

Code Talker: A Novel About the Navajo Marines of World War Two Study Guide

Code Talker: A Novel About the Navajo Marines of World War Two by Joseph Bruchac

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Plot Summary

Code Talker: A Novel About the Navajo Marines of World War Two is a novel by Joseph Bruchac. In this novel, a man is telling his grandchildren how he came to receive several medals for his service in World War II. The grandfather, Ned Begay, was born on Navajo land, but attended a boarding school in order to learn English. Throughout his childhood Ned was told by the white man that using his sacred language was wrong. However, when World War II broke out, Ned learned that the government was recruiting Navajo men to use their language as a code the enemy could not decipher. Ned quickly chose to join up and play his part. *Code Talker* is a novel that is based in true history about American heroes who are all too often overlooked.

Ned Begay has gathered his grandchildren around and begins to tell them the story of how he earned a number of medals during World War II. Ned begins his story with the day his uncle took him to a white man's boarding school where he was to learn English. Ned's uncle fought for Ned to go to this school because he believed it was important for Navajo to know English in order to avoid conflict based on miscommunication with the white man. At the school, however, Ned was treated poorly by white people who misunderstood the importance of the Navajo language and culture to these children and tried to convince them that everything they had ever known was wrong.

Ned survived boarding school and chose to go on to high school. While in high school, Pearl Harbor was attacked by the Japanese and Ned heard that the government was looking for willing men to serve in the military. However, when a group of Navajos went to join the military, they were sent home because they were seen as unfit for service. A short time later, Ned learned that the government had changed their minds and were looking for Navajo men who could both speak Navajo and English fluently to join the military. Ned became excited at the idea of serving his country and asked his parents to lie about his age. Ned's parents told him they would prefer if he waited until he was sixteen to enlist. A year later, Ned joined the Marines.

After boot camp, Ned and his fellow Navajo soldier were immediately placed into training to become Code Talkers. The code was new and constantly changing. Ned and the others had to learn the code quickly and proficiently as they were not allowed to keep anything on which the code was written. After training, Ned and his fellow Code Talkers were sent to Pearl Harbor where they met with other Navajos to share changes to the code.

After training, Ned was sent to the Pacific. Ned was assigned to a group of Marines and was among those who invaded Bougainville. Soon afterwards, Ned and his fellow Marines moved on to Guam. Eventually, Ned found himself a part of the invasion on Iwo Jima and followed the Marines onto Okinawa. When the war finally ended, Ned was among one of the first to know because he was a Code Talker.

After the war, Ned and his fellow Code Talkers were forbidden from sharing what they had done during the war. It was not until 1969 that the Code Talkers were allowed to

share the truth about what they had done during the war. Now Ned shares it with his grandchildren to show them that it is okay for them to be proud of their sacred language and their culture.



Prologue: Listen, My Grandchildren and Chapters 1-4

Prologue: Listen, My Grandchildren and Chapters 1-4 Summary

This book is a fictional novel. However, the story of the Code Talkers is based in fact.

Ned Begay tells his grandchildren to gather around so that he might tell them the truth of how he won several medals during his service as a Marine during World War II. To begin, Ned shows his children a picture of the raising of the flag on Iwo Jima. Ned points out Ira Hayes, a Pima Indian, who was featured in the photograph.

Ned, who was known by his parents as Kii Yazhi, little boy, was only six when his family agreed to send him away to a white man's boarding school so that he might learn English. Ned says goodbye to his great-grandfather, mother, and father before getting into a wagon with his uncle. At the beginning of the trip, Ned's uncle tells him that there was once a great miscommunication between the Navajo and the white man that caused the Navajo to be forced from their land many years ago. For this reason, the uncle tells Ned that is important for a Navajo to speak the white man's language in order to communicate with him.

