A Guide to
I Heard the Owl Call My Name
Margaret Craven

“The myths are the village and the winds and the rain. . . . The village is the talking bird, the owl, who calls the name of the man who is going to die. . . .”

The Novel at a Glance
I Heard the Owl Call My Name is a novel about a clash of cultures. The plot focuses on a young Anglican vicar, unaware that he has only a few years to live, who is sent to work among the Tsawatineuk, an American Indian tribe of the Kwakiutl (kwá’ké-’ot’l) people in British Columbia.

Setting: Kingcome Village, British Columbia, during an eighteen-month period in the 1960s.

Protagonist: Mark Brian, a newly ordained Anglican vicar in his twenties.

Conflicts: The major conflict in the novel concerns Mark’s efforts to gain the trust of the villagers and later to recognize and accept the fact of his impending death. The Kwakiutl people face a conflict between life as they know it and modern ways. Jim, a “local boy,” and Gordon, a “city boy,” clash over Keetah, and Keetah struggles with her love for Gordon and her desire to stay in the village.

Resolution: Mark is accepted by the villagers, who invite him to remain with them until he dies. Mark accepts the inevitability of his death (although he is killed in a landslide before illness overtakes him). The villagers to some degree accept the inevitability of change. Keetah marries Jim.

Themes: Clashes of cultures might be unavoidable, but they are often accompanied by tragedy. In human life, as in nature, change is inevitable. Celebrating life prepares one for death.

Title: According to tribal tradition, an owl calling the name of a person means that person will soon die. The title foreshadows the novel’s ending.

Special Considerations
The central character and the Kwakiutl people touch each other deeply and conduct their lives in direct relationship with the cycle of nature. One young woman, lured to the outside world, dies of a drug overdose; other deaths occur. Students will recognize that this popular novel, though it deals with serious problems faced by its characters, ends by celebrating life.

Background
Northwest Coast. One of six major cultural regions of native peoples of North America, the Northwest Coast extends from southern Alaska to northern California. Northwest peoples include the Kwakiutl and the Haida. Notable features of Northwest cultures were an economy based largely on salmon fishing; a mythology that was elaborated in symbolic, carved door posts and totem poles; the central role of the cedar tree and potlatch celebrations involving elaborate meals and present-giving. Extensive contact with Europeans in the eighteenth century resulted in the spread of disease and conversion to European ways. Only in the 1940s did native groups begin to repopulate the villages and revive their traditional languages and art.

Vocabulary. Terms like Cedar-man, potlatch, Kwákwala (the language of the Kwakiutl people), and La-hell (a guessing game played with bones) are explained in context. The abbreviation RCMP stands for Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

Main Characters
The Bishop, Anglican church official; a wise and sensitive man. He is addressed in person and in Mark’s thoughts as “my lord.”

Mark Brian, newly ordained vicar in his mid-twenties, assigned to Kingcome Village and the surrounding area; a generous, sensitive, hard-working man who has only a few years to live but does not know it.

Jim Wallace, Kwakiutl man in his mid-twenties who serves as Mark’s guide and becomes his friend. Wallace wants to marry Keetah.

Caleb, retired Anglican cleric who teaches Mark to handle and maintain a forty-foot diesel launch and tells him to use the royal Victorian “we” when he speaks.

Calamity Bill, hand-logger and crotchety loner, famous for never removing the inner of his two pairs of long red underwear.
Marta Stephens, daughter of a hereditary chief, a very old, white-haired grandmother. She mothers Mark, knitting him a warm toque (cap) and feeding him.

Mrs. Hudson, Kwakiutl matriarch, Keetah's grandmother.

Keetah, young Kwakiutl woman engaged to Gordon.

Gordon, young man thirsty for knowledge and modern ways. Gordon is the oldest of six siblings; his father died recently; his mother dies in childbirth.

**Plot**

**Part One. Yes, my lord—no, my lord**
The title of Part One suggests Mark's ambivalence about his assignment to Kingcome.

