

Chief Joseph: War Chief of the Nez Perce Short Guide

Chief Joseph: War Chief of the Nez Perce by Brent Kenneth Ashabranner and Russell Gerard Davis

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Overview

Most nineteenth-century frontier literature created a negative stereotype of Native Americans, portraying them either as noble savages or as amoral villains. Both extreme characterizations, developed in such works as James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* (1823-1841), Francis Parkman's *The Oregon Trail* (1849), and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855), perpetuated the myth that Native Americans were not only less than American; they were less than human.

But, like other works of the past few decades such as Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, Evan Connell's *Son of the Morning Star*, and W. P. Kinsella's *The Moccasin Telegraph*, Chief Joseph: War Chief of the Nez Perce candidly addresses the U.S. government's reprehensible treatment of Native Americans. In their biographical novel, Ashabranner and Davis present Chief Joseph and his Nez Perce as ordinary men, devoted to their families and involved in routine daily activities, who want only to live peacefully. Joseph hunts and fishes with the young Nez Perce, rejoices at the birth of his second daughter, and grieves the deaths of Springtime, his second wife, and Ollicutt, his younger brother.

As the U.S. Army forces the Nez Perce to abandon their homes and traditions for life on a reservation, Joseph decides to move the village more than sixteen hundred miles to freedom in Canada.

Ashabranner and Davis focus both on Joseph's battle with the government and on his inward struggle with his beliefs and emotions. Although it details scenes of hunting and fighting, the book presents a moving twist on the traditional adventure story of the frontier because it depicts the tragic destruction of a man and his culture.

About the Author

Brent Ashabranner was born on November 3, 1921, in Shawnee, Oklahoma. In 1941 he married Martha White, and the couple later had two daughters. After serving in the U.S. Navy from 1942 to 1945, he earned his bachelor's and master's degrees at Oklahoma State University in Stillwater.

Following his graduation in 1952, Ashabranner taught at Oklahoma State University until 1956, when he began work as an educational materials adviser in Ethiopia, Libya, and Nigeria for the U.S. Agency for International Development. Beginning in 1961, Ashabranner worked for the Peace Corps, as a director in Nigeria and India, and eventually as the acting deputy director.

Born in Boston on October 29, 1922, Russell Gerard Davis attended Dartmouth College before transferring to Holy Cross College, where he received his bachelor's degree in 1943. In 1946 he married Mary Elizabeth Carroll, with whom he raised seven children. Over the next nine years, Davis taught at Cranwell School in Lenox, Massachusetts, and at Harvard University, where he earned his master's degree and doctorate in education. While working as a researcher in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, for the International Cooperation Administration in 1957, he met Brent Ashabranner. Returning to the United States in 1957, Davis became the research director at Boston College, where he remained until 1962, when he became a lecturer and researcher at Harvard. He has since worked for the Peace Corps, the U.S. Navy, the State Department, the Ford Foundation, and various private firms in Latin America.

After meeting in Ethiopia in 1957, Ashabranner and Davis collaborated on their first book, *The Lion's Whiskers*, based on the stories they heard while living in Ethiopia. Since then, the men have co-authored several books for young adults, most of which derive from the folktales and legends of foreign cultures.

Setting

Historically, Chief Joseph takes place during the 1877 Nez Perce War in the American Northwest. The action begins in Idaho, near the Oregon-Washington border, as General Oliver Otis Howard orders the Nez Perce to leave the Wallowa, meaning "Land of the Winding Waters" in Nez Perce, and move to the Lapwi Reservation. With Joseph's decision to lead his people to Canada, where they can live in peace and pursue their old way of life, the narrative follows the Nez Perce's sixteen-hundred-mile march from Idaho into northern Montana, then south through Montana to Big Hole and Camas Creek, where the tribe crosses into Wyoming and Yellowstone Park, and then toward Canada.

About thirty miles from safety in Canada, the Nez Perce are surrounded by the U.S. Army at Bear Paws Mountains, and Joseph surrenders. Because the action takes place on the frontier of the American West, the specific story of the Nez Perce defeat reflects the general history of western expansion: the inevitable military defeat of Native Americans followed by an influx of white settlers who destroy the Native American way of life and the frontier itself.

Social Sensitivity

In a foreword to Chief Joseph, Ashabranner and Davis claim that they wish to "add to the legend of a great American, while keeping the facts straight," and they do this well, without moralizing. In their attempts to reach a younger audience, the authors simplify the story of the Nez Perce to the point of melodrama at times, and neglect indepth treatment of peripheral characters, including women.