The trip is a long one, but Ned enjoys the many days he is able to spend with his father. When they arrive at the school, Ned's uncle is quickly sent away. Ned meets and is introduced to several other Navajos in the school yard until a large, red man comes out and yells at them. A young Navajo comes to them and explains that they must not speak their sacred language and learn English quickly.

The first thing the school does is cut all the children's hair. This is an insult as cutting the hair is thought to be a sign of misfortune to the Navajo. Then the children are given white man clothing and English names.

As the children progress in the school, they begin to understand the terrible things the teachers are telling them. The children are told that their traditions are bad and that they must never speak their own language. In fact, when Ned is caught speaking Navajo, his mouth is roughly washed out with soap. This is enough to teach Ned to speak only English. However, other students at the school refuse to give up their language and suffer much worse punishments, such as beatings and a week in solitary confinement. However, Ned does well in school and eventually finishes boarding school with high grades.



Prologue: Listen, My Grandchildren and Chapters 1-4 Analysis

The novel begins with an older man gathering his children around to talk to them about his actions during World War II. The man begins this by pointing out a young Indian man who was part of the famous picture in which six soldiers raising the American flag on Iwo Jima. This man is clearly very proud of his heritage and wants his grandchildren to be proud, therefore the reader goes into this novel expecting a story about Navajo culture and legacy.

The story begins with the old man telling of how he was sent to boarding school as a small child. It was a difficult existence for a young Indian child, especially as the teachers and administrators tell the children that everything they have ever known, all that was ever important to them, is wrong. Ned deals with this with an open mind because of his uncle's advice, but others in his classes find it difficult and as a result end up have a very difficult time.



Chapters 5-9

Chapters 5-9 Summary

Ned makes the decision to continue on to high school even though this is somewhat unusual among young Indian students. Ned has dreams of becoming educated and having a career that might help his people. Ned enjoys being closer to home and likes his teachers, especially since they are much better teachers than those at the boarding schools.

Ned had been studying Japan in the months before the attack on Pearl Harbor. For this reason, he knows a great deal about America's new enemy. Ned is in the dorms when he hears about the attack on Pearl Harbor and he goes to listen to the report on the radio with a group of other students.

In the days after the attack on Pearl Harbor, several Navajos try to join the military, but because of their poor English skills and other prejudices, they are turned away. Then a recruiter for the Marines comes to the school and tells the community that they are looking for Navajo who can speak both Navajo and English fluently. Ned is excited about this, but he is only fifteen and he must be seventeen. Ned asks his parents if they will lie about his age so he can join the Marines, but they ask him to wait a year.

Ned sits back unhappily and watches as twenty-nine Navajo men are chosen to become Marines. These men are the first Code Talkers. The people of Ned's community do not know this, however, and worry because none of those who have gone to boot camp have returned. Then one day one of these men, Johnny Manuelito, returns to the community to recruit more Navajos. Ned is determined to join.

When Ned asks his parents again to help him join the Marines, they insist that he must have a Blessingway first. A Blessingway is a prayer ritual over a Navajo in which the community gathers together to wish success and goodness for the Navajo. Despite the turn from Navajo traditions to Catholicism in Ned's community, there is a singer who is willing to do the ceremony. Ned recalls it as a special time in his life.

Chapters 5-9 Analysis

Ned is a smart young man and he makes the choice to continue his education in high school. Ned has a bright future and hopes that he can do something to help his community. However, while Ned is still in high school, Pearl Harbor in Hawaii is attacked by the Japanese. This causes a great deal of excitement and determination to fight throughout the United States, including in the Navajo community. However, many Navajo are turned from the military because of their inability to communicate in English.

In time, however, the Marines begin looking for Navajo who can speak both English and Navajo fluently to join. This seems ironic based on Ned's previous experiences with the



white man in which they have told Ned that his old language will hold him down and keep him from success in life. Now Ned is determined to become a Marine and fight for his country despite the white man's treatment toward him previously in his life and his people's history.



