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A boy discovers his Native American heritage in this Depression-era tale of identity and friendship by the author of *Code Talker*

It's 1932, and twelve-year-old Cal Black and his Pop have been riding the rails for years after losing their farm in the Great Depression. Cal likes being a "knight of the road" with Pop, even if they're broke. But then Pop has to go to Washington, DC--some of his fellow veterans are marching for their government checks, and Pop wants to make sure he gets his due--and Cal can't go with him. So Pop tells Cal something he never knew before: Pop is actually a Creek Indian, which means Cal is too. And Pop has decided to send Cal to a government boarding school for Native Americans in Oklahoma called the Challagi School.

At school, the other Creek boys quickly take Cal under their wings. Even in the harsh, miserable conditions of the Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding school, he begins to learn about his people's history and heritage. He learns their language and customs. And most of all, he learns how to find strength in a group of friends who have nothing beyond each other.

Two Roads Details

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From Reader Review Two Roads for online ebook

Kelly K says

This is one of those children's books that would best be appreciated by adults. Focusing on a nearly teenage boy and his father riding the rails during the Great Depression, his WWI veteran father goes off to Washington DC to participate in the Bonus Army while he is left at a Native Indian boarding school. This was a unique perspective on a coming of age story.

Leonard Kim says

3.5 stars. Reads less like a historical novel of road and boarding school life in the 1930s and more like a lyrical chivalric romance (the protagonist repeatedly refers to himself and other hobos as "knights of the road"). Feels old-fashioned in that regard: there's hardly a female character in sight, and the protagonists are characterized by ability and honor and fraternity. Such a masculine ideal is deservedly met with more skepticism these days, and yet a child could do worse than Cal for a role model. Such a character is rare enough now, and this one well-written enough, that it almost felt more fresh than regressive.

I docked a half-star for the short third part (less than 10% of the book) which felt a lot more like conventional, and less interesting, historical fiction for children. It felt to me grafted-on and rushed. At first, with so few pages left, I even thought an ending wasn't possible, and the author was setting up a sequel. I would've preferred it if this part were omitted, and the book ended with the second part, even with Cal's father's fate unresolved.

Yapha says

Fascinating look at how WWI veterans were treated during the Great Depression, life on the rails as a Hobo (or knight of the road), and at the later years of the Indian Boarding Schools. Not only did I learn a ton, but it was an absorbing read as well. I'd love to see a sequel. Highly recommended for grades 5 & up.

Rebecca says

Two Roads is an excellent (and refreshingly clean) book for 12 and up by Joseph Bruchac about Cal, a young boy traveling as a "Gentleman of the Road" with his father, Will, during the Great Depression. In order to take care of some business, Will must leave Cal behind--temporarily--at an Indian boarding school. Cal understands his father's decision, yet he knows nothing of being about being a Creek (which had been concealed from him) and yearns to stay with his father, his last living relative.

Two Roads is filled with Bruchac's usual warmth, insight, and rich description. The history and deep empathy make is a winner for middle school or even 9th grade classroom use.

Cheryl says

Cal and his father is a hobo through no fault of their own. After World War I followed by the Depression, returning soldiers had a hard time of it many becoming jobless and in turn homeless. Such is the fate of this father/son duo. Survival meant figuring out the culture of riding the rails. Cal is left at an Indian School while his father rides to Washington D.C. to march for the bonus that the government was supposed to give to the soldiers but never did. When this separation occurs, Cal finds out that he is actually Native American, something not known to him prior to this. Bruchac writes of the injustices of the times while weaving in Native American culture and engaging adventure. Always the storyteller, Bruchac has another winner here. A powerful book appropriate for upper elementary and middle school readers.

Ms. Yingling says

ARC from Follett First Look

Very interesting look at the Great Depression and Native American (Creek) history. Size of text and general philosophical tones pushes this a bit towards the YA side. The bit about the history of sneakers was an inspired addition!

Serenity says

I had not been aware of the events depicted in this book, so it was interesting to read about the march on Washington by WWI veterans. I was a little disappointed that more of the book was not focused on Cal's time at school, but overall this was a satisfying read. The writing flows really well and Cal's story is intriguing.

