

A Teacher's Guide to

CHESTER NEZ AND THE UNBREAKABLE CODE:

A NAVAJO CODE TALKER'S STORY



JOSEPH BRUCHAC

pictures by
LIZ AMINI-HOLMES

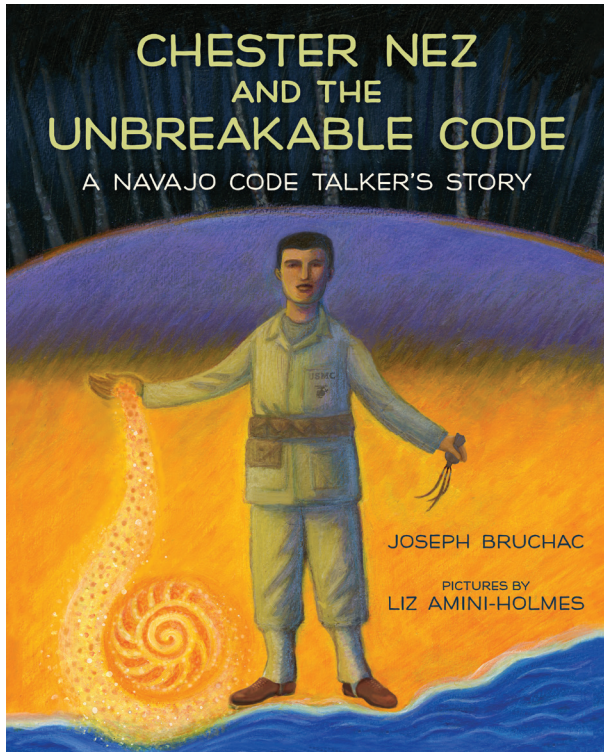
guide prepared by
ADRIENNE O'BRIEN

Ages 7–10 // Grades 1–5

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ABOUT CHESTER NEZ AND THE UNBREAKABLE CODE: A NAVAJO CODE TALKER'S STORY

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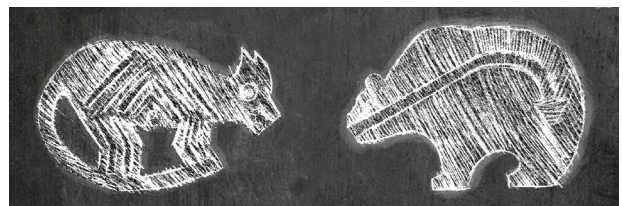
As a young Navajo boy, Chester Nez had to leave the reservation and attend boarding school, where he was taught that his native language and culture were useless. But Chester refused to give up his heritage. Years later, during World War II, Chester—and other Navajo men like him—was recruited by the US Marines to use the Navajo language to create an unbreakable military code. Suddenly the language he had been told to forget was needed to fight a war. This powerful picture book biography contains backmatter including a timeline and a portion of the Navajo code and also depicts the life of an original Navajo code talker while capturing the importance of heritage.

ABOUT JOSEPH BRUCHAC

As a writer and storyteller, Joseph Bruchac often draws on his Native American (Abenaki) ancestry. Joseph is the author of over 130 books for young readers and adults, including *Code Talker: A Novel About the Navajo Marines of World War Two*. He holds a bachelor's degree from Cornell University, a master's degree from Syracuse, and a PhD from the Union Institute. He lives in New York. Visit him online at www.josephbruchac.com.

ABOUT LIZ AMINI-HOLMES

Liz Amini-Holmes holds a bachelor's of fine arts degree in illustration from the Academy of Art University and the University of San Francisco. She has illustrated other books for children including *Fatty Legs*, *Miracle*, and *A Stranger at Home*. She lives in California. Visit her online at www.lunavilla.com.



BEFORE READING: BUILDING BACKGROUND AND SETTING A PURPOSE FOR READING

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What genre is this story? How do you know?
- Where is the Navajo Indian tribe from originally?
- What is the landscape of the American Southwest like?
- What is a secret code?
- When might someone need a secret code?
- Have you ever had to keep a big secret from your friends and family? How did that impact you?

KWL CHART

Before reading the book, make a KWL chart with the class to determine background knowledge and to spark curiosity about the topics.