Chapters 10-15

Chapters 10-15 Summary

With his parents' help, Ned joins the Marines. When he arrives at Fort Defiance Ned has his head shaved and is given new clothes. Ned and his fellow Navajos find boot camp easy because they are used to walking long distance with weight on their backs and doing other physical activities. Many of the white boys who joined at the same time fail to finish boot camp, but all the Navajos make it through. For Ned, it is also a lesson in dealing with white people. Ned actually befriends a fellow recruit when the boy, Georgia Boy, asks for help learning to read.

After boot camp, instead of going home on furlough like the other recruits, Ned and the other Navajos are immediately taken to Camp Elliot where they begin Code School. Johnny Manuelito is one of the teachers. On the first day, the recruits are asked to write down the English word for a Navajo word spoken by the teacher. They are then told that they must learn a code that cannot be broken by the enemy using their own language.

The Navajo students began to learn the code, but they could not write it down or take anything with the code written on it from the classroom to keep it secret. The code itself was designed by giving letters of the alphabet a word in Navajo, including multiple Navajo words for letters used most frequently.

In August of 1943, Ned and his fellow Code Talkers shipped out to Pearl Harbor in order to meet with other Code Talkers and discuss changes to the code. Ned speaks to a couple of Navajo who have already been in battle and learns some tricks of survival. He also hears some stories of the difficulties some of the Navajos have experienced from their commanding officers.

Ned has imagined during training that his enemies are monsters, but he hears a story from another Navajo that reminds him they are only human.

Ned is shipped out. Ned is unhappy with the ship, afraid of what would happen if it sank. However, once they arrive Ned finds himself finding common ground with the local natives. Ned also finds the practice landings at recently liberated Guadalcanal educational but lacking in danger.

Chapters 10-15 Analysis

In these chapters, Ned joins the Marines and goes through boot camp and then code school. Ned does not know what the Marines have in mind for him until he begins code school. It is an ironic turn in Ned's life to find himself an asset to the American government because of his sacred language and his culture after being told for years by the white man that speaking his language and living by the rules of his culture will not help him be successful.



Ned learns from others who have already seen battle what to expect. Ned is young and feels somewhat immortal, therefore he has little fear when he thinks about what it is going to be like in battle. The only fear Ned has early in his military career is fear on the ship that takes him to the Pacific Islands where the Japanese have conquered many American held islands. The history of the novel comes in at this point as Ned's story corresponds with the history of World War II.



Chapters 16-21

Chapters 16-21 Summary

Ned reconnects with Georgia Boy in Guadalcanal as his squad waits for orders to invade Bougainville. As Ned and his group of Marines are preparing to invade Bougainville, General McArthur and his men are preparing to invade New Britain Island so they can establish air strips on both. As Ned waits on his transport vehicle to land on the beach, he and his fellow Marines listen to the American ships and planes bombard the beaches with bombs.

Ned and his group are among the first to land on the beach. Ned somehow makes his way to the edge of the beach and begins to dig a foxhole. It is a long day of fighting and Ned is amazed that it all happened without ever seeing a Japanese soldier.

The landscape of Bougainville was mostly hills and volcano. Between the landscape, the constantly bonsai-ing Japanese, and the insects on the island that can give the soldiers malaria. Ned dislikes the malaria preventative medication and tries to come up with ways to avoid taking it, but eventually is caught and forced to take it properly. Ned remains on Bougainville for two months, during which time he sees PT boats off the beaches, including one commanded by future president, John F. Kennedy.

Ned relates a story in which there was a Marine squad under fire by the Americans and they kept radioing in that they were Americans too. However, no one believed them and they finally asked them to prove it by having a Navajo send the request to stop bombing. The moment that happened, the bombing stopped.

In June of 1944, the Marines turn their attention to the Marianas Islands. Ned's group is sent to Guam over Saipan, a fact that Ned tells his grandchildren he is happy for because the fighting on Saipan was fierce.

