

WALKING TO THE DAWN LAND

JOE BRUCHAC

The Dawn Land is a real place. Also known by my Abenaki Indian ancestors as Ndakinna, “Our Land,” it is approximately the area now known (ironically, it seems to me) as New England. The name my people are called by, Wabanakiak, is a reflection of our long residence—at least since the last ice age 10,000 years ago—in that area where the rays of the rising sun first strike the North American continent. Waban means white, light, or dawn. Aki means earth, land, or a garden. Thus we are the people of the Dawn Land.

This story of Ndakinna in ancient times—at some point not that long after the retreat of the mountains of ice—began in a dream. I woke one morning with the vivid image in my mind of a young man making a fire in which he would heat the stones for a sweat lodge. I got up, went into my study, and began to write to find out his story. I didn’t plan or outline anything. I simply stayed on my protagonist’s trail—like a hunter following a set of tracks. The other characters appeared, events occurred—often surprising me. I wrote every morning, often twenty or thirty pages at a time. It was as if I was taking dictation, hearing an ancient voice speak. By the time I was done—less than six weeks later—I realized I had the first draft of a complete novel.

But it wasn’t really that easy. I need to add that I’ve spent most of my adult life immersed in Northeastern native history, traditions, and language. I’ve not just read thousands of books, I’ve also spent as many hours listening to Native elders who’ve been incredibly generous in sharing their knowledge—such people as Stephen Laurent/Atian Lolo, Maurice Denny/Mdawelasis, Alice Papineau/Dewwasentah, Ray Fadden/Tehanetorens, and countless others. I could go on at far too great length about the lessons held in Iroquois and Abenaki stories. There is, for example, the essential teaching that there are at least two sides to every story. There is the understanding that one may think with either the twisted mind or the straight mind. One whose thoughts are twisted may be redeemed. Even the most evil may turn again to the good.

I’ve learned from our oral traditions how to let a story tell itself through me. So it is that the basic narrative arc of *Dawn Land* is the structure of a traditional lesson story. And the language of the novel reflects the structure and the thought patterns of Abenaki as much as English. It’s not just in the names of the characters—dogs and humans and others—but also in the way life is seen by the humans, who do not regard themselves as lords of creation or elevated above the other parts of a vibrant, powerful, and aware natural world.



WALKING TO THE DAWN LAND (CONT'D)

JOE BRUCHAC

Further, our traditional tales have a very long memory. They are so very old that they often tell us of such now-vanished beings as huge dangerous animals and different human-like creatures—giants and little people—that match fossil remains now being studied by paleontologists. You'll encounter some of those in *Dawn Land*.

I also owe a debt to those, from my father and grandfather to such contemporaries as John Stokes, founder of The Tracking Project, who taught me what I know of the old arts of survival that my Abenaki characters understand and live throughout the novel. My older son, Jim, has far surpassed me in his knowledge of those ways and continues to share them at his Ndaakinn Education Center. So, if a character in this story uses a rabbit stick, builds a canoe, makes a fire or a shelter, or tracks an animal, that man or woman's actions are not shaped by my imagination but reflect a reality that I've shared.

I also have to thank the Alamosak, The Dog People. I've enjoyed the willing companionship of dogs all of my life and the three intelligent, loyal, good-humored companions of Young Hunter are drawn both from Abenaki traditions (their very names are traditional dog names among our people) and from the many canine friends who've shared their lives with me. I've walked a trail and watched as two dogs range to either side, slept in a shelter in deep woods with one guarding my head and the other keeping watching at my feet. Agwedjiman, Pabetciman, and Danowa are so central to this tale that more than one reader has suggested the book should have been called "Dog Land."

There are many ways to tell a story. Each time we share a story—even one we've heard again and again—it is new and renewed. Each teller's voice—though the same words may be spoken—brings new life to the telling. So it is with real delight that I see this story that gave itself to me now offered as a graphic novel—a form that excites the imagination like no other, inviting both mind and eye to take part in the telling. Walk with us through this tale of ancient time. It is a story and a setting that may seem strange, but it should also be familiar. For the same earth supports us, and we humans—though we may forget it from time to time—remain a fallible and hopeful part of a world that is greater than ourselves. We are still in need of stories to show us the way.



TACKLING GIANTS

WILL DAVIS

Giants have been present within the human story for as long as we have been recording it. Their images are carved into the hillsides of prehistoric England, drawn on the canyon walls of the American West, portrayed in hieroglyphs and sculpture from Ancient Egypt to South America. They are mentioned in Genesis 6, verse 4, “There were giants in the earth in those days. . .”

There they are, casting their imposing shadows over the origins of our world. From religious texts to folklore, giants have always roamed across the darker landscape of the Earth’s history.

Modern reason would suggest that giants abide in myth only, but who is to say? Gaping lacunae in the human tribe’s collective memory beckon to the imagination. How little our history books say of the continental Americas before the times of European exploration and settlement! It is within the shadowed twilight of that lacuna that *Dawn Land* takes place. It draws from the oral traditions and mythology of those who lived in these lands through many ages and generations.

In the summer of 2000, my mind was occupied with thoughts of giants. Knowing this, a dear friend thought I might enjoy reading a book by Joseph Bruchac. From the first pages of *Dawn Land*, however, the great and terrible beings, the giants, were only one element of a more powerful, sweeping narrative.

No two storytellers are alike. Joe Bruchac is a master storyteller, and it has been an honor to tell this story in the form of a graphic novel. Joe’s advice to me at the beginning of this journey a decade ago was to “keep it between Earth and sky,” which I have endeavored to do with every stroke of the brush.



DAWN LAND DISCUSSION GUIDE

Book Description

Dawn Land is a graphic novel written by Joe Bruchac and illustrated by Will Davis. In a haunting glimpse into the mythical past of prehistoric America, it tells the story of Young Hunter, whose quest to overcome the Stone Giants changes the lives of all of his people.



For Discussion

Dawn Land is a graphic novel, a story told with words and pictures. But it's adapted from a novel, told entirely in world. How do you think the novel is different?

Technological innovations frequently cause great changes. Do you think this story makes a judgment about whether the development of the bow and arrow will be good for the Abenaki people? Do you have an opinion?

Throughout his quest, Young Hunter is confronted by Ancient Ones, the first creations of the Owner-Creator. Think about the first sentient creations of Gods of other religions. What would it be like if they walked the earth?

Weasel Tail (Holds the Stone) is Young Hunter's cousin, and saved his life as a child. The two young men share a similar history, but grow up very differently. To the extent that Weasel Tail being marked by the giants can be read as a metaphor for the effects of a tragedy on a child, is he still responsible for his actions? How do you think his tribe should deal with him? Should those who have been damaged psychologically by traumatic events still be held to the same standards of behavior by society?

Think about the roles that women play in this story. What can you deduce about their place in Abenaki society? Are these women better or worse off than women in modern American society?

Joseph Campbell postulates that every hero goes through cycle of separation (from homeland, family, etc. when called to go on a quest), initiation (into a set of trials that form the quest), and return (at which point a hero must resolve the dichotomy between things learned on the quest and his initial state). Does Young Hunter's journey follow the Campbellian quest model? Would you call him a hero? What about Weasel Tail?

Dawn Land is based on Abenaki myth. What purpose do you think that myths play or should play in a society? What role could this story have played for the Abenaki? What about for us, now?