

Literature Circle Guide to *Code Talker* by Joseph Bruchac

Book Summary

Ned Begay is transplanted from his family's home at the age of six, and sent to a boarding school to learn English and the "American" way of life. There he is given a new name and clothes and forbidden to speak his native language Navajo. When he is 16, he is recruited to join the Marines, and shortly afterwards he enlists and is sent to boot camp. He discovers that his Navajo language, which he has been using only in secret for years, is the secret weapon that the U.S. is using in their war against the Japanese. As a Navajo code talker, Ned is able to use his native language to save countless American lives, and his experiences in the Pacific—from Guadalcanal to Iwo Jima to Okinawa—change him forever.

Author Information

Joseph Bruchac grew up in a small town in the foothills of the Adirondacks not far from the city of Saratoga Springs, New York. He was raised by his grandparents, who kept a little general store where Bruchac worked in his free time. He grew up hearing traditional stories and songs told by his grandparents and their friends, and from an early age he knew that he wanted to be a writer. He published his first book of stories in 1975. Bruchac has a Ph.D. from Union Graduate School, and his books have won many awards, including the Parents' Choice Award, the American Book Award, and the Skipping Stones Honor Award for Multicultural Children's Literature. Today Bruchac lives in New York in the same house in which he grew up. Besides writing books, Bruchac loves to write and perform songs in a musical group he formed with his sister and two grown sons.

Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions

1. Once he arrives at boarding school, how does Ned Begay get his new name?
Mr. Benally, a teacher at the boarding school, attempts to translate Kii Yazhi, Ned's Navajo name, into English. When Kii Yazhi tries to explain that he is the "son of the One with a Gray Mustache," Mr. Benally writes down that his last name is "Begay," not realizing that in Navajo the name *Biye* means "son of." Mr. Benally then gives him the first name "Ned," after his own dead uncle.
2. Describe the warfare method the Americans call "banzai."
During a banzai attack, Japanese soldiers would run fiercely towards the enemy with a gun or a sword or even just bare hands, shouting "banzai" as a tribute to their emperor, Hirohito.
3. Ned says that his weeks in training at Camp Elliott are "some of the best in my life" (p. 81). Why is this so?

Ned enjoys the camaraderie of life in training camp. He is recognized for his athletic skills and abilities, and he feels connected with his fellow soldiers. Also, for the first time in many years, he is allowed to speak Navajo, and even respected for being able to do so. He realizes that by knowing this language, he is able to play an important role in defeating the Japanese, and because of this he feels deeply proud to be a Navajo and a U.S. Marine.

4. When Ned is terribly worried about crossing the deep waters of the Pacific Ocean in a boat, how does his friend Bill Toledo encourage him (p. 90)?

Bill Toledo tells Ned, “Look up.” Bill reminds Ned that even “out on the ocean. . . Father Sky will be above us. We will never be forgotten by the sky.” He encourages Ned to find comfort and strength in his Navajo faith.

5. Some of Ned’s classmates, including John Roanhorse, openly defy their boarding school teachers. Ned also disobeys his teachers, but in his own quiet way. How does Ned defy his teachers?

Ned defies his teachers by speaking Navajo when he is alone with other students. He learns and teaches Navajo songs and stories, which he shares in private when the teachers can’t hear. He finds that boarding school makes him even more determined to hold onto his language and his culture.

6. On the sign in front of Ned’s mission school is the motto: “Tradition is the enemy of progress” (p. 23). What does this motto mean to the teachers of the mission school?

The teachers of the mission school are determined to erase all memory of Navajo customs and language from their students’ memories. They believe that in order to help their students become fully integrated into mainstream American life, they must leave behind all their Navajo traditions, including their language. The teachers teach their students that every part of their old Navajo way of life is wrong and should be discarded.

7. Describing the battle of Iwo Jima, Ned says, “Our Navajo nets kept everything connected like a spider’s strands spanning distant branches” (p. 187). How does this simile describe the work of the code talkers?

Like a spider’s web connecting distant branches of a tree, the Navajo code talkers connect the movements of Marine troops, directing them and warning them of danger. Their Navajo language and voices support the “web” of the troops, resulting ultimately in the U.S. victory over the Japanese.

8. Throughout his time in training and in service as a code talker, Ned carries a pouch of corn pollen with him. What does this pouch mean to Ned, and how does he use it?

The pouch of corn pollen from his home helps Ned feel blessed and protected even though he is far from family. The pouch keeps him “calm and balanced and safe” (p. 82). He uses the pouch of corn pollen in a ritual every morning:

he touches the pollen to the tongue and head, then lifts it up to “the four sacred directions” as he greets the dawn. To Ned, the pouch is a remembrance of his family, home, and faith.

9. Ned notices that the Navajos have a much easier time adjusting to life as Marines than the white men. Why does he feel his life as a Navajo prepared him for being a Marine?

