It is 1919, and Niska, the last Oji-Cree medicine woman to live off the land, has received word that one of the two boys she grudgingly saw off to war has returned. She leaves her home in the bush of Northern Ontario to retrieve him, only to discover that the one she expected is actually the other.

Xavier Bird, her sole living relation, gravely wounded and addicted to the army’s morphine, hovers somewhere between the living world and that of the dead. As Niska paddles him the three days home, she realizes that all she can offer in her attempt to keep him alive is her words, the stories of her life.

In turn, Xavier relates the horrifying years of war in Europe: he and his best friend, Elijah Whiskeyjack, prowled the battlefields of France and Belgium as snipers of enormous skill. As their reputations grew, the two young men, with their hand-sewn moccasins and extraordinary marksmanship, became both the pride and fear of their regiment as they stalked the ripe killing fields of Ypres and the Somme.

But what happened to Elijah? As Niska paddles deeper into the wilderness, both she and Xavier confront the devastation that such great conflict leaves in its wake.

Inspired in part by real-life World War I Ojibwa hero Francis Pegahmagabow, *Three Day Road* reinvents the tradition of such Great War epics as *Birdsong* and *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Beautifully written and told with unblinking focus, it is a remarkable tale, one of brutality, survival, and rebirth.
In the summer of 1945, my father was invited to Buckingham Palace by the king. The war in Europe had ground to an end in the streets of Berlin. As George VI pinned the Distinguished Service Order upon my father's uniform, he proclaimed him the most highly decorated medical officer in the British Empire.

In the summer of 1945, Erl, my dad's older brother, was living a traditional lifestyle in a teepee near Algonquin Park, selling crafts to tourists. Uncle Erl had experienced World War I and was too old for this second great war, but I doubt he would have wanted to participate anyway. He enjoyed life in the woods of northern Ontario in summer and the life of a world wanderer in winter.

I'm forty years old, the third youngest of eleven children born into a strict Irish Catholic family. My age betrays the fact that my father sired a number of my siblings, including me, when he was quite a bit older than most fathers. I grew up with history and myth swirling around me, stories of my father's war exploits and my uncle Erl's Ojibwe ways inseparable. I was born into a family from a very different era and listened to stories of how my father and Erl and their younger brother Robert had to form their own gang when they were young because they were Mick Catholic bastards in a world of Orangemen. My father was older than most of my friends' grandfathers, and had actually delivered a number of my schoolmates' fathers into the world.

My father was blond and blue-eyed. Erl was brown and high-cheekboned and had a hooked nose. Robert looked something in the middle. My father chose one
route. He became a doctor and a war hero and brought his family to the city. Erl took the other route. He lived in the bush and made his own clothing out of hide and travelled the world with only a few coins in his pocket, somewhere along the way picking up what now sounds like the horribly racist moniker "Injun Joe." There are still postcards of him in full Indian regalia floating around Algonquin Park trading posts. Robert chose a quiet life somewhere between the two.

My dad died when I was eight. Erl took the three day road years earlier. Robert died not long after my father. My ravenhaired mother, strong and still beautiful, was left to raise my sisters and brothers and me. She was no stranger to war veteran relatives, either.
Discussion Questions

1. Why does Joseph Boyden use two narrators to tell the story of Three Day Road? What effects does he create by interweaving Niska’s and Xavier’s narratives?

2. Niska tells Xavier about the stories her father told her family. "Sometimes his stories were all that we had to keep us alive" (p. 33). What role do stories play within the novel?

3. Why does Niska spend so much time telling Xavier stories of the past? Why does she say that she "feeds" him stories? What effect do her stories have on him?

4. Early in the novel, Thompson asks Elijah if he likes combat and killing, to which Elijah responds: "It's in my blood." But Thompson doesn't ask Xavier, who thinks: "Does he sense something? How am I different?" (p. 69). How is Xavier different from Elijah? How do they each feel about combat and killing? In what ways are they alike?

5. Elijah has a dream in which three of his dead fellow soldiers tell him: "Do what you can. There is nothing sacred any more in a place such as this. Don't fight it. Do what you can" (p. 261). How does Elijah interpret this? Are these spirits right in suggesting that in war nothing is sacred and that a soldier should do whatever he can—even if it involves killing innocent people—to survive and win?

6. In what ways is it significant that Xavier and Elijah are Cree Indians? How do the Canadian soldiers perceive them? What aspects of their traditional ways of life affect how they perform during the war?

7. How does Niska begin to cure Xavier of his despair and morphine dependence? What does this cure suggest about the difference between Native American and Western views of medicine and healing?

8. Niska has the gift of receiving visions. What do her visions reveal to her? How do they guide her?

9. What does the novel as a whole say about war and what it can do to those who must kill in war? How are Elijah and Xavier changed, physically and spiritually, by their experiences in war?

10. In what ways is Three Day Road relevant to our own time and circumstance?