**Untitled Prologue.** Told that a young priest has only two or three years to live, the Bishop sends him to his "hardest" parish, Kingcome Village, the place where he will learn the most about the meaning of life.

**Chapter 1. The setting** is introduced. We accompany Mark when he meets Chief Eddy, his Kwakiutl host, for a boy's funeral and then leaves when he sees that the villagers wish to add a ritual of their own. The villagers seem to accept the vicar but do not wish to give up their own rituals.

**Chapter 3.** We hear what members of the tribe think of the new vicar. They like him for respecting their customs, but they also poke gentle fun at him.

**Chapter 4.** The vicarage (house) is falling apart, but Mark refuses the Bishop's offer of a prefabricated new house. He wants to wait for a sign of acceptance—he wants the villagers to offer to help him build. Two small children become the vicar's first friends, and the tribal leader, Chief Eddy, gives him a lesson in Kwákwala. Much to Mark's surprise, everyone attends his first Sunday service; Old Marta gives him a toque to keep his head warm.

**Chapter 5.** By September Mark has almost given up trying to understand young Jim Wallace, his Kwakiutl boatman, but friendship is awakened when Mark recites a Kwakiutl prayer that Jim had forgotten. Later, Mark and Jim picnic with Marta, Keetah, and the two small children. They watch a salmon die while trying to swim upstream. In a bit of foreshadowing, Mark and Jim realize that with time he has come to understand Kwákwala. On a trip to Alert Bay, he asks an RCMP sergeant to try to find Keetah's sister. Later, the sergeant brings Mark a photograph of a dead girl. Mark identifies her as Keetah's sister. Deserted by the white man, she worked at a beer parlor until she died of a drug overdose.

**Chapter 8.** Several of the young people come home for Christmas, speaking English and disdaining native ways. Mark recognizes that the outside world calls to them—especially to Gordon, whose grandfather is an elder of the tribe. In January, Mrs. Hudson mourns: Her granddaughter, Keetah's sister, plans to marry a white man, and Mrs. Hudson is sure that the white world will destroy the girl.

**Chapter 10.** It is a blustery February and March. Mark realizes that with time he has come to understand Kwákwala. On a trip to Alert Bay, he asks an RCMP sergeant to try to find Keetah's sister. Later, the sergeant brings Mark a photograph of a dead girl. Mark identifies her as Keetah's sister. Deserted by the white man, she worked at a beer parlor until she died of a drug overdose.

**Chapter 11.** Spring and summer bring the return of fishing, with the men gone for days or weeks at a time. When Gordon's mother dies giving birth to her sixth child, Mark summons the RCMP, helps prepare the body, and conducts the funeral. He assures Gordon that he and his older siblings may continue school; the village will care for the young ones. Foreshadowing the young vicar's death, Old Marta notices Mark's great weariness; in answer to the vicar's wishes, Chief Eddy now says that the men will help him build a new vicarage. "You suffered with them," writes the Bishop, summing up this part of the novel, "and now you are theirs."

**Part Three. Che-kwa-la**
The title of this part means "fast moving water"—Jim's characterization of Gordon.

**Chapter 12.** References to August, when the tribes will be able to buy liquor legally, create a sense of foreboding.
Mark lives at Marta's house for six summer weeks while his old vicarage is torn down and a new one is built according to plans and materials sent by the Bishop. At Marta's house, Mark loves hearing the elders speak of the old culture. Appalled at how much has been lost, he urges Keetah to write down what the elders say. The Bishop brings old Caleb and other clergy to the feast dedicating the new vicarage.

Chapter 13. August brings floods and, in other villages, money wasted on alcohol, fights, and gambling. One day an American yacht moors in the inlet, and seven Californians come ashore to gawk. Mark answers their questions but refuses to assist them any further. Toward the end of August, an English anthropologist boards in the village for ten days. She criticizes Christianity and the old culture. Appalled at how much has been lost, he decides that the complexity of the outside world and that outsiders will not accept the people. Mark says that at least the Kwakiutl family line would continue. Keetah avoids Mark for a while, lest the priest judge her. Mark admits he does not fully understand Keetah's choice but says he will always be proud of her. Jim, who has always loved Keetah, says that he will gladly raise the child as his own.

