Study Materials for Smoke Signals

**Instructions -- After watching the film, do the following: 1) Read through the accompanying notes about the Coeur d’Alene Indians, highlighting or underlining at least ten (10) pieces of information about the tribe; 2) Then, on a separate sheet of paper, respond in a paragraph or more to any two highlighted elements; and 3) Provide complete, thought out answers to any five (5) of the study questions below. (Note: For extra credit, you may answer any of the remaining questions.)**

**Notes on the Movie**  
Director, Chris Eyre, stated that in this film he tried to show "a kind of Indian sensibility in the heartland, rather than all that romantic, spiritual, oppressive stuff about Indians sold by non-Indian filmmakers." The film enriches the student's awareness of modern Native American cultural experience as it illuminates the nature of forgiveness in a lesson applicable to all, especially those who need to forgive their fathers.  
  
The director of this movie said that "Any time you put an Indian on the screen, it's political -- that's kind of the luggage that comes with the whole Indian package."   
  
**Coeur d'Alene Indians**The Coeur d'Alene Indians held sway in a territory that now comprises parts of north Idaho, eastern Washington State and western Montana. It extended for some four million acres over the drainage and headwaters of the Spokane River. The Coeur d'Alene obtained food by hunting, fishing, gathering wild plants and root digging. They used basic techniques to manage their resources, pruning plants that grew wild, and burning some areas to generate better plant growth. The Coeur d'Alene also burned extensive areas of forest to eliminate the lichen that hangs from trees. This lichen was used as winter forage by deer. The burning forced the deer to descend into the low country where they could be more easily taken in deep snow. After 1700, the Coeur d'Alene began to use horses and switched their main game sources from deer and elk to the buffalo. They developed a wide flat bow about one meter in length. The bow string was made with 30 strands of sinew from the leg of a deer, attached with glue made from the skins of salmon. They wrapped the bow with twine made from the bark of the bitter cherry tree and made arrows from the wood of the serviceberry tree.   
  
Horrific small pox epidemics devastated the Coeur d'Alene and other Native Americans of the Plateau beginning in 1780. The Coeur d'Alene population fell from an estimated 3,000 - 4,000 people in 1780 to just 300 - 500 in 1853. The population stayed in the 400 to 500 person range until the 1900s and began a slow increase. In 1994 the Bureau of Indian Affairs counted 1,216 members of the tribe. As of 2009, the tribe had more than 2100 enrolled members.   
  
Training for the Coeur d'Alene young stressed proper behavior and self-control. Boys and girls coming of age sought guardian spirits by suppressing their emotions and concentrating on hopes of receiving a vision and a song. They sweated and bathed daily in cold water and they received tattoos of vision designs relating to their guardian spirits.   
  
The name Coeur d'Alene is French for "heart like an awl." It was given to these Indians because of their reputation for sharp bargaining with early fur traders. In 1842, the Coeur d'Alene welcomed Jesuit missionaries. Many became Catholic. They were encouraged to farm and to learn English. By 1900, many Coeur d'Alene had become prosperous farmers and ranchers with large herds of horses and Victorian houses. Nonetheless, there was a continuing struggle for land and many Coeur D'Alene Indians have been limited to a reservation of about 345,000 acres.   
  
In the 1960s, the Coeur d'Alene language was spoken by 100 people and, in 1997, by less than 20. Tribal authorities are trying to revive the language and it is now taught in the tribal grade school.   
  
By the 1990s, the tribe had developed a large tribal farm, a shopping center, a medical center, tourist accommodations and a gambling casino. It was trying to enlarge its land base by buying land.

***Discussion Questions***:    
  
1. In a flashback Suzy and Arnold share the worst things they have ever done. Arnold gives no more details than that he "broke three hearts, too." To what is he referring?

2.  Thomas, the film's narrator, is a storyteller, an individual responsible for carrying on the oral tradition of the tribe. What stories does he tell that seem to carry more meaning than what appears on the surface?

3. Thomas says that Arnold cut his hair and never grew it out again. What might this mean in the context of this story?

4. There are several references to fry bread in the film. The references to fry bread become metaphorical when Victor's mother discusses how she learned to make the best fry bread on the reservation. Explain what is meant by the metaphor.

5. What humorous aspects of the film poke fun at poverty?

6. When Thomas offers a story about Victor's father attending an anti-war demonstration in the 1960's in exchange for a ride to the bus station, he concludes that Arnold negotiated a plea bargain from assault down to "being an Indian in the 20th century." What irony can be found in this bit of humor?

7. What is the "oral tradition" referred to in the movie?

8. Victor and Arnold are asked if they have passports as they are leaving the reservation. One of the women in the only-in-reverse car comments that they are going to a whole different country and that the U.S. is as foreign as it gets. What irony lies in this statement?

9. Several times in the film there are references to magic. What special meaning does the term seem to have?

10. After Thomas comes back to the bus with his hair down, looking closer to the image that Victor told him was important for Indian men, two white men were seated where Victor and Thomas had sat earlier. They show disrespect for the Indians and Thomas tells Victor his warrior look doesn't work every time. Victor responds with the song about John Wayne's teeth. What is his purpose here?