

The Navajo Code Talkers in Books for Young People

By Beverly Slapin

Throughout World War II, Diné (Navajo) code talkers were a crucial part of the U.S. effort in the South Pacific, sending and receiving messages in an unbreakable code based on the Diné language. As Marines, they took part in every assault, from Guadalcanal in 1942 to Okinawa in 1945, experiencing some of the bloodiest fighting in the war.

For the Diné code talkers, the military experience of serving in World War II—mythologized as “the good fight”—was a chance for the young men to demonstrate their courage in the most exciting adventure of their lives. For many, it was the first time they had ever left their communities, the first time they had ever seen an ocean, the first time they had ever seen a paycheck. In the aftermath of that war and the post-traumatic shock that came with it, they found they were not allowed to discuss the top secret nature of their work.

Although the code talkers probably saw themselves as “warriors,” referring to soldiers as “warriors” perpetuates a century-old hoax. There is a great cultural and philosophical distinction between the terms “warrior” and “soldier,” and somehow, for the Indian community, this distinction has been blurred, erased, “forgotten,” and most of all, exploited. Sacrificing their lives for the benefit of the U.S. war machine has become one of the only acceptable ways for young people today to demonstrate their courage. And the image of “warriors” protecting their lands, cultures, and communities has young Indian people—in far greater proportion than anyone else—becoming cannon fodder for cynical colonialist ventures.

In the four books reviewed below—two fiction and two non-fiction—the term “Navajo” is used rather than “Diné,” the people’s self-name; this is especially noticeable in the *The Unbreakable Code* and *Code Talker*, where a grandfather talking to his grandchild(ren) would be more likely to refer to himself as “Diné” or “our people.” In all four, the extent of Japanese fatalities, including civilians, is soft-pedaled. Two (*Navajo Code Talkers* and *Code Talker*) do mention the U.S. bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and those two also discuss the legacy of the Navajo Long Walk and the Indian residential schools. The books are reviewed according to their year of publication, from the oldest to the most recent.

Kawano, Kenji. *Warriors: Navajo Code Talkers*. Flagstaff, Ariz: Northland, 1990. 107 pp. Illus. with photos by the author. Foreword by Carl Gorman (Diné). Gr. 6 and up.

Through his long friendship with Diné elder and code talker Carl Gorman and his family, Japanese-born Kenji Kawano became the official photographer to the Navajo Code Talkers Association. Kawano’s beautiful book of historical and contemporary black-and-white photographs, coupled with the words and stories of the code talkers themselves, reflect this gifted photographer’s honoring of the people whose code baffled Japanese communicators and contributed to the World War II defeat of his own people.

Here is Wilsie H. Bitsie, now an elder, telling Kenji Kawano, “Why did I kill? This has had great psychological bearing on me, and still does.” Both Gorman’s foreword and Kawano’s preface are personal and heartfelt, and Benis M. Frank’s introduction gives a historical overview from the Marine Corps perspective. Since the term “warriors” appears only in the title, one would suspect that it was a marketing decision. It was interesting to read the first-person accounts in *Warriors* and see how their various permutations showed up in the later-published books.

Aaseng, Nathan. *Navajo Code Talkers*. New York: Walker, 1992. 116 pp. Illus. with photos. Foreword by Roy O. Hawthorne (Diné). Gr. 5–8.

That Aaseng relied almost entirely on outdated and questionable-at-best sources by cultural outsiders—such as Reader’s Digest’s *America’s Fascinating Indian Heritage* and Scott O’Dell’s *Sing Down the Moon*—is reflected in his falsely authoritative and condescending writing. Especially egregious is the chapter describing how the alleged Diné belief system may have impacted the code talkers’ performance in the Pacific:

Navajos were taught not to kill snakes. Was that practical or even possible in some of the snake-infested hellholes the marines found themselves in? How would the Navajos react to a belegaana (sic) slashing a snake out of fear or simply for the fun of it? Navajos were taught never to eat a piece of food with the point of a knife stuck in it. Would this cause problems at mealtime? Navajos took care to avoid having beasts cross their paths and to stay away from any tree damaged by lightning. Would these traditional taboos clash with orders from a superior officer to take up a certain position?

Then there’s this garbled mess:

Not only did the Navajos sound like the Japanese to many Marines, they also looked like them. There was no one “type” of Navajo that could be immediately recognized. Navajo men can display great differences in size, build, skin color, and facial appearance. They do, however, tend toward a number of characteristics that are more similar to the Japanese than to the belegaana [sic]: dark hair, dark skin, sparse facial hair, high cheekbones, occasionally even Asian-appearing eyes.

What does this mean? I think Aaseng is probably trying to

say something, but I get the feeling he's describing a breed of horse. Actually, there were several cases in which Diné code talkers were almost killed by white Marines, who mistook them for enemy infiltrators. These incidents occurred because of cultural blindness, not because Navajos and Japanese people look alike. *Navajo Code Talkers* is not recommended.

Hunter, Sara Hoagland. *The Unbreakable Code*. Flagstaff, Ariz.: Northland/Rising Moon, 1996. unpaginated. Illustrations by Julia Miner. Grades 3–5.