The painful social issues surrounding the story of Chief Joseph remain relevant today, as various Native American tribal leaders still seek just treatment from the U.S. government. The tragedy of Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce represents the tragedy of other Native Americans: Chief Osceola and the Seminoles; Chief Black Hawk and the Sauks; Chief Sitting Bull and Chief Crazy Horse and the Sioux; Chief Geronimo and the Apaches; the Cherokees' trail of tears; the Wounded Knee massacre. Violating its own constitution, the U.S. government captured land that Native Americans had roamed for hundreds of years. Ashabranner and Davis avoid explicit condemnation of the government, but they implicitly address this issue.

Literary Qualities

In translating fact about Chief Joseph into fiction, Ashabranner and Davis attempt to balance Joseph's private and public personas. Although they portray Joseph as a leader of legendary courage and dignity, they also reveal his moments of doubt: after the victory at White Bird Canyon, when White Bird exclaims that they have won their first battle, Joseph wonders, "Can we win the last one?"; and as he observes the exuberant Nez Perce youths on the hunting trip, Joseph worries that their happiness will soon end with the sounds of the war drums.

A less subtle literary device occurs at the end of each chapter, with a suspenseful sentence that leads logically and urgently into the next chapter. The fourth chapter ends with the impending birth of Joseph's second daughter as he hopes that she will "live to see peace," but the fifth chapter opens ominously with Colonel Perry's attack at White Bird Canyon. The next-to-last chapter ends as the army organizes a new attack against the decimated Nez Perce, and the final chapter is appropriately titled, "I Will Fight No More."

The symbol that dominates the narrative is the telegraph, or "the singing wires" that the Native Americans say are faster than the fastest pony, than the locomotive, and than a bird in flight. The Nez Perce odyssey becomes a race against the telegraph. By extension, the telegraph symbolizes the onslaught of white civilization and the end of the Native Americans' way of life. Within the novel's plot, the Nez Perce are doomed not only because of the army's superior force, but also because of the coming of technological advances as symbolized by the telegraph.



Themes and Characters

The main characters in *Chief Joseph* are, with few exceptions, historical and include General Oliver Otis Howard, the warrior chiefs, and Chief Joseph.

General Howard, however, appears only in the opening scene, when he orders the Nez Perce to move onto the reservation, and at the end, when he accepts Chief Joseph's surrender. As Howard and his troops doggedly pursue the Nez Perce, Howard's presence becomes more foreboding and he seems to symbolize the relentless U.S. government and army that will eventually conquer the entire Native American population.

While Howard acts as Joseph's nemesis, the warrior chiefs, though not fully developed as characters, function as family and support for Joseph. Ollicutt, Chief Joseph's younger brother and one of the Nez Perce chiefs, is referred to as the "tall chief and always fights bravely and skillfully. Chief Looking Glass, a courageous and loyal warrior who dies in battle, derives his name from a small mirror hanging on a string around his neck. White Bird, Chief of the Salmon River Nez Perce, always feels guilty because some of his more volatile young warriors—Red Moccasin Top, Swan Necklace, and Wallaitits—sparked the war by killing Richard Devine and Henry Elders, white settlers who had often mistreated Native Americans.

Toohulhulsote, a chief and medicine man of the Nez Perce Dreamer religion, refuses to be intimidated by any white settler, and when he angrily confronts General Howard during negotiations, he is arrested. Despite his own huge size and ferocious courage, he readily acknowledges Joseph's abilities as a war chief. Chief Yellow Bull is an aged, battle-scarred warrior who fights bravely and stands by Joseph even after the Chief Joseph. U.S. Postal Service stamp issued in 1968 surrender, exemplifying the loyalty in war and in defeat that Chief Joseph commanded. Pile of Clouds, the trail chief, urges Joseph not to rest in the Bear Paws Mountains but rather to push on into Canada; his death vision and urgency foreshadow the inevitable Nez Perce defeat. With the deaths of most of these warrior chiefs late in the journey, Joseph knows he must surrender.

Chief Joseph's Nez Perce name denotes his stature as the Inmutuyahlatlat or Thunder-Traveling-Across-theMountains. His selfless concern for his people prompts his decision to lead them to safety in Canada. Although he wants peace and claims that he is not a war chief, he fights courageously for his people when war becomes inevitable, thus epitomizing the Nez Perce saying: "Take courage! This is a good day to die."

In fact and legend, Joseph was a brilliant military tactician who, with three hundred warriors, engaged the U.S.

Army in thirteen battles, either defeating them or fighting to a draw. Finally, emerging from Ashabranner and Davis's narrative are Chief Joseph's wisdom and quiet dignity, which are evident in his moving "I will fight no more forever" speech.