Avondale Middle says

Stirring, informative, and unforgettable. It was a journey reading the story of Cal and learning about a part of our history that is seldom shared in classrooms.

Corinne Wilson says

3.5 stars. This book covers a lot of rarely told history: the Bonus army who gathered at Washington to demand the money promised them after WW1, the diversity in Indian boarding schools and the bonding between boys that kept generations coming back despite the subpar education, the ethical code of the hobo (not to be confused with tramps or bums). It might not be fast paced enough for some tweens, but it's a solid read.

What I really enjoyed, though, was the relationship between father and son. We don't see a lot of that in modern literature. William Blackbird reacts with understanding and support toward his son's visions and his

quiet nature. Cal Blackbird does the same for his dad's PTSD and covering up of the family's racial identity.

Tricia says

Cal Black and his dad have been riding the rails since they lost their farm to the Depression. Hoboes, they adhere to the "knights of the road" code of honor. It's an enormous shock when Pop reveals he's a Creek Indian and has decided to send Cal to the Challagi School for Native Americans. Bruchac has written other moving novels about the draconian life of the Indian schools. Here, he explores how students of different tribes came together to discover and confirm their pan-Indian identity. Readers also learn about the 1932 protest of the "Bonus Army" in Washington D.C., seen by many as a precursor of the Civil Rights movement. Multi-layered, beautifully written, and narrated by a clear-eyed boy anyone would be lucky to call a friend.

Kristi Bell says

Clean book about a boy and his father that are hobos and part-Indian.

Actually 3 1/2 stars....Set in 1932, Cal and his father, who is a WWI vet, go across the US via train car to look for a new start.

Leslie says

A longer post today, and even then it feels inadequate. Bruchac tackles a lot of history and cultural conversation in this slim novel set in a single year. I don't often read books that are or are similar to biographies, and this felt like I was listening to an elder telling stories. It's written for middle graders, but I'm going to recommend it to my dad who, like Cal's dad, supplemented my Oklahoma History homework with our own oral histories.

Joseph Bruchac's Two Roads will come across to many primarily as an educational novel. 1932 was a busier year in US history than many of us will remember from our classes and books.

Bruchac chose the setting on purpose. In an interview with fellow award-winning author, Cynthia Leitich Smith, he explains:

I wanted to have it take place in that time before the New Deal that parallels present day America where the divide between the rich and the majority of people is growing and homelessness is a huge issue...as well as what happens to veterans of our foreign wars.

1932 was a good time to talk about Indian boarding schools in the US, and while Bruchac has written about them in other work, in the same interview he reminds us that "there are so many stories that still need to be told—and not just stories of Indians as victims. I wanted to tell a story which shows how many Native kids managed to stay Native in those harsh environments, forge friendships, and resist assimilation."

I think the use of 1932 was an excellent choice for a historical moment that will resonate, the code of ethics held by the hobo culture and the veteran's petitioning the federal government in protests numbering in the thousands is inspiring. But the story of young Native people pursuing and protecting their culture and

identity will resonate with a large swath of our young readers.

The novel is told by Calvin “Cal” Black|Blackbird and he injects the novel with a contemplative tone. He’s quick, quietly funny, observant and often takes a listening posture. I read one review that questioned how a 1930s boy could be as articulate as Cal, or some of the others. I question why any presentation of—call it “wokeness”—by any marginalized population before white characters (and people) of the same age became woke would be presumed historically inaccurate or dissonant. His pop, Will, is wise and articulate; and Cal is also that classic, well-read character.

Two Roads is not an action adventure. Its more biographical with moments of action and adventure; Bruchac suggests as much in his “Afterword.”

It’s my hope that this small novel—based not just on years of research but also on the countless stories of boarding school life I’ve heard over the last five decades from friends and elders who were kind enough to share them with me—will [...] Entertain with a good story while also, though not in a preachy way, teaching something about parts of American and Native American history that should be better known. (320)

Cal has an unusual ability that a friend will later identify. He can move into the past when a story is being told, actually reside in the body of person present and experience the moment as them—which is terrifying when his veteran father slides into his memories of WWI. Cal can also envision scenes from the future—which helps move the character in a necessary direction late in the story. It’s intriguing and useful, but isn’t as utilized as often as I’d anticipated. For the most part, Cal is to remain in the present where he has more than enough on his mind.