Comforting his young grandson, who is distraught about having to move to Minnesota, a Diné grandfather recounts his own experiences away from home, both at an Indian boarding school and later, as a code talker. "All those years," he remembers laughing with another young recruit, "they told us to forget Navajo, and now the government needs it to save the country!" When John excitedly asks his grandfather to tell him about the fighting, Grandfather appropriately responds, "What I saw is better left back there. I would not want to touch my home or my family with those pictures." In this story about a close family relationship and ties to the land that tells you who you are forever, Hunter is to be forgiven for an occasional clunker ("You're going to be all right," Grandfather said. "You have an unbreakable code."), the self-reference to "Navajo," and a somewhat contrived backstory.

Miner's softly textured oil paintings illustrate the warmth of grandfather and grandson together and the beauty of the land. Hunter's endnotes give young readers the original code and some code words to look at and pronounce.

Bruchac, Joseph (Abenaki). *Code Talker: A Novel about the Navajo Marines of World War Two*. New York: Dial, 2005. 231 pp. Grades 5–7.

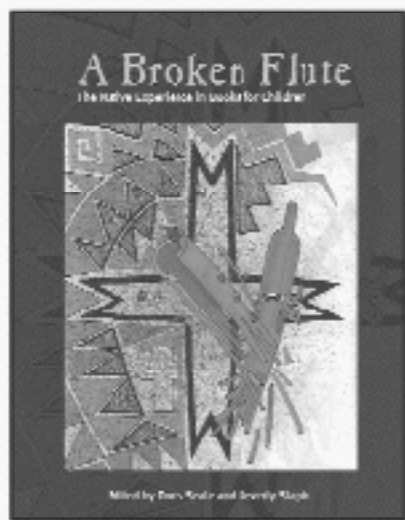
How does one tell a historical story that is true to itself, while at the same time taking responsibility not to dredge up old prejudices for today's young readers? This dilemma is one that I imagine Bruchac struggled with in researching and writing *Code Talker*.

Code Talker is essentially *The Unbreakable Code* expanded to a middle-reader chapter book. Here, Bruchac's fictionalized narrator, Ned Begay, shares with his grandchildren the experience of the war and what came after. Bruchac deftly sets the story in the context of Diné history, including the forced Navajo Long Walk to Bosque Redondo and the Indian residential schools' attempts to eradicate Native languages.

Well researched and relying on both published and oral accounts, *Code Talker* is related in an honest, realistic voice, one that does not hesitate to tell a funny story when the opportunity occurs: "I kept a straight face because it would have been rude to laugh at a grown-up, even a grown-up biligaana who had just said that all sheep above the age of six should be in school." The irony of having the language beaten out of you as a child and then having that same language considered invaluable in the war effort is the focal point of the story. An overemphasis on cultural details with which Diné grandchildren would already be familiar and the grandfather's self-reference to "Navajo" seem to be for the benefit of the presumed audience of non-Native readers. It's also

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problematic that Bruchac uses the term “warrior” interchangeably with “soldier.”

As Bruchac writes in his author’s note, all the events are real and almost all the characters are real. It’s a little unnerving, but not necessarily a bad thing, to see Carl Gorman (whom I’ve met) showing up as a young man in a historical novel. But although Diné elders share war stories with each other, it’s highly unlikely that a Diné grandfather would burden his grandchildren with the fear, pain, death, and gory details of the war.

Another problem in *Code Talker* is Bruchac’s narrator’s demonization of the Japanese people. Although Ned Begay sometimes walks away from the racist remarks uttered by his fellow Marines and calls war “a sickness that must be cured...a time out of balance,” he also likens the Japanese people to “the monster beings in our old stories, (who) preferred to strike in the darkness” and tells his grandchildren that “[w]e must never forget, as the Japanese forgot, that all life is holy.” (Considering that U.S. forces incinerated hundreds of thousands of Japanese men, women, and children in Hiroshima and Nagasaki and on the Japanese-held islands in the Pacific—the former mentioned in the book—one might do well to ask, who else forgot that all life is holy?) And it is unfortunate that Bruchac chose to put into print the Diné code word for “Japan” as an ethnic slur that calls attention to the presumed shape of a people’s upper-eyelid folds.

For younger readers, *The Unbreakable Code* presents a part of history that will not be found elsewhere. For older readers, a thoughtful, critical teacher could use *Code Talker* paired with *Warriors: Navajo Code Talkers*, and lead his or her students in comparing the experiences of the code talkers with those of Indian young people serving in the military today. Why do Indian young people continue to go to war in far greater proportion than any other ethnic group? What other options do young people of color have to get access to education and jobs? In the context of war, colonialism, and racism, what kind of philosophical and ideological mentality did the U.S. government create against the Japanese people? How is this kind of mentality fostered and demonstrated against Arab and Muslim peoples today?

Glorifying war under any circumstances is wrong, and the mutation of “warriors” into “soldiers,” “human beings” into “monsters,” and “friends” into “enemies” is an ongoing problem that needs to be addressed.

Beverly Slapin is co-founder and director of Oyate, a grassroots Indian community organization working to see that Native

lives and histories are portrayed honestly. Along with Doris Seale, she recently co-edited *A Broken Flute: The Native Experience in Books for Children* (AltaMira Press, 2005). 📖

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