Topics for Discussion

1. In relation to the plot, why does the novel's title emphasize Chief Joseph's title, "War Chief of the Nez Perce"?
2. Point out and discuss specific examples of Joseph's shrewd leadership abilities.
3. Cite specific instances in the narrative of the whites' actions toward the Nez Perce. Are the white settlers' actions justified?
4. Joseph has two wives, Springtime and Walking Woman. Discuss the differences between these two women.
5. Explain General O. O. Howard's position, demands, and actions toward Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce.
6. Discuss the difference between the term "telegraph" and the term "singing wire." How do these different terms reflect the difference in perspective between white and Native American cultures?
7. Examine the difference between Joseph's Native American name (ThunderTraveling-Across-the-Mountains) and Howard's name. How are white and Native American values illustrated through their use of language?
8. Chief Joseph's dramatic "I will fight no more forever" speech is frequently quoted for its power, majesty, and dignity. Discuss its effectiveness and also comment on how it marks not only the end for the Nez Perce, but also the end for other Native American tribes.

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. By checking library sources, write a report about one of the major clashes between white culture and one of the following: Chief Osceola and the Seminoles; Chief Black Hawk and the Sauks; Chief Geronimo and the Apaches; Chief Sitting Bull and the Sioux. Discuss the similarities and differences between Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce and the other chief and tribe.
2. The Lolo Trail was a trail of sorrows for the Nez Perce; the Cherokees had their "trail of tears." Research and report on the Cherokees' "trail of tears" in terms of what it was, what brought it about, and its final results.
3. What immediate effects did the railroads have on the West and on the Native Americans' way of life?
4. Report on the various factors that led to the destruction of the American buffalo, emphasizing the effect this had on the Native Americans and their way of life. How did the treatment of the buffalo by the settlers parallel the settlers' treatment of the Native Americans?
5. Read Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, which also combines fact and fiction, and compare it with Ashabanner and Davis's account about Chief Joseph. Read more historical accounts as well. Which is better and why?
6. Shannon Garst's *Crazy Horse: Great Warrior of the Sioux*, an excellent book for young readers, recounts the life of another famous Native American chief.

After reading Garst's novel, compare it with *Chief Joseph: War Chief of the Nez Perce* in terms of how the chiefs are portrayed, what each tried to do, and their ultimate fates.



For Further Reference

Balch, Glenn. *Horse of Two Colors*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1969.

Balch's juvenile novel is about a young Nez Perce who escapes after two years of captivity and makes his way north with a stallion that sires the first Appaloosa.

Beal, Merrill D. *I Will Fight No More Forever: Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce War*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1975. Highly recommended for its photographs, historical information, and notes and bibliography.

Bleeker, Sonia. *Horsemen of the Western Plateaus: The Nez Perce Indians*. New York: William Morrow, 1957. Bleeker's mixture of fact and fiction makes for interesting and informative reading.

Brown, Dee Alexander. *Wounded Knee*.

New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974. Amy Ehrlich's adaptation of *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* traces the white man's conquest of Native Americans, especially the symbolic end of Native American freedom at Wounded Knee.

Chalmers, Harvey. *The Last Stand of the Nez Perce: Destruction of a People*. New York: Twayne, 1962. Chalmers uses an interesting literary technique: the chapters alternate between written historical accounts and the recollections of Yellow Wolf, one of Joseph's braves.

Gidley, M. *With One Sky Above Us: Life on an Indian Reservation at the Turn of the Century*. New York: Putnam, 1979.

Recommended for its readability and detailed pictures of Chief Joseph, his warriors, tribe, and villages.

Haines, Francis. *The Nez Percés: Tribesmen of the Columbia Plateau*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972.

With interesting photographs, this book contains some material never before published and is a scholarly but readable study.

Harrison, Jim. *A Good Day to Die*. New York: Dell, 1981. In this novel portraying his protagonists' journey out west to destroy a supposed dam, Harrison indirectly contrasts the dignity, purpose, and courage of the Nez Perce with the lack of such virtues in modern man.

Howard, Oliver Otis. *Nez Perce Joseph*.

1881. Reprint. New York: Da Capo Press, 1972. A firsthand account written by the officer responsible for finally capturing Chief Joseph and his tribe.



Wolper, David (producer). *I Will Fight No More Forever*. 1975. Although it is not based on Ashabranner and Davis's novel, this movie adaptation of the Chief Joseph story contains historical facts about the Nez Perce and depicts the hardships and deprivations of their heroic trek. The film stars James Whitmore as General Howard, Sam Elliott as Colonel Niles, and Ned Romero as Chief Joseph. Romero captures the emotion, power, and dignity of Chief Joseph's "I will fight no more" speech in a dramatic final scene, but overall the movie is, at best, a grade B western.



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