Cal and his pop, Will, are “knights of the road,” hoboes. Using the rails and a strict code of ethics, they work in trade for food and mostly keep to themselves. It is a fascinating culture, but disturbing when you consider how for many, this lifestyle wasn’t a choice. Before he met his wife, built a farm, and had Cal, Will chose to be a ‘bo. But this past year on the rails, is courtesy of the passing of wife/mother who buried them in medical bills, and the banks failing. If only Will could either receive or borrow against his Compensation Certificate for surviving the Great War.

Will isn’t the only War Vet who thinks “evil Hoover” could do more to care for them. We meet many walking wounded, carrying shrapnel, suffering PTSD and/or the ill-effects of mustard gas. Veterans with reach begin to petition Hoover and the White House for consideration, and soon an occupation is organized: the Bonus Expeditionary Forces (BEF), or the “Bonus Army.” 45,000 veterans and their families set up camp in the capital. While Will would join them, he needs a safer place for his 12 year-old-son; and returning him to his education would benefit Cal as well.

Before the subject of sending Cal to a boarding school comes up and Cal begins to contemplate what being Indian might mean, we’ve already encountered the racism of the US as they travel along the rails in the South. Cal and his father are brown, and when they meet a white man on the road, Will casually reveals the paler skin at the opening of his shirt. Paired with the revelation that he is a vet, the man becomes incredibly hospitable. But it wasn’t just honoring a veteran’s service. We meet a heavily decorated black man further along. Corporal Dart had joined the French Army as a Harlem Hellfighter. The local police threaten a hobo camp to give up any black folk.

Cal has no idea, until his father tells him, that he is half-Creek. Will would sometimes claim they were Italian, but Will is full-blood Creek out of Muskogee, Oklahoma, and Cal’s mother was an Armenian immigrant (put on the orphan train as a child and raised by a Polish couple in Nebraska). There were benefits

to passing. Besides not having to be identified alongside negative stereotypes and media representations, “the bank would be more likely to give [a mortgage] to a white couple who are a tanned war veteran and a nurse and not an Indian and a dirty immigrant” (69). Cal is intentionally raised white. The opportunity to place his son in an Indian School forces the revelation.

“Challagi’s how you say Cherokee in Choctaw. Sort of an insult—seeing as how it means cave dwellers. Folks without real houses. [...] Naming a school for the way one tribe insults another? Just what you’d expect from Washington” (106).

Challagi Federal Agricultural Indian Boarding School or Plains View was where Will had gone before running away to join the Army. According to Bruchac’s author notes, the fictitious Challagi is patterned Chilocco Indian Agricultural School in Oklahoma. Will tells Cal of his experiences at Challagi, and then we watch as Cal confirms them during his own stay—with a few exceptions: The way discipline is handled changed with the new superintendent and the publication of the Meriam Report. And the population, which is whiter than it had been.

When you consider how the point of the school was to “civilize” aka whiten the Indian; how some students died at school; how Will suffered, and ran away three times; and how he cared for his son, we ask: why would Will board his son at an Indian School? It was a question Bruchac had for Jim Thorpe’s son Jack (see “Afterword”). Jim Thorpe sent his sons to Indian school and so did many other graduates.

--In a disturbing aside, Will admits that if Cal had been a girl, he would absolutely not have sent him. He goes on to tell of a teacher who abused the girls with impunity until one of the students finally (violently) intervened. Because the story is from Cal’s point of view, we only get glimpses of and speculation as to what life looks like for the girls. Cal does note repeatedly that he pities their lack of freedom—freedom boys have from the eyes of the matrons and administrators to go off on their own.—Too, Will finds reassurance in that Cal should pass as full-blood at Challagi, and Cal allows his classmates to assume he is fully Creek.

The explanations written into the narrative vary. Like Will, parents needed a place for their children to be educated, and the agricultural program and other trade skills proved valuable. One kid in the book was the lone Indian where he lived and was happier being with other Indians at the school. Will and the author quote K. Tsianina Lomawaima’s work and “countless stories over five decades” when they cite an unexpected outcome in the boarding schools.