The landing on Guam is delayed, leaving Ned and his buddies with little to do. When they finally land on Guam, Ned and his Marine buddies are pinned down by the Japanese. Eventually they begin to move inland, but come under tough fire during the night. In late July, the Marines begin to push further into the island and eventually liberate it in August. On Guam, many of the Marines befriend the natives, including a friend of Ned's who takes care of a young boy who has been left orphaned by the Japanese.

Chapters 16-21 Analysis

Ned reconnects with some friends from boot camp, including Georgia Boy. Ned also makes friends with other Marines, including Smitty, who becomes something of a protector to Ned during many of their missions.



Ned finally sees combat in these chapters. Ned is present during the taking of Bougainville as well as Guam. It is a difficult time for Ned, but he plays an important role in the battles by keeping the lines of communications open with his special code. Ned's story not only tells his grandchildren a little about history, such as his sighting of JFK, but also shares with his grandchildren the sense of camaraderie between soldiers, even between white men and Indians.



Chapters 22-29

Chapters 22-29 Summary

Ned is shot while on Guam and spends several weeks in a hospital in Hawaii. While there, Ned becomes aware of soldiers who suffer from battle fatigue.

Due to his job as a Code Talker, Ned knows things other soldiers do not like the fact that the Japanese have begun flying kamikaze missions and that the Americans are preparing a nuclear weapon. Ned and other soldiers are beginning to look forward to the end of the war. Also on Pavavu, Ned finds himself in a position to meet a great number of Indians fighting in the war, including some who are not Code Talkers.

As the Marines prepare to invade Iwo Jima, Ned learns a great deal about the island. Ned learns that the Japanese soldiers often wear sennimbari, cloths made by their mothers, sisters, and wives, that they believe will protect them in battle. The Lakota Indians have a similar thing called a ghost shirt that is a shirt that is thought to protect the warrior from harm.

Ned and the other Marines have a large breakfast on ship before landing on Iwo Jima. Landing on the beach was easy, too easy.

After landing on the beach, the Americans are bombarded by the Japanese who have built tunnels and pillboxes all over the island. Not only this, but the island's terrain is all uphill and smells of sulfur. When an American group has raised a flag on Mount Suribachi, the Americans begin to celebrate even though many of them are still under attack by a few remaining Japanese soldiers. Fighting continues on for a time and Ned loses many of his friends, both white and Indian.

From Iwo Jima, the Americans turn their attention to Okinawa. Although a small island, Okinawa is overrun by Japanese and the fighting is long and terrible. The fight continues for more than eighty days and ends with thousands of deaths, both on the American and the Japanese sides. Then on April 12, 1945 the Code Talkers must spread the word that the beloved president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, has died.

Due to fears of the large American casualties if America were to invade Japan, the new president decides to drop the atomic bomb Nagasaki and Hiroshima. A short time later the Japanese surrender.

When Ned is discharged from the Marines, his job is not written on his discharge papers and therefore he cannot use his experiences in the Marines to get a job. However, Ned does use the GI bill to go to college and become a teacher. Ned is forbidden from talking about his job as a Code Talker, but in 1969 he is finally given the freedom to talk about it. Not only this, but many stories and books are written about his and others' experiences. Now Ned is telling his grandchildren to show them how important their language and culture really is.



Chapters 22-29 Analysis

In these chapters, the reader goes along with Ned when he joins several of the most famous battles of World War II. Ned is among the Marines who invade Iwo Jima and then Okinawa. These two battles are two of the final battles of the Pacific war against Japan. Ned tells his grandchildren how difficult it was being on Iwo Jima, partially from the environment, also because of the fighting. The Japanese are determined not to give up an island so close to their homeland and fight strongly despite the clear turn of the war in the Allies favor.

