traits directly. Often, however, the reader must make inferences about a character’s qualities based on descriptions of his or her appearance, thoughts, and actions. These clues help you identify and understand the story’s theme.

Look back at page 671 in “The Birchbark House.” How does Omakayas react to having her feelings hurt by her sister? Think about how her reaction—and what she does as a result—relates to the theme of the story.



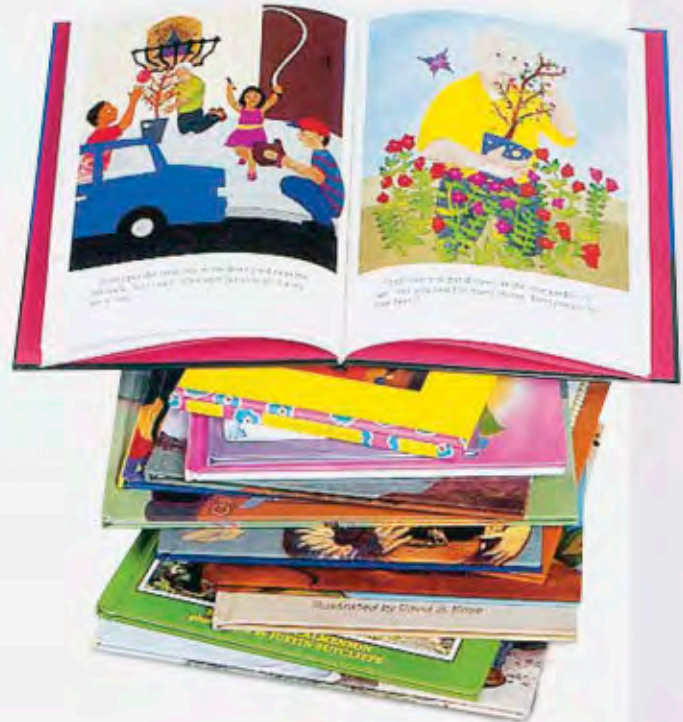
Author's Word Choice

Authors carefully choose words to help their readers understand what is happening in a story. Reread the first sentence at the top of page 678. It is easy to imagine why Omakayas's voice trembles when the mother bear makes "a gurgling sound deep in her throat" and opens her mouth to show "long, curved yellowish teeth." The author's **word choice** provides a clear impression of what Omakayas hears and sees.



Visual Elements

When you analyze a text, it is important to consider how visual elements affect your understanding. **Visual elements** may include photos, graphics, and illustrations. "The Birchbark House" is accompanied by illustrations that show Omakayas interacting with her natural surroundings and highlight the power of nature. Think about how these illustrations add to the beauty of the text.



Your Turn

RETURN TO THE ESSENTIAL QUESTION



Review the selection with a partner to prepare to discuss this question: *How can traditions influence a person's thoughts and feelings?* As you discuss, take turns reviewing and elaborating on the key ideas in your discussion.



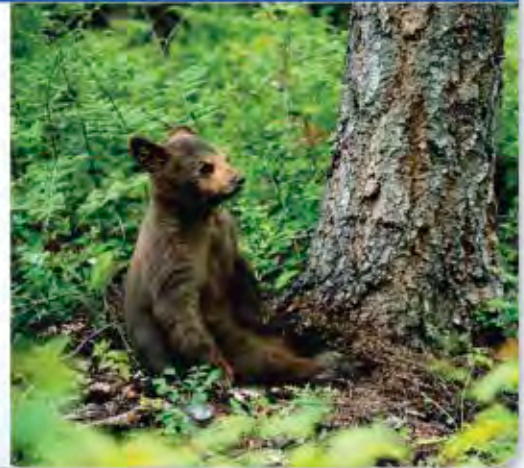
Classroom Conversation

Continue your discussion of "The Birchbark House" by using text evidence to answer these questions:

- 1 How does Omakayas react when her feelings are hurt by her sister?
- 2 How do Omakayas's feelings about her sister relate to her experience with the bears?
- 3 What details from the story show Omakayas's knowledge of her environment?

TALK ABOUT THEME

List and Discuss Omakayas forms a special bond with the bear cubs. She shares her berries with them and imagines taking them home. What does her interaction with the bears show about her? How does it relate to the theme of the story? Discuss these questions with a partner, and work together to make a list of text evidence that supports your answers.



Performance Task

WRITE ABOUT READING



Response How do the descriptions of Omakayas's thoughts and actions provide clues about her character? Write a paragraph describing the author's characterization of Omakayas. Include text evidence such as quotations and details that help you make inferences about Omakayas's traits, such as her courage or her respect for nature.



Writing Tip

Be sure to cite specific evidence from the text to develop your ideas and support your analysis. Double-check any quotations or paraphrases for accuracy.