The Journal of Jesse Smoke Discussion Guide | Scholastic.com

To the Discussion Leader

Sadness and respect are the cornerstones of *The Journal of Jesse Smoke: A Cherokee Boy* written by Joseph Bruchac. Jesse tells the tragic story of what it was like to be part of the Cherokee Removal — a plan by the United States government to forcibly move Native Americans from their homes in the eastern United States west to Missouri and Oklahoma. Native Americans were herded into detention camps where horrible living conditions caused the death of thousands. The forced march west became known as the "Trail of Tears" and resulted in the elimination of at least one quarter of the Cherokee nation. Politics, greed, and broken promises all played a part in the Removal and created a sad chapter in American history.

While Jesse's story is certainly sad, his journal is also filled with pride in his people and respect for their customs. The respect for the Cherokee throughout this book is the result of author Joseph Bruchac, a gifted writer and storyteller with American Indian ancestry who has spent a lifetime learning about and writing about Native Americans. About creating this book Bruchac says, "To do justice to this story I had to spend years in the process of learning with the help of many Cherokee people. That kind of learning teaches you patience. I would not have been able to write this story twenty years ago, even though I thought of doing such a novel more than once. I am glad that I waited." Young readers of this fine journal will be glad that he waited, too.

**Summary**

It is 1837 in Tennessee and the Cherokee Nation is on the brink of being changed forever as they face the Removal — being forcibly moved from their homes and land, in part because of a treaty signed by a group of their own people. Sixteen-year-old Jesse Smoke has been studying at the Mission School, but it has been shut down and turned into a fort for the ever-increasing number of soldiers entering the territory. Now Jesse has returned to his home to live with his widowed mother and two younger sisters. All hope lies on the Cherokee chief John Ross who is in Washington, D.C. trying to delay the Removal. As the people await word on their future, Jesse goes about doing the chores on the farm from building fences to hunting for meat to dealing with his stubborn mule Napoleyan. He also plays stickball and other games with his friends. Jesse writes, "We try to live our lives in an every day fashion. But we are worried. Only the very young, like my little sisters, seem unaware of what it all means. The forts have grown in number, we are quite surrounded like hostages in our own land."

Then, one night in May, family members are suddenly awakened, dragged from their homes, and forced at gunpoint to run through the darkness to a stockade camp. Jesse is separated from his family, and when he tries to return to his home to retrieve his missing journal, a soldier brutally strikes him in the face with the butt of his rifle. For days he lies sick and in pain until his mother and sisters are able to find and care for him. Camp Cherokee is "not a good place." The food is poor and strange to the Cherokee. The sun burns down on them. What little water is available, is far away. Many are sick and each day people die. As the days drag into weeks, Jesse strikes up an acquaintance with a young Tennessee soldier whom he calls White Will. Jesse helps Will, who cannot read or write, to send a letter to his parents, and Will, in return, gives Jesse information about the camps and plans for the Removal. As summer goes on, the Cherokee
must deal with swarms of mosquitoes and biting flies, poor sanitation, and diseases like measles and whooping cough. Jesse writes, "Each day more are carried out to be placed in the earth in shallow graves. No Cherokee can own any of this land except in death, and it is so often the very young and the very old. If we survive, we may be a Nation without children or elders." Spirits are low and Jesse admits, "It is hard not to lose myself in sorrow and give up, as have some of our people. My pen is like a lifeline that I must have lest I too be washed away."

Plans are made for the relocation to lands in the west, and the Cherokee are allowed to organize their departure. Wagons, horses, oxen and supplies are gathered, but the journey must wait until fall when weather conditions are better. Jesse and his family are one of the last groups to leave Camp Cherokee. Since he speaks English, Jesse is given the task of assistant interpreter and courier. He observes, "my education has made me useful." Riding his mule, Napoleyan, Jesse goes back and forth between the thirteen parties of his people. The journey is a massive undertaking: crossing rivers and mountains, dealing with torrential rain and broken wagon axles, and "every day, at least one person does not rise from their blankets, and a grave must be dug by the roadside."

As winter approaches, it becomes bitterly cold, and ice forms on the rivers making them impossible to cross. The parties must wait a month until the ice is gone. During that time, drunkenness, brought on by whites supplying liquor to the Cherokee, becomes a major problem, prompting Jesse to say, "I vow I shall never drink." Finally, after more than four months on the trail, they reach the last campsite. Though he feels deep resentment for what his people have endured, Jesse resolves to "cast anger and hatred out of my heart. If we must build a new nation in the west, we must do it together."

Thinking About the Book

1. What surprised you most as you read Jesse’s journal and learned about his experiences on "The Trail of Tears?"

2. Why do Jesse's friends call him "Mission Boy?" What does that mean to them? What does the mission education mean to Jesse?

3. What role do women play in the Cherokee culture? Find examples in Jesse's journal that support his observation that, "In our Cherokee way, it is the women who are the real heads of our households."

4. Who is the Feeler? In what ways is he important to Jesse?

5. What does Jesse mean in the following statement? "The land must be cleansed of us like soil washed from a pale hand."

6. What is the most memorable scene in The Journal of Jesse Smoke? Explain your answer.

7. Identify each of the following and explain their importance in Jesse's journal.
   - Treaty of New Echota
   - Chief John Ross
   - Sequoyah
   - Rev. Jesse Bushyhead
   - Tahlequah

8. If you could choose only one word to describe Jesse Smoke, what would that word be? Why?

9. Jesse tries to explain to White Will why there was a division among the Cherokee people over the signing of the Treaty of New Echota. Jesse writes, "I then explained to him that by signing away our lands, their lives were forfeit. They knew that when they signed they might also be signing their own death warrants." What happened to the men who signed that treaty?
Student Activities

1. Look at the Cherokee Museum's map of the Trail of Tears. According to Jesse's journal, which route did they follow? Which seems the longest? Which might have the most dangers? Why do you think so?

2. In the old west people branded their livestock to show ownership. Each owner's brand was different from any other. The Cherokee were to brand their animals with CN (for Cherokee Nation). Look up brands and see some of the many designs that have been used. Create and draw your own brand using your initials or other distinguishing mark.

3. Imagine that you were with Chief John Ross as he tried to persuade the officials in our nation's capital to halt or postpone the Removal. Write a speech that could convince the President to stop this forced migration.

4. Find out more about the author, Joseph Bruchac.

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