The reader learns a great deal of history in these chapters. The battle of Iwo Jima is one of the most definitive battles of World War II. Not only this, but the author goes on to describe the end of the war and the bombs that forced the Japanese to surrender. At the end of his story, Ned tells his grandchildren how he was forced to remain silent about his job in the war until 1969. Ned goes on with his life, becoming a teacher for the Navajo children in his community. Ned has made great sacrifices for both his country and his community, making him a character to look up to. Perhaps this will help his grandchildren take to heart what he says about the war and the Navajo culture.



Characters

Ned Begay

When the book begins, Ned Begay is a grandfather sharing his story with his grandchildren. As Ned begins his story, he moves back in time to when he was a six year old boy about to go to boarding school. Boarding school is a difficult for Ned as he struggles with the ideals of the teachers who are telling him all his traditions and language are bad and remembering the pride his family instilled in him in those same traditions and language.

As Ned grows older, he discovers that he is a good student and enjoys learning. Ned continues his education where others often drop out and attends high school. During his years of high school, Ned studies about the Japanese. Shortly after doing a report on the Japanese, Ned hears that the Japanese have attacked Pearl Harbor. Ned immediately wants to join the military, but his parents caution him to wait until he is older. However, when Ned hears that the Marines want Navajos who can speak both English and Navajo, he becomes excited and wants to join even more than before.

Ned fights in the Pacific during World War II. Ned is a part of the invasions of many of the Pacific Islands, including Iwo Jima and Okinawa. In his role, Ned both fights the enemy and radios information using the Navajo code. Ned is a hero, but he is not allowed to talk about what he has done until over twenty years after the war. Ned takes advantage of his right to talk about his role in the war and uses it to show his grandchildren why they should be proud of their culture and their language.

Johnny Manuelito

Johnny Manuelito is one of the first Navajos to be recruited to be a Code Talker. Rather than go straight into combat, Johnny is chosen to recruit more Navajos and to be one of the first code teachers. Later Johnny will see combat and will prove to be essential during the fight on Iwo Jima. Johnny Manuelito is the recruiter who finally recruits Ned.

Georgia Boy

Georgia Boy is a young man from Georgia who asks Ned to teach him how to read while they are together in boot camp. Later, Ned and Georgia Boy reunite on Bougainville Island and fight side by side for most of Ned's time in the war. Georgia Boy is injured on Iwo Jima and Ned is afraid that he has been killed, but later discovers that the medic was able to save his life.



Smitty

Smitty is a young man Ned befriends while fighting in the Pacific. Smitty is assigned to protect Ned in combat and does a good job of it. When Ned is injured at one point during the fight for Guam, it is Smitty who calls for the medic to help save Ned. Smitty is one of a few young white men that Ned comes to call a friend during the war.

Frank 'Hosteen' Mitchell

Hosteen Mitchell is a singer in the Navajo community where Ned lives. Before Ned's family will allow him to join the Marines, they insist that he have a Blessingway ceremony sang for him. Hosteen is chosen as the singer because he is a friend of the family and because he not only believes in the traditions of the Navajos, but also embraces some of the beliefs of the Catholics, something many Navajos came to embrace while attending boarding school. Hosteen is a good friend of Ned's and has nicknamed him ant because of his determination that outweighs his small size.

John Roanhorse

John Roanhorse is a boy Ned went to boarding school with. John dislikes the white teachers' attempts to keep the Navajos from speaking their own language. John comes to like the taste of the soap the teachers wash his mouth out with when caught speaking Navajo. John is beaten repeatedly by the principal for speaking Navajo, but continues to do so. John is finally placed in solitary confinement with nothing but bread and water for a week.

Phillip Johnson

Phillip Johnson was the son of a white trader who knew some basic Navajo. Johnson took some Navajo to the Marines in San Diego to show how their language could be used as a code in war. Although many credit Johnson with the father of the Navajo code, Johnson never spoke Navajo fluently and did not participate in the creation of the code. The first twenty-nine Navajo recruits created the code. However, Johnson did work as an administrator of the Navajo code school at Camp Ellison later in the war.