Chapter 14. Mark and Jim take the boat to Vancouver for an overhaul, at the same time delivering Gordon and three other boys to a city school. The old people know this departure accelerates the dying of the tribe. Mark talks to the boys about responding to racial slurs. He has lunch with his sister but does not notice the sadness in her eyes. He is happy to return to Kingcome Village.

Chapter 15. The old men of the tribe ask for Mark's help. The old coffins, placed in trees during the past, have fallen and spilled the bones of tribal members. Mark organizes the digging of a large communal grave—a massive task.

Chapter 16. Home again at Christmas, Gordon acts more and more like a white man, and his family's potlatch for him and Keetah seems unlikely to make him want to stay in the village. Mark respects Gordon's right to choose his own life, but believes he will ultimately make his relatives proud. Gordon returns to the city, and Keetah goes with him but cannot promise she will stay. Mark and Jim predict that Keetah will return to the village, but they worry about her fate.

Chapter 17. After Christmas, Caleb, the old cleric, comes to visit. He tells Mark about the cedar tree and explains how gratitude for its bounty led to the Kwakiutl myth of Cedar-man. Caleb worries that Kingcome will forsake the simplicity of village life for the complexity of the outside world and that outsiders will not accept the people. Mark says that at least the Kwakiutl have Caleb, who has been to them like Cedar-man. Caleb says that the same is true of Mark.

Part Four. Come wolf, come swimmer
The title of Part Four foreshadows Mark's death.

Chapter 18. January and February bring snow, ice, cold rain, and illness. Out on a patrol, Mark and Jim find Calamity Bill ill from the complications resulting from a fall. Mark watches over him through the night. Calamity dies peacefully at dawn.

Chapter 19. In March, Mark finds Marta knitting a sweater to welcome Keetah, who indeed soon returns. Too homesick to endure the outer world, she stayed with Gordon long enough to conceive his child, so that his Kwakiutl family line would continue. Keetah avoids Mark for a while, lest the priest judge her. Mark admits he does not fully understand Keetah's choice but says he will always be proud of her. Jim, who has always loved Keetah, says that he will gladly raise the child as his own.

Chapter 20. One Sunday, bright light suddenly fills the gloomy little church, and Mark feels “the burden of the winter lift.” A dance-potlatch for Jim and Keetah is planned. Marta notices “how thin and white” Mark is. She recognizes that death is close at hand for him even before the owl has called his name, which recalls the novel's title. Marta persuades the Bishop to come to the potlatch. The feasting and dancing last for two days. Before leaving, the Bishop tells Mark that this village always enabled him to learn “[e]nough of the meaning of life to be ready to die.”

Chapter 21. It is early spring. On a boat trip, Mark begins to assess what he has learned. He helps some loggers one day, and later he scatters Calamity Bill's ashes. Alone and reflective, he puts various clues together and realizes that he is dying. When he reaches the vicarage, he tells Marta that something strange happened that night: “I heard the owl call my name.” Knowing it means his death is imminent, she replies, “Yes, my son.”

Chapter 22. Mark walks the village, thinking that the people do not know he is dying. But Marta has told them. Keetah tells Mark that the villagers want him to stay with them. She says, “You are the swimmer [salmon] who came to use from the great sea.” Mark feels a deep peace. That night, on a rescue mission with Jim in a season of terrible spring storms, he gives Jim some advice. The vicar says that Jim must help Keetah get to know the outside world in preparation for the day when they both must go there. As they approach the float in Kingcome Inlet, the story explodes in a violent climax: Lightning blasts a tree at the top of the inlet and rocks the world with thunder. More trees fall and create a landslide.