Possible topics:

- Navajo and other Southwest Indian tribes
- Secret codes and World War II
- Conflicts between Native Americans and the US Government in 1800s–1900s

KEY VOCABULARY

These words could be posted prior to reading the book. They are key words and concepts to discuss as you read. Students can use context clues to decipher meaning.

• **ancestors**

• **artillery**

• **captive**

• **decrypt**

• **encrypt**

• **foxhole**

• **matron**

• **platoon**

• **reservation**

• **sacred**

• **vital**

DURING READING

QUESTIONING, INFERRING, AND ANALYZING

As you read, stop and ask questions that require students to make inferences and analyze the deeper meaning in the story.

- Why was Chester's name changed when the American government took him to the boarding school?
- Discuss the changes that were forced on the Navajos at the school. What was the purpose of these changes?
- What was the purpose of the boarding schools for American Indians?
- Can you infer what the "Right Way" is to the Navajos?
- Notice the names given to each month, in English and in translated Navajo. Why did the author do this?
- What do the crows in the illustration symbolize? (p. 4)
- When other children have fears and nightmares, Chester calms them. What do we learn about his character through his actions? (p. 5)
- While in boarding school, how was Chester able to succeed in both worlds? What does this tell you about him? (pp. 8–9)
- When Chester says "Protecting his homeland was an honor," what does he mean?
- What was the purpose of the Navajo code? (pp. 10–11)
- Discuss why the Navajo code was so

complex. Why were other countries not able to break it?

- How was Chester impacted by his experience in the war?
- What can you infer about the "Enemy Way"? What was it? (pp. 24–25)
- What impact did the Navajo Code have on the end of World War II?
- When did Chester finally tell his secret? Why did he keep it to himself for so many years?
- Analyze the last line of the book, "He kept his feet on the trail of beauty." What does the author mean by this? Why did he end the story this way?

COMPARE AND CONTRAST

- Compare and contrast the illustrations on pages 4 and 6. What is the illustrator trying to convey with the color and detail of these two very different scenes?
- Compare and contrast the illustrations of Chester on pages 8 and 9. What do the pictures symbolize? How does the illustrator use a similar image in two different ways? Why?
- Use this contrast to teach the concept of irony: Discuss the irony between the beginning of the story and the end. As a child, Chester is told his language is worthless and that he needed English to survive. As a soldier and code talker, it is his native language that helps save lives in the war.

AFTER READING

- Revisit the KWL chart to fill in the “L” column with new information the students learned about the topic
- Read the “Author’s Note” to the students in order to discuss what Chester did after his experience as a code talker.
- Have students write secret codes to each other using the Navajo Code from the back of the book. Make copies of the page in the book so students can work in pairs to decipher the codes.
- Explore other books about “The Long Walk”.
 - *Navajo Long Walk: The Tragic Story of a People’s Forced March from their Homeland*. Joseph Bruchac; Shonto Begay, il. 2002.
- Explore other books about Code Talkers.
 - *The Unbreakable Code*. Sara Hoagland Hunter; Julia Miner, il. 2007.
- Explore other books about boarding schools like Fort Defiance.
 - *Cheyenne Again*. Eve Bunting; Irving Toddy, il. 2002.
 - *As Long as the Rivers Flow: A Last Summer before Residential School*, Loyie, Larry, and Constance Brissenden. 2003.
 - *Children of the Indian Boarding School*. Holly Littlefield. 2001.
- Project the timeline. Discuss the paths Chester took after his experience as a code talker. Ask students: “Now that

you’ve made inferences about Chester’s character after reading the story, what can you infer about the choices he made later on in his life?”

- Let students choose a topic from the timeline to explore further. Have them do inquiry projects in pairs on one of the following topics.
 - Boarding Schools in the early 1930s, such as Fort Defiance
 - Famous Navajo code talkers, such as Roy Begay or Gene Crawford
 - Platoon 382
 - National Code Talkers Day
 - Navajo Indians today

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

Aligned with Illinois CCSS, grade 4–5
English Language Arts–Literacy

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.1
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.3
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.7
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.10
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.1
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.2
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.6
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.9



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