Corporal Radant

Corporal Radant is a favorite teacher of the Navajos while Ned is at Camp Ellison. The Navajo students often play jokes on Corporal Radant during their class period to show him how they like him. When the class is over, Corporal Radant admits to his Navajo students how much he will miss them.

Sam Begay

Sam Begay is one of the early Code Talkers. Ned meets Sam at Pearl Harbor after his training when the Navajo Code Talkers gather there to exchange information on changes in the code. Sam tells Ned and his friends what it is like to be in combat and how to protect yourself with what you have on hand. Sam also tells the others about some of the trouble he has had or heard about with the white commanders and how it was overcome.

Ned's Grandchildren

Ned's grandchildren are an unnamed group of children to whom Ned is telling his story of how he won several medals during World War II. Ned uses his story of how he became a Code Talker during World War II to show his grandchildren how important their language and culture is and to teach them to be proud of where they come from.



Objects/Places

Corn Pollen

Ned uses corn pollen each morning in his prayers.

Sennimbari

A sennimbari is a waist cloth made for Japanese soldiers by their mothers, sister, or wives that is thought to protect them in battle. Many Japanese soldiers wore these waist cloths at Iwo Jima.

Ghost Shirt

A ghost shirt is a shirt worn by the Lakota Indians that was thought to protect the warriors from injury in battle.

Boarding School

Ned Begay attends a boarding school at Rehobooth Mission in Gallup, New Mexico, that is run by white people. This school tries to teach Ned that speaking his sacred language and living by the traditions of his people will stop him from finding success in his life.

High School

Ned attends a high school that is closer to his home and has better teachers. It is unusual for Navajo children to continue their education after boarding school, but Ned is exceptionally smart and an eager student.

Dinetah

Dinetah is the name for the ancient lands of the Navajo that is located in modern day Arizona.

Fort Defiance

Fort Defiance is both the military fort where the Navajo people were taken after being forced off their native lands and also where Ned began his military training.



Camp Ellison

Camp Ellison is where Ned receives his code training.

Pearl Harbor

Pearl Harbor is a Navy base in Hawaii. Pearl Harbor was attacked by the Japanese on December 7, 1941. Pearl Harbor is also a military base where Ned goes to meet with other Code Talkers to discuss updates of the code.

Guam

Ned is among a group of Marines who attack the island of Guam to recapture it from the Japanese. This is where Ned is shot in the shoulder during battle.

Iwo Jima

Iwo Jima is an island in the Pacific Ocean that was occupied by the Japanese in 1945. The Marines attacked Iwo Jima in February 1945. On February 23, 1945 the iconic photograph of the raising of an American flag on the summit of Suribachi was taken. Ned mentions this photograph in the opening pages of the novel.

Okinawa

Okinawa is an island close to the shores of Japan. When the Americans attack Okinawa, the Japanese are so entrenched that it takes more than eighty days for the Americans to finally take control of the island. The huge loss of human life, both Allies and Axis, led to Truman making the decision to drop the atomic bomb on Japan.



Themes

Cultural Pride

Ned Begay begins telling the story of how he became a Code Talker in World War II as a tale of how he won several medals during the war. However, as the novel begins to unfold, the reader can see where Ned is going with his story. Ned talks about how he was taught that being a Navajo, that speaking his language and participating in his cultural traditions, was a bad thing. Ned then talks about the discrimination he faced at the hands of the white man who assumed because Ned was an Indian, he was stupid.

As Ned's story continues, the plot is filled with irony as Ned learns that his people were turned down for service in the military because of their inability to communicate in English, but then the Marines began to recruit Navajos so that they could use their language to communicate in battle. Ned quickly joins the Marines despite being a little too young and becomes a hero fighting alongside other Marines.

