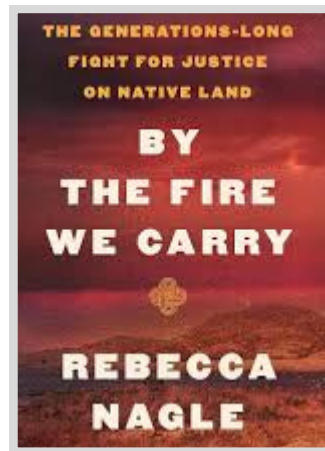


# By the Fire We Carry by Rebecca Nagle



## Summary

Before 2020, American Indian reservations made up roughly 55 million acres of land in the United States. Nearly 200 million acres are reserved for National Forests—in the emergence of this great nation, our government set aside more land for trees than for Indigenous peoples. In the 1830s Muscogee people were rounded up by the US military at gunpoint and forced into exile halfway across the continent. At the time, they were promised this new land would be theirs for as long as the grass grew and the waters ran. But that promise was not kept. When Oklahoma was created on top of Muscogee land, the new state claimed their reservation no longer existed. Over a century later, a Muscogee citizen was sentenced to death for murdering another Muscogee citizen on tribal land. His defense attorneys argued the murder occurred on the reservation of his tribe, and therefore Oklahoma didn't have the jurisdiction to execute him. Oklahoma asserted that the reservation no longer existed. In the summer of 2020, the Supreme Court settled the dispute. Its ruling that would ultimately underpin multiple reservations covering almost half the land in Oklahoma, including Nagle's own Cherokee Nation. Here Rebecca Nagle recounts the generations-long fight for tribal land and sovereignty in eastern Oklahoma. By chronicling both the contemporary legal battle and historic acts of Indigenous resistance, *By the Fire We Carry* stands as a landmark work of American history. The story it tells exposes both the wrongs that our nation has committed and the Native-led battle for justice that has shaped our country.

Courtesy of *HarpersCollinsPublishers*

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## About the Author

Rebecca Nagle is an award-winning journalist and a citizen of Cherokee Nation. She is the writer and host of the podcast *This Land*. Her writing on Native representation, federal Indian law, and tribal sovereignty has been featured in the *Atlantic*, the *Washington Post*, the *Guardian*, *USA Today*, *Indian Country Today*, and other publications. She is a Peabody Award nominee and the recipient of the American Mosaic Journalism Prize, Women's Media Center's Exceptional Journalism Award, and numerous honors from the Native American Journalist Association. Nagle lives in Tahlequah, Oklahoma.

Indigenous communities deserve the same standard of journalism as the rest of the country, but rarely receive it from non-Native media outlets. Nagle's journalism seeks to correct this.

Courtesy of HarperCollinsPublishers

## Discussion Questions

1. How might “fire” function metaphorically in this book? In what ways do individuals or communities “carry” the fire?
2. What notions of land, sovereignty, and “Indian country” emerge in the book? How do these ideas challenge common assumptions about U.S. history, jurisdiction, and state authority?
3. How did Nagle's personal family history help or hinder her ability to tell the larger story of Cherokee history and treaty rights? What role did Nagle's family history, specifically the actions of Major Ridge and John Ridge, play in the narrative? How did this specific part of the story challenge or resonate with you?
4. The book covers both the harms suffered by Native nations and the complexity of Indigenous history (including participation in slavery, assimilation pressures, etc.). What role does nuance play in Nagle's telling?
5. One major thread is the legal drama of individual cases and the larger structural history of Indigenous land rights. Which did you find more compelling: the personal stories or the structural history - and why?
6. When reading about the legal technicalities - treaties, jurisdiction, reservations, mineral rights - did you find yourself challenged? Did Nagle succeed in making the law accessible? How did your own assumptions about how law works in relation to Indigenous nations shift as you read?
7. How do collective memory and the telling of past injustices contribute to contemporary justice struggles? What does this book reveal about the connections between historical injustices and present-day issues?
8. How effective was Nagle in using symbols, metaphors, or imagery to convey her ideas about generational trauma and justice?
9. Consider the idea of intergenerational legacy: both the legacy of dispossession and the legacy of resistance. How does “carrying” the fire relate to previous generations, and what responsibilities or possibilities does it suggest for current and future generations?
10. After reading the book, how has your view of U.S. history, Native sovereignty, land justice, and the role of law changed? Were you surprised by any of the information or perspectives presented in the book?

## Professional Review

### Kirkus Reviews (07/10/24):

**\*Starred Review\*** In 1832, almost 200 years before *McGirt v. Oklahoma*, the Supreme Court held in *Worcester v. Georgia* that the Cherokee nation was a sovereign power. Andrew Jackson ignored it, forcing the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Muscogee (Creek), and Seminole nations—collectively called the Five Tribes—to leave their ancestral lands in what is now the southeastern United States and go west of the Mississippi to Indian Territory. Nagle gracefully carries readers back and forth through time, explaining the history of the Five Tribes before and after the Trail of Tears, the evolution of U.S. policy toward Native Americans, and the unique peculiarities of Indian law, thornily complex in part because “US courts kept bending the rules, and not to the benefit of tribes.” She is just as careful to elucidate the technicalities of court procedure, helping readers understand how a death-row appeal on jurisdictional grounds led to “the largest restoration of Indigenous land in US history.” The legal arcana are dense, but Nagle’s writing is not. With restrained passion she exposes one injustice after another. Following a recitation of the greed and lawlessness prompted by the discovery of oil on Muscogee land, she observes that the “origin story of the great state of Oklahoma contains a vast criminal conspiracy to rob Native people of their land and money.”

### Publishers Weekly (07/16/24):

**\*Starred\*** Journalist Nagle reports in her brilliant, kaleidoscopic debut on the legal battles leading up to *Sharp v. Murphy*, the startling 2020 Supreme Court decision that upheld the terms of a 19th-century treaty granting the Muscogee Nation land for resettlement in Oklahoma. She interweaves the complex courtroom drama with an empathetic, harrowing recap of the 1999 murder of George Jacobs by Patrick Murphy, the case which revealed that the Muscogee Nation’s reservation had never officially been dissolved. Nagle’s narrative is lucid and moving, especially as she uses archival sources to recreate the mounting terror experienced by Native peoples in the Southeast as violent mobs of outsiders swarmed onto their land. It’s a showstopper. (edited for length)