Chapter 23. The tribe hears the roar of the slide, and the men run to help anyone caught in it. By morning they have sighted the wreckage of the boat and know there is one survivor, but they do not know who it is. Unable to choose between Mark and Jim, Keetah prays for both. The men carry a body into the vicarage. It is Mark's. After the funeral, as she lies awake in the dark, Old Marta prays softly, “Walk straight on, my son.” Peter, the carver, recalls that the soul of a great chief who had died used to come straight back to earth in the form of a raven. Lest no one be ready for Mark's return, Peter goes and sits on the steps of the vicar's house. As the novel ends, the river continues to flow, waiting “for the swimmer to come again on his way to the climax of his adventurous life,
and to the end for which he had been made.”

**Approaches for Post-Reading Activities**

The most impressive features of this novel are carefully researched setting, the details of the Kwakiutl culture, and the way setting and culture affect the characters and the theme. Discussion groups or individual research projects might focus on the following activities.

1. **Researching Northwest Cultures**
   One of the first things that readers of this novel will want to talk about is the rich native culture of the North American Northwest Coast. Their interest can lead to an investigation of the culture. They could consider the totem pole, the dugout canoe, the potlatch, the importance of the salmon, and the mythology of Cedar-man. Illustrations with clear captions could make this research project into a good classroom display. A map-making exercise is a natural.

2. **Responding to a Critic**
   Elaine Moss, in a review of the book, says that it is “firmly rooted in nature” and that it constitutes “both a challenge to modern man and an undeniable comfort.” In an opposing critique, Valentine Cunningham dismisses the novel as “tear-jerking [promotion] of the simpler life.” In a group discussion, have students talk about what each critic means and decide if they think the critic is right or wrong. They will have to find at least two details from the text to support their assessment. Students might write a letter to one of the critics, explaining why they agree or disagree with the evaluation.

3. **Contrasting Characters**
   Students could discuss the contrast between Mark and the visiting English anthropologist (Chapter 13). They could focus on attitudes toward the Kwakiutl people, using as evidence the things each character says and does. Which character, in their opinion, shows greater insight into the Kwakiutl culture? Can students think of how people today still exemplify these two approaches to a different culture? Students should use examples from the book to support their opinions.

4. **Interpreting a Parable**
   Have students re-read Chapter 9 to understand why Mark writes to the Bishop and why the Bishop responds by telling the parable (symbolic story) of “Tagoona, the Eskimo.” What do students think this parable, taken in context, means?

**Meet the Writer**

Margaret Craven (1901–1980) was born in Helena, Montana, grew up in Washington state, and spent her adult life in California. After a few years as a newspaper columnist and editorial writer, she devoted her life to free-lance writing. Her short stories appeared in several magazines, including *The Saturday Evening Post*. She was sixty-nine when she published *I Heard the Owl Call My Name*, her first novel. It became a best-seller and was adapted for television in 1973. She also wrote two novels set during World War II, *Walk Gently This Good Earth* and *The Home Front*, and an autobiographical memoir, *Again Calls the Owl*.

**Read On**

Margaret Craven, *Again Calls the Owl*. A memoir about the writer’s childhood in the Pacific Northwest, her struggle to become a writer, the research and travel that provided the foundation for her writing, and her struggle against blindness.

Anne Cameron, *Daughters of Copper Woman*. A challenging yet intriguing blend of autobiography, fiction, and myth; a retelling of Northwest Coast myths of the native Nootka peoples of Vancouver Island.

Dorothy M. Johnson, “A Man Called Horse.” Famous short story, later made into a movie, about a white man who lived for a while with a Crow tribe.

D’Arcy McNickle, “Train Time.” A short story about the cultural clash that can occur when a well-meaning adult tries to help a child “assimilate.”

Leslie Marmon Silko, “The Man to Send Rain Clouds.” A short story about the clash of cultures between a Catholic priest and his Laguna parishioners.

Anne Sexton, “Courage.” Courage lies not only in heroics, but in the small things we do and endure as very ordinary human beings.

King James Bible, “To Every Thing There Is a Season” and “The Greatest of These Is Charity.” Both selections could serve as epigraphs for this story of the vicar who is able to die after he learns what life means.