Ned's story ends with the message that the grandchildren who are Ned's audience should embrace their culture and their language. The Code Talkers were heroes who helped America win the war against Japan by exchanging information in a way that the enemy could not decipher and understand. For this reason, Ned says that his grandchildren should be proud that their language could do such a thing for their nation.

History

This novel takes place during World War II. Ned, the hero of the novel, is a Code Talker who uses the Navajo language to move information during battle. The author of this book uses his fictional character to tell a true story of the Navajo during World War II.

The author takes his fictional character and places him in real situations. Through the fictional character, the reader learns about many of the iconic battles in the Pacific arena during World War II. Not only this, but the reader also sees through Ned's eyes some other aspects of this history, such as seeing JFK captain a PT boat and the tradition of wearing sennibari by the Japanese. Hence, history is a major theme of the novel.

Racial Discrimination

When Ned talks about his days at school prior to the war, the reader sees the kind of discrimination many of these students had to face. Due to the conflicts between the Indians and the American military, there was a lot of misunderstanding about Indian culture. For this reason, many whites labored under the misconceptions that Indians were savages who could not be taught. Ned faces this misconception head on when he

arrives at the boarding school and is told that he cannot speak his own language or indulge in any of his cultural traditions.

The discrimination continues for Ned when he attends high school. Ned is told that he is a good student, but this compliment is phrased in such a way that it is clear that Ned will never be as good a student as a white student. There is also discrimination when the Japanese first attack Pearl Harbor and many Navajos try to join the military. Many of them are sent home again because they cannot speak English fluently enough.

Finally, Ned witnesses some discrimination in the military when commanders refuse to use the Navajo Code Talkers because they do not believe their code will work or they do not trust that the Navajo are sending the correct code. When his service with the Marines is over, Ned also experiences discrimination when he learns that the military benefits that will provide homes for white soldiers will not allow new housing built on Indian Reservations.

Style

Point of View

The point of view of this novel is the first person. The premise of this novel is that Ned Begay is telling his story to his grandchildren to show them that their language and culture is something to be proud of. Ned is telling the story in the past tense and occasionally inserts comments into the story as he tells it, such as telling his children that he saw JFK on the beach and that he might have introduced himself had he known he would one day be president.

The point of view of this novel works well with the plot. The point of view lends credence to the idea that an elderly man is telling the story of his life to his grandchildren. The point of view also allows a sense of intimacy between the reader and the main character, causing a situation in which the reader feels concern for the main character's safety throughout the novel. However, the point of view takes away some tension from the novel as the reader clearly understands that no harm ever comes to the main character during his days in the war. Since this book was intended for young readers, though, this lack of tension is understandable.

Setting

The novel is set in the 1930s and 1940s. The novel begins with the main character going to boarding school in Gallup, New Mexico. The novel continues, taking the main character back to the Indian Reservation, to military camps, and finally to war in the Pacific. The latter half of the novel takes place during battles that are true to the history of World War II, giving the reader some true information about that time in history.

The setting of this novel is authentic to the main character and to the history of the story. The author uses a fictional story of a Navajo Indian and interlaces it with true history, giving the reader a true sense of what it must have been like to be a Navajo Indian during this time period and to use the language he had been taught was improper to help his country win a war. The setting of this novel is of utmost importance to the plot and therefore works well with the plot.

Language and Meaning

The language of this novel is simple English. The author inserts multiple words in Navajo that not only help the reader understand the culture of the main character, but also allows the reader some insight into the code that was used to communicate from the battlefield during World War II. Many of these words are translated in the text and do not pose any confusion for the reader.



The language of this novel is authentic to the plot and the main character. The language remains simple throughout, making it appropriate for the intended audience of young readers. The language of this novel works well with the plot and therefore is appropriate to the book.

Structure

The novel is divided into twenty-nine chapters and includes a prologue. The novel is told in narration and lacks a great deal of scenes. The novel is basically one man telling a story, skimming over scenes in an attempt to tell a great deal of story in a short amount of space.