Ned says that as Indians, the Navajos are used to being shouted at and being told they were worthless, so they are not offended by the Marine insults. Also, the Navajos find the physical training much less challenging, since they are used to walking in the sun with heavy packs. The Navajos don't tire as easily as the other new recruits, and they are able to wait patiently for their orders. As children in the boarding school, they had been taught at a young age how to line up and march, so this part of Marine life is easy for them.

10. When First Sergeant Shinn, the Marine Corps recruiter, comes to Fort Defiance, why is Ned interested in joining the Marines?

Ned is impressed with the Marine uniforms and weapons he observes in a recruiting poster, and he is most impressed with Sergeant Shinn, whom seems immediately trustworthy to Ned. Shinn tells the Navajos that if they enlist, they will have many more opportunities than if they stay on their reservation, and Ned believes him: “Looking at First Sergeant Shinn, I could see that this was indeed a man who believed in what he said. I was ready to believe in it, too” (p. 43).

11. Ned mentions that the Japanese army does not follow the “rules of modern warfare” (p. 168). List three examples that support Ned's statement.

For the Japanese, being captured or surrendering in war is a great shame to your nation and family, and a Japanese soldier would kill himself rather than surrender. The Japanese use banzai attacks as a major offensive tactic, even though they lose many soldiers without advancing their cause. They treat their prisoners-of-war horribly, often beating and starving their prisoners. And when they conquer native peoples of the island, they are known for being especially cruel, often killing or oppressing those they conquer.

12. One of the Marine generals writes a report saying, “The Navajos have proved to be excellent Marines, intelligent, industrious, easily taught to send and receive by key and excellent in the field” (p. 137). Why is Ned so surprised to read this report?

This news makes Ned feel like sun is shining in his heart (p. 137) because he is so used to hearing only criticism from white people towards the Navajos. He has become so used to being judged and derided for his Navajo customs, lifestyle, and language, and now instead his people are being praised for their intelligence, skill, and knowledge.

13. How would you describe the teaching methods and classroom styles of Ned's teachers in the boarding school? What do you think of the methods Ned's teachers use, both to teach and to discipline their students?

The teachers at the mission school use public humiliation and corporal punishment to correct their students. When students use their native language, for example, their punishment is having their mouths washed out with soap. When Ned is caught speaking Navajo, he is forced to wear a dunce cap as a punishment. The mission teachers have no interest in their students' feelings or backgrounds; they are only interested in forcing their students to leave behind their Navajo language and customs. Most students will be appalled at the methods of Ned's teachers, which seem extremely harsh and cruel.

14. Ned survives both the hardship of boarding school and the trauma of war. How is Ned able to get through these difficulties? Which of his personal qualities do you think help him most during his trials?

Ned's inner strength and courage help him survive his hardships without bitterness. Through all his trials, he derives strength from his awareness of his Navajo heritage. His memories of his family and his faith help to sustain him: "What helped me through those times of uncertainty were thoughts of my home and family. It comforted me to know that my family was praying for me during those times" (p. 140). He is also motivated by his desire to serve his country and be a credit to his Navajo people.

15. In *Code Talker*, the character Ned Begay is telling his grandchildren the story of his time spent as a Marine in World War II. How do you think Ned's grandchildren would feel about their grandfather after hearing about his experiences? What do you think is the most important lesson that Ned's grandchildren might learn from his story?

Ned's grandchildren would be impressed by their grandfather's integrity, bravery, and fortitude in battle, as well as his ability to forgive and live a life without bitterness in spite of the discrimination he has experienced.

Note: These questions are keyed to Bloom's Taxonomy as follows: Knowledge: 1-2; Comprehension: 3-5; Application: 6-7; Analysis: 8-10; Synthesis: 11-12; Evaluation: 13-15.

Activities

1. To help other students who read *Code Talker*, create a glossary of Navajo words and their definitions as explained in the book. You may put your words in an alphabetical list or create a set of vocabulary flash cards to share with your classmates.

The Navajo words in *Code Talker* are defined as they occur in the story. Other students who read the novel could use the glossaries that the students create.

2. Using a map of the South Pacific, trace Ned's travels as a code talker, from Guadalcanal to Okinawa, and all the places he visited in between. Draw a small picture or symbol to show what happened at each of the locations that Ned visited.

This activity will help students review Ned's travels during the war and increase students' familiarity with the geography of the Pacific front of World War II.

3. Imagine that the character Ned Begay is a real person who will be visiting your school to talk about his experience as a code talker. Make a poster advertising Ned's visit that will encourage your classmates to come hear him speak.

This activity gives students the opportunity to summarize Ned Begay's story using text and pictures. Teachers can encourage students to highlight aspects of Ned's character and story that will most inspire their fellow classmates.