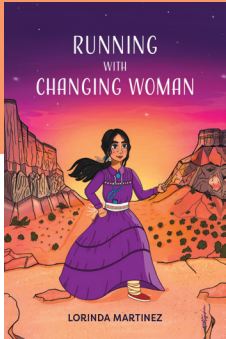


Teacher's Guide *Running with Changing Woman*

Written by Lorinda Martinez

Cover by Brittany Gene



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About the Book

Lorinda Martinez's *Running with Changing Woman* (Salina Bookshelf, 2023) follows the coming-of-age journey of Samantha Begay, a sixth-grade Diné (Navajo) girl who lives with her family near Atsá Mesa on the Navajo Reservation. The novel opens with Sam on the school bus, humiliated after her first menstrual period begins during class. Her best friend Kim is absent that day, leaving Sam vulnerable to teasing from classmates and to her own confusion about what this change means. The early chapters capture her embarrassment, her discomfort with her body, and her wish to "just be normal again."

At home, Sam's mother and grandmother begin preparing her for the Kinaaldá, the traditional Navajo puberty ceremony for girls. Through alternating scenes of humor, embarrassment, and growing self-knowledge, readers see Sam's transformation from a shy, anxious preteen into a confident young woman who begins to understand her connection to Changing Woman (Asdzáą Nádleehi)—the first woman in Diné stories who represents balance, strength, and renewal. Supporting characters enrich the story's realism. Kim, Sam's outspoken best friend, shares her own experience with the Kinaaldá and helps Sam see it as a rite of pride rather than shame. Edgar, her kind and loyal classmate, becomes a source of comic relief and emotional support, offering quiet acts of friendship that ground Sam when she feels exposed. Beverly, Sam's mother, balances her professional life as a nurse with her role as cultural teacher, telling her daughter, "This ceremony will teach you to be a hard worker, how to survive, how to pray for yourself and others."

As the story unfolds, readers watch Sam's inner conflict—caught between modern school life and traditional expectations—turn into self-acceptance. Her conversations with her mother reveal both generational distance and deep affection. When Sam admits, "I'm afraid. I'm not like Renee. What if I'm weak?" her mother reassures her that "Navajo women have proven their strength inherited

from *Changing Woman*... You're Navajo, you'll survive." These moments show that the strength Sam is seeking is not only physical but also spiritual and emotional. The novel teaches that womanhood in Diné tradition is not defined by embarrassment but by responsibility, prayer, and balance—what the Navajo call hózhó.

The Kinaaldá ceremony at the heart of the novel symbolizes not only biological maturity but also spiritual and communal belonging. Through the ceremony, Sam learns the values of discipline, humility, and service. The story reminds readers that coming of age in the Navajo world is both a personal and cultural transformation: a time to discover one's voice, remember one's ancestors, and recognize the strength that flows from women before them. As Sam's mother reminds her, "This ceremony is a chance for your family to start you off on the right path in life."

For Navajo girls, stories like *Running with Changing Woman* are powerful mirrors of identity. They show that coming of age is not something to fear but something to honor. By blending English storytelling with Navajo language, humor, and family teachings, Lorinda Martinez offers a contemporary portrait of Navajo girlhood that is rooted in tradition and hope. The novel celebrates the wisdom of women and the endurance of Diné culture. It teaches that strength is learned through challenge, that laughter and culture can coexist, and that every generation runs with *Changing Woman* in its own way—toward balance, identity, and pride.

Readability:

- Estimated Lexile Level: 650L–750L
- Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level: 4.9 (Upper Elementary)
- Flesch Reading Ease: 82.7 (Easy to read for grades 4–6)
- Common Core Grade Band Appropriate for Grades 4–6
- Can be adapted for Grades 7–8 with deeper cultural discussions

Key Themes for Classroom Discussion:

- Navajo cultural practices (Kinaaldá ceremony, matrilineal traditions)
- Respect for family, elders, and cultural knowledge
- Identity, resilience, and growing up
- Friendship and peer relationships
- Balancing modern life with cultural traditions

Classroom Use

This book is an excellent resource for:

- Social Studies: Exploring Navajo culture and traditions
- English Language Arts: Character analysis, theme exploration, and narrative structure
- Navajo Language & Culture: Vocabulary connections and cultural stories
- SEL (Social Emotional Learning): Navigating peer pressure, embarrassment, and resilience

12-Day Grade 6 ELD Unit Plan – Running with Changing Woman

Day 1: Chapters 1–2: The Bus Ride Home & Mission Impossible

Standards: AZ ELP 6-8.L.1, AZ ELP 6-8.SL.1

Objective: SWBAT describe Sam’s feelings during the bus ride and explain how she uses strategies to handle embarrassment.

Vocabulary: embarrassment, dignity, peer pressure, strategy

Materials: Text excerpts, character chart

Exit Ticket: Write 2–3 sentences describing a time you felt embarrassed and how you handled it.