The novel contains one main plot with several subplots. The main plot follows Ned as he grows from a six year old student to a sixteen year old Marine. One subplot discusses the treatment of the white man to the Indian students. Another subplot follows the many friendships Ned develops while at war. One more subplot discusses Ned's pride in his language and his culture, a fact he is trying to share with his grandchildren. All plots come to a satisfying conclusion at the end of the novel.

Quotes

"Grandchildren, you asked me about this medal of mine. There is much to be said about it" (Listen, My Grandchildren, p. 1).

"The tip of that thin needle of wood was red with my blood. Before we went over the hill, I dropped it onto the brown earth. Although I had to go away, I could still leave a little of myself behind" (Chapter 1, p. 11).

"Thus it was, grandchildren, that I began my day as Kii Yazhi and ended it as Ned Begay" (Chapter 3, p. 22).

"Our whole world had changed. What was going to happen now?" (Chapter 6, p. 37).

"But there was a problem. They were only accepting men between the ages of seventeen and thirty-two. I was still only fifteen years old" (Chapter 7, p. 43).

"But being Catholic did not mean we would forget the Holy People and our Navajo Way" (Chapter 9, p. 60).

"Code talker. It was the first time I had ever heard that name, but it sounded good to me" (Chapter 11, p. 73).

"What was missing was chaos. There was none of the noise and confusion of real battle. No enemy fire. No bullets striking us, no mortar shells exploding. No wounded men screaming in pain or calling for their mothers" (Chapter 15, p. 104).

"So I suppose you could say that John F. Kennedy was the most famous man I almost met" (Chapter 18, p. 132).

"Being Navajo and keeping to our Navajo Way helped me survive not just the war, but all those times of quiet and anxious waiting that were not yet peace" (Chapter 19, p. 140).

"Our first major objective on the island had been to take Mount Suribachi, but the fierce Japanese resistance made it almost impossible. All we could do was creep forward a few feet at a time. It took us four days to move halfway up the slope, taking terrible casualties all the way" (Chapter 26, p. 187).

"Let our language keep you strong and you will never forget what it is to be Navajo. You will never forget what it means to walk in beauty" (Chapter 29, p. 214).



Topics for Discussion

Who is Ned Begay? Where does his name come from? Why is Begay a common surname for many students of the type of boarding school Ned attended? What was one of the most common first names? Why did Ned go to boarding school? What was he to learn? What does Ned learn?

What are the boarding schools, such as the one described in this book? What are their purpose? Why do they discourage the children from speaking their native language? What did they do to ensure these children did not speak their native language? For what reason? How did many of the children react to these rules? What happened to them?

Why did white people have such a poor opinion of the Indians during the time period in which this novel is set? What might have led to this opinion? Was this opinion fair to the Indians? How did the Indians react to this opinion? How might the Indians have reacted differently?

Why was Pearl Harbor attacked? Who attacked? What was the reaction of the American government? Why did many young men join the military in the days and weeks after the attack on Pearl Harbor? What modern event might parallel the attack on Pearl Harbor? What was the mood in America in the months after the attack on Pearl Harbor?

How did the Navajos react to the attack on Pearl Harbor? How did Ned react? For what reason? Why did Ned have to wait to join the Marines? What might have happened had he been able to join sooner? What did Ned learn to do as he began his training as a Marine? How was this education ironic when the reader takes into account what Ned was taught at boarding school?

What is a Code Talker? What was his job during World War II? Why did the Marines choose the Navajo language for their code? What other languages had the American military tried in the past? For how long did the Marines use Navajo Code Talkers? How was this code developed? Who developed it?

What happened at Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Who were among the first Americans to see the damage? What did they think of this action? Why was this done? What other choices were available at the time? Would the Japanese military have ever backed down if not for the demands of their emperor? What would have happened if the Japanese had not surrendered?