

A Discussion Guide for

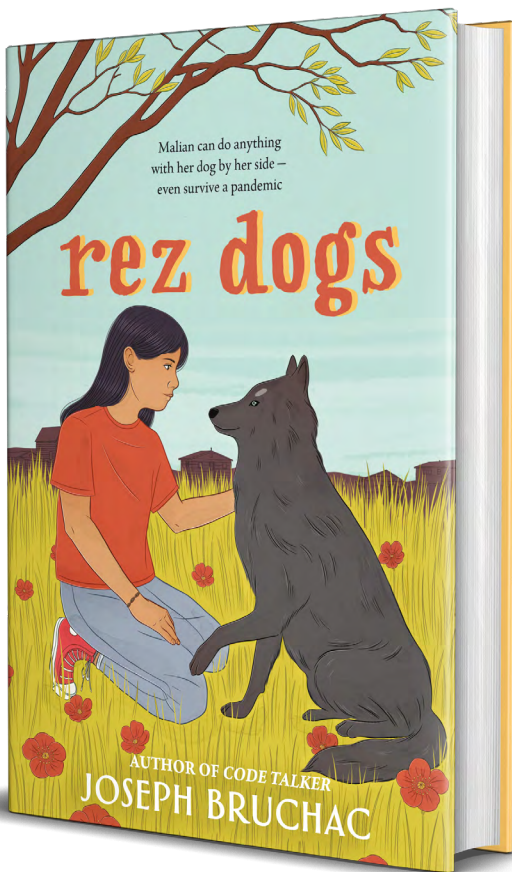
rez dogs



AUTHOR OF *CODE TALKER*

JOSEPH BRUCHAC

ABOUT THE BOOK



★ “Hidden throughout this moving novel in verse, old stories are discovered like buried treasures.”

— *KIRKUS REVIEWS*, STARRED REVIEW

FOR MALIAN, a weekend visit to her grandparents on the reservation turns into a much longer stay when sheltering in place orders are made during the COVID-19 pandemic. Just as she arrives, a mysterious wolf-like rez dog appears. Grandma remarks, “Looks to me like he thinks he belongs here.” So begins a tale of friendship between Malian, a young girl, and Malsum, a very special “rez dog.” Told in verse and covering topics from online school to traditional activities with grandparents, this compassionate story helps both Native and non-Native students reflect on the COVID-19 pandemic while developing empathy and cross-cultural understanding.

★ “Bruchac intricately interweaves past and present stories... with a deft touch in this rewarding intergenerational narrative.”

— *PUBLISHERS WEEKLY*, STARRED REVIEW

★ “Storytelling is an important part of culture, and Bruchac is a masterful storyteller who weaves culture with narrative and allows the reader to truly be a part of the story.”

— *SCHOOL LIBRARY CONNECTION*, STARRED REVIEW

ABOUT THE DISCUSSION GUIDE

The questions in this guide were written by Kelly Sassi. Kelly is a professor of English and education at North Dakota State University. She directs the Red River Valley Writing Project. For several years, the writing project has collaborated with teachers and students on the Turtle Mountain reservation, where many rez dogs make their home.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



“BEFORE READING” WRITING PROMPTS

1. Think about a dog you have known. How did the dog communicate with people? How did people respond to the dog? If you have had a dog, what role did it play in your family?
2. Think about the COVID-19 pandemic or another time when you were isolated from other people. What gave you comfort during this time?