Rather than being made “less Indian,” the Indian schools actually served to confirm their Indian identity not just as members of a particular tribal nation, but in a Pan-Indian sense. This identity was strengthened not in the classroom but in their interactions with other Native students. This was especially so by the 1930s when many Native students, like Cal came to the boarding schools already speaking English and knowing little or nothing about their original tribal communities. [...] They made use of the boarding schools as places where they would not be assimilated or acculturated [...] but given the tools to adapt, survive, and even thrive. (319-20)

In Two Roads, Cal falls in with a gang of other Creek boys. Cal expands culturally and linguistically. One of the members leads them in stomp dances in the woods, which provides an opportunity to indulge yet another conversation on what it means to be Indian or of a certain tribe. Is it skin color? Tommy Wilson’s father is full-blood Muskogee Creek like Cal’s dad, but his mother is Norwegian and Tommy has her white looks. Unlike Cal, he was raised in a Creek community and raised as Indian. It was only after Tommy persists and is able to offer new dances (cultural information), that the Creek boys would allow him access.

While Cal does struggle with questions of identity, with homesickness and worry for his pop, troubles at school are resolved pretty quickly, which earns some criticism for robbing the novel of dramatic tension. He's a quick learner, he has amazing friends (the best of which he meets the first day), and he has access to things and information that he needs to not only survive but to thrive.

The narrative seems to give Cal a fairly gentle time of it, but it isn't willing to excuse what is wrong. For instance, the nicest white guy on campus is still inexcusable: The superintendent may not be into physical violence and theft like the last one, he is unapologetically racist and his words make impact.

In such a harsh landscape that is 1932 in the United States, there are good people doing good. Cal clings to his father and his father shows him how to not only survive, but find friendship, joy and a sense of self-possession; Cal finds friends who can offer him that same kind of experience at boarding school. And it feels all the more vital due to the threats of erasure, starvation, physical violence, and countless other indignities.

Bruchac writes a story of a boy who will find his way despite the best and worst intentions of those in positions of authority. Cal finds a community who looks out for one another, often advocating for one another and sharing their resources. I think young readers will appreciate the camaraderie and the determination the heroes in this novel demonstrate. *Two Roads* is timely and timeless.

Recommended for those interested in Native American History, US History: Depression Era or post-WWI. I think it will appeal to curious readers who like hearing people's stories, particularly those non-fiction readers. Also, readers of classics, who are likely to catch or approve of the references. I'll be recommending this one to my dad.

<https://wordpress.com/post/contemplat...>

Michelle says

Well-done middle grade book set in 1932 that covers a lot of ground for so slender a book--Dust Bowl, Depression, WWI veteran complaints and the march on Washington, prejudice against blacks and Native Americans, "Indian schools", hobo life--it was a busy book! The only part that felt rushed, though, was the very end. If not for that this would be a solid 5 star.

Linda Owen says

A wonderful historical novel set in the 1930's. The main character, Cal Black/Blackbird is riding the rails with his father after they lost their farm early on in the Depression. Cal enjoys the hobo life, but his father has read about the Bonus March of WWI vets on Washington, asking for Hoover and the government to pay them their promised bonuses. He decides to join the other veterans, so he tells Cal that he is, in fact, a Creek Indian, which makes Cal eligible for attendance at Challagi Indian School. The story follows Cal there, as he adjusts to his Indian heritage, new to him, and the ups and downs of life there. He finds friendships and good instruction in the useful skills with inadequate academic instruction. He misses his father and finally joins him in Washington, where General McArthur leads the brutal dispersal of the marchers. Hard to put down!

Alicia says

Knowing Bruchac as a local Native American author makes it doubly wonderful when you read a book as well characterized and plotted as this. Cal and his father, a veteran are hoboes, working for their measly earnings around the country. But Cal didn't know that his father was a Creek Indian. His Armenian mother sent west on an orphan train and his dad decided to raise him as if he was white. To make things easier. Yet know his dad wants to march and protest on Washington for earnings from the war and he wants to send Cal to an Indian school.

The relationship between the father and son is emotionally charged and sentimental. As a reader, you're rooting for both. To accomplish their goals. And get the justice and peace they deserve. The magic is in how they get there.

And Bruchac's author note is chock-full of additional facts and things to read for those inclined. A worthy addition to historical fiction and specifically one focused on American Indians.
