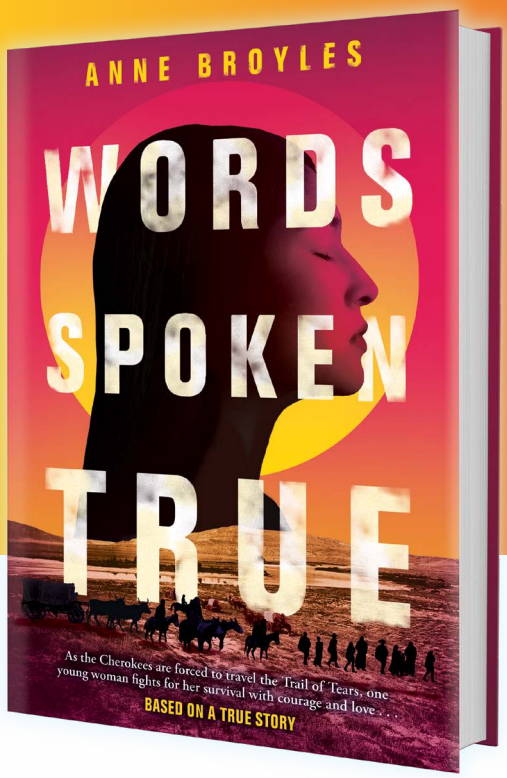

WORDS SPOKEN TRUE

BOOK GUIDE

BY ANNE BROYLES

Words Spoken True
By Anne Broyles
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Also available in audio
Ages 12 & Up • Grades 7 & Up
On sale 11/3/2026

The Story

Jane Bushyhead dreams of one day becoming a teacher. But everything changes when she and her family are forced from their home in the ancestral Cherokee land by US soldiers at gunpoint. After months of imprisonment and uncertainty, Jane and her people are then ordered to march eight hundred miles to "Indian Territory" (modern-day Oklahoma) during one of the worst winters of the nineteenth century.

It is a grueling journey—many of the Cherokee people are barefoot and unprepared for the freezing weather—and all go hungry as supplies dwindle and sickness abounds. Yet, Jane finds romance with a young man who has been adopted by the Cherokees, as well as comfort within the loving embrace of her family.

As the dangerous journey unfolds, and Jane finds purpose in teaching and recording the stories of her people, she will be forced to bear witness as they perish from starvation, disease, and deadly hazards on the trail. Soon, Jane will have to face an impossible choice between love and her own family.

Award-winning author and enrolled member of the Cherokee Nation Anne Broyles brings the Trail of Tears to vivid, desperate life in this beautiful story about courage, community, memory, and love.

Reading Group Questions

1. At the beginning of the story, Jane dreams of becoming a teacher one day. Does Jane get what she wants by the end of the story? Is what she wanted at the end of the story different from what it was at the start? If so, how and why did it change?
2. What do you think is Jane's secret strength?
3. What did you learn from the story about the time period in which this book is set? What did you learn about the Trail of Tears?
4. Now that you've finished the book, what do you think are the central themes? Are there certain scenes or images that you think helped you understand the story?

The Power of Story
Connecting Readers, One Book at a Time

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About the Author

Photo © Amy Ljams Photography

Anne Broyles is the award-winning author of several children's books, including *I'm Gonna Paint: Ralph Fasanella, Artist of the People; Priscilla and the Hollyhocks*; *Arturo and the Bienvenido Feast*; and *Shy Mama's Halloween*. *Words Spoken True* is her first YA novel. Anne lives in Portland, Oregon, and you can find her online at annebroyles.com.

Author Q&A

***Words Spoken True* is based on the life of a real young woman; how did you come across Jane Bushyhead? What made you want to write her story?**

I grew up proud of my Cherokee heritage. When I began to write books for children and young adults, I wanted to share the story of the Cherokee Trail of Tears with contemporary readers. Sometime in the early 1990s I traveled to our tribal headquarters in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, to search for a real-life young person who survived the 1838 forced march. An encouraging librarian at Oklahoma's Northeastern State University's Special Collections brought me piles of books and files. I sat at a long table and spent hours leafing through pages in search of my protagonist.