“DURING READING” DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



1. When the rez dog Malsum first appears at the beginning of the story, how does the author describe him? What does this tell us about Malsum’s personality?
 2. Whenever Malian’s grandfather, Grampa Roy, taps his index finger on his chin, he is about to tell a story. His first story (pp. 10–13) is about what the village dogs do when they are left on their own: “They’d put on clothes / we left behind / and some of them / were walking around / on their hind legs” (p. 12). What did Red Hawk learn from this experience? Why do you think Granmpa Roy told this story to Malian?
 3. Malian and her grandparents receive a package of their favorite cookies from Malian’s parents, along with a note that reads, “We miss you so much, / but we’re glad you’re there. / That’s the way our Creator / meant it to be, that one day, / young people might know / the blessing of being able / to take care of those / who cared for them / when they were young” (pp. 23–24) In what ways does Malian take care of her grandparents? In what ways do they take care of her?
 4. In Chapter 4, Malian receives a panicked call from “The Three Muskraters.” What promise does she get from them before helping them out of their predicament? Why did she make them promise it?
 5. While eating frybread with her grandmother, Malian learns about her mother’s upbringing. Why was her mother taken away from the reservation and raised by white people? How would you feel if you were taken away from your home and raised by people from another culture?
 6. Malian’s grandfather tells her the story of how it came to be that dogs “are the only animals / on this old land / who’ve always lived / with us human beings” (p. 68). Why do you think he told her this story? What does this story mean to you?
 7. A woman from Social Services pulls up in a government van in Chapter 7. How does Malian handle this encounter? How does Malsum help her? What does this encounter tell us about Malian’s character? What does it tell us about Malsum’s character?
 8. Grandma tells Malian a story about a young moose who accepts a pipe when no other moose would. Although Malian has heard the story before, she asks to hear it because she believes one can learn something new from a story each time. What do you think she learns from the story this time? Are there any stories you like to hear over and over again? Why?
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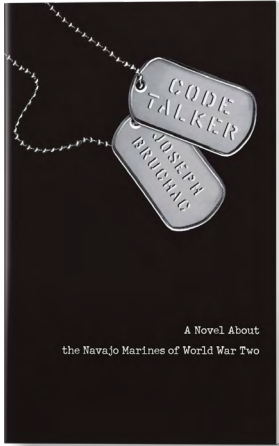
Discussion Questions Continued

9. When Malian and her grandparents look through the photo album, she learns some new things about her family and also about her great-great-grampa's dog, Wolf. Which picture made the biggest impression on Malian? Have you ever learned something new about your family from looking at family pictures? What was it? Did it change how you thought about someone in your family?
10. After her teacher, Ms. Mendelson, tells a story about running in fear from a Black person, and apologizes to the class, she says their last assignment will be for each person to share "whatever it is you want us to know / about you and your family" (p. 166). How does Malian decide which story to tell, and what is the response to it? Do you think Malian will end up being a storyteller like her grandparents? Why or why not?
11. When the time comes for Malian to leave the reservation, she tells Malsum that her parents said he could go back to the city with her. They communicate without words. What do you think Malsum's response was and why?

"AFTER READING" WRITING ACTIVITIES

1. What if Malsum could speak? Rewrite one of the scenes in the book from Malsum's perspective, including what Malsum would say.
 2. Some stories are meant to be told out loud, some to be written down. Oral storytelling is a tradition in the author's Abenaki culture. Imagine you are eighty years old—what story would you tell to your grandchildren?
 3. *Rez Dogs* was created by the author, Joseph Bruchac, dictating to his iPhone while walking his dog. Try dictating one of your stories to a voice recorder. How is this different from writing a story?
 4. According to **Learning for Justice**, "The goal of settler-colonization is the removal and erasure of Indigenous peoples in order to take the land for use by settlers in perpetuity." In *An Indigenous People's History of the United States*, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz explains the five genocidal practices prohibited by the United Nations: killing members of the group; causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; forcibly transferring children of the group to another group. Which of these genocidal practices are brought up in the novel? What actions are taken by characters in the book to resist further oppression?
 5. Think back to questions 5 and 7 of the preceding section. These questions deal with issues related to our country's history of settler colonialism and the systemic oppression of Native American people. What other examples of colonialist oppression and Native American resistance can you find in the text? What do you think the author is teaching us about our shared history?
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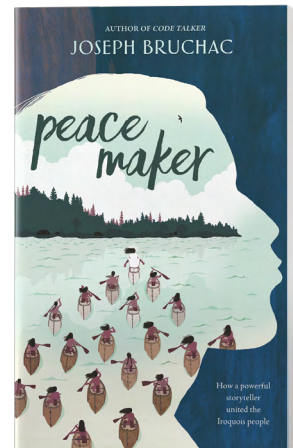
OTHER BOOKS BY JOSEPH BRUCHAC



★“Readers who choose the book for the attraction of Navajo code talking and the heat of battle will come away with more than they ever expected to find.”

— *BOOKLIST*, STARRED REVIEW

“Bruchac brings a fresh point of view to this briskly told fictionalization of the Iroquois Confederacy’s beginnings.” — *PUBLISHERS WEEKLY*



“Learning while laughing is the goal, and it is achieved.”

— *SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL*



★“A tautly paced and compelling story of self-discovery, family, belonging, and friendship.” — *HORN BOOK*, STARRED REVIEW