When I discovered Jane Bushyhead's letter to a White school friend I knew she was the right lens into my story. Jane was almost fourteen years old, extremely articulate, and conscious of the events that were leading to the Indian Removal. She wrote things like "If we Cherokees are to be driven to the west by the cruel hand of oppression to seek a new home in the west" and "It is thus all our rights are invaded." I could feel her pain at being separated from her friend and the dread that she might be forced to leave her homeland. Jane was real to me right from the start.

As a bonus, Jane's father Rev. Jesse Bushyhead was a well-known leader in the Cherokee Nation. I had access to some of his sermons and writings and because of newspaper articles written about him as he traveled the Trail of Tears, I could plot much of the geography and chronology of Jane's journey.

What were some unique challenges you faced while writing *Words Spoken True*? Was there anything especially difficult about trying to stay true to what really happened while also presenting an engaging narrative?

I worked on this novel off and on for MANY years, workshopping it at writing retreats and with critique groups. For far too long I did not find the best way to tell it from Jane's point of view. The Trail of Tears was the main character, not Jane, even though all the action happened to her. I had a clear sense of the large-scale events: Jane having to leave her boarding school; General Scott telling the Cherokees to get ready to move; soldiers forcing the Bushyhead family from their home; months in captivity; the 800+-mile walk; arrival in Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma).

It took me time to imagine Jane's adolescent inner life: the conflict with her father and her crisis of faith, in particular. This inner life seemed to me to be possible, even probable for a bright young woman torn from the life she had known, thrust into imprisonment, surrounded by illness and death. I had lots of information about her father's Trail of Tears journey from newspaper articles, other people's journals, and historical record. The only concrete proof I had of who Jane was? One letter written before she went on the Trail and genealogical info on her life.

Every other member of her family is mentioned numerous times in historical documents. They were an amazing family and all her siblings (who survived her by many years) made their mark on Oklahoma and Cherokee history. Jane only lived a few years after arriving in Oklahoma, but I figured if she were the oldest child of such an impressive family she, too, would have been a strong person with big ideas.

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I can prove a lot about her life but *Words Spoken True* is historical fiction and I hope readers connect with my imagined Jane as I strived to remain true to the historical facts and events. My Author's Note gives clear real-life facts on all characters and details anything that might deviate from the facts we know or that there were discrepancies in retellings of historical events and I sometimes had to choose which version seemed most likely.

Can you tell us a little bit about your research for this book—where did you look, and what did you find? Did anything you discovered really surprise you or stand out?

My initial research took place before the internet was widely available. While in the Special Collections looking at documents and academic books, I had no access to a copier, so I typed entire articles out on my laptop computer to print out when I returned home. In subsequent years I went to other Oklahoma libraries to research the Bushyhead family and the Trail of Tears. I did a solo road trip along the Trail to see places like New Echota, Georgia, and Cape Giradeau, Missouri, trying to visualize Jane's journey—not easy when I was driving a rental car on highways since she would have walked those hundreds of miles on dirt roads or paths.

When I began research those long years ago, I wrote many letters to individuals who knew parts of Jane's story and asked for help through our tribal newspaper, *The Cherokee Phoenix*. I have three 4-inch-thick notebooks crammed with information I gathered, from academic journals to hand-written letters to correspondence with Jane's great-great grandson, who was thrilled I was writing her story. When in recent years I returned to this labor of love, I was able to find many of those same documents and books available online plus many new resources. Dozens of books were also available.

How important Jane's father and siblings were in Oklahoma history surprised me. I loved finding photos of them and reading about their lives as a Principal Chief and Supreme Court Justice of Cherokee Nation, sheriff, newspaper publisher, teacher, hotel owner. So even though I'm sad that Jane didn't live long after surviving the Trail of Tears I'm grateful for the contributions the rest of her family made to our tribe and the state that is now Oklahoma.

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