Day 2: Chapters 3–4: Kim’s Story & Mom’s Story

Standards: AZ ELP 6-8.R.1, AZ ELP 6-8.W.2

Objective: SWBAT compare how Kim and Sam’s mom describe the Kinaaldá ceremony and identify shared themes.

Vocabulary: ceremony, tradition, generational, similarity

Materials: Venn diagram handout

Exit Ticket: Complete one similarity and one difference between Kim’s and Mom’s story.

Day 3: Chapters 5–6: New Rituals & Ms. Janice’s Story

Standards: AZ ELP 6-8.R.4, AZ ELP 6-8.SL.1

Objective: SWBAT identify how school staff support Sam and explain why adult guidance is important during change.

Vocabulary: ritual, guidance, support, responsibility

Materials: Excerpts, teacher-student support chart

Exit Ticket: Name one adult who supports Sam and why.

Day 4: Chapters 7–8: Encore of Embarrassment & Feast De La Feast

Standards: AZ ELP 6-8.L.3, AZ ELP 6-8.SL.2

Objective: SWBAT explain how humor and family meals strengthen relationships.

Vocabulary: humor, relationship, respect, feast

Materials: Family meal role-play activity

Exit Ticket: Write one way meals are important in your family.

Day 5: Chapters 9–10: Mrs. Lobo’s Story & Crash Course

Standards: AZ ELP 6-8.R.2, AZ ELP 6-8.W.3

Objective: SWBAT summarize Mrs. Lobo’s story and discuss how community elders share wisdom.

Vocabulary: elder, wisdom, lesson, summary

Materials: Story summary chart

Exit Ticket: Write one lesson Sam learns from Mrs. Lobo.

Day 6: Chapters 11–12: So It Begins & Over the Hill and Through the Desert

Standards: AZ ELP 6-8.R.5, AZ ELP 6-8.W.6

Objective: SWBAT trace Sam’s journey into the ceremony and explain how place is described in the text.

Vocabulary: journey, landscape, environment, resilience

Materials: Map of Navajo Nation, setting chart

Exit Ticket: Draw or describe one place Sam visits and why it matters.

Day 7: Chapters 13–14: Settling In & Rebecca’s Story

Standards: AZ ELP 6-8.R.3, AZ ELP 6-8.SL.3

Objective: SWBAT compare Sam and Rebecca’s experiences and identify how friendship supports growth.

Vocabulary: friendship, comparison, empathy, support

Materials: Character comparison chart

Exit Ticket: List one way Sam and Rebecca help each other.

Day 8: Chapters 15–16: Teacher Sam & The Testing of Sam and Rebecca

Standards: AZ ELP 6-8.W.2, AZ ELP 6-8.L.5

Objective: SWBAT explain the importance of perseverance in Sam’s “testing” and use evidence from the text.

Vocabulary: perseverance, challenge, evidence, growth

Materials: Quote analysis worksheet

Exit Ticket: Write one example of perseverance from the chapters.

Day 9: Chapters 17–18: Sam’s Test Continues & The Grind

Standards: AZ ELP 6-8.R.7, AZ ELP 6-8.SL.5

Objective: SWBAT analyze how Sam balances school life with cultural traditions.

Vocabulary: balance, tradition, challenge, identity

Materials: Two-column notes (school vs. culture)

Exit Ticket: Share one challenge Sam faces balancing two worlds.

Day 10: Chapters 19–20: The Final Countdown & Two Arrivals

Standards: AZ ELP 6-8.R.8, AZ ELP 6-8.W.1

Objective: SWBAT debate whether Sam is ready for the final steps of her ceremony and justify with evidence.

Vocabulary: readiness, argument, justification, transformation

Materials: Debate prep sheet

Exit Ticket: Write one argument for or against Sam’s readiness.

Day 11: Chapters 21–22: The Sing & Who Wants Cake?

Standards: AZ ELP 6-8.R.9, AZ ELP 6-8.SL.4

Objective: SWBAT explain how the final ceremony transforms Sam and describe an important event that happens during the ceremony.

Vocabulary: event, transformation, culture, celebration

Materials: Timeline

Exit Ticket: Describe one key event that happened during the ceremony and explain why it was important for Sam.

Day 12: Beyond Reading: Cultural & Community Engagement

Standards: AZ ELP 6-8.W.7, AZ ELP 6-8.SL.6

Objective: SWBAT connect Sam’s story to real community or cultural practices and present findings to peers.

Vocabulary: community, engagement, heritage, presentation

Materials: Interview guide, poster or slideshow materials

Exit Ticket: Share one insight about cultural traditions you researched or experienced.

10-Day Grade 6 Social Studies & SEL Unit Plan Running with Changing Woman

Day 1: Introduction to Identity and Place

Standard: SS06.G1.1 – Use geographic knowledge to explain cultural identity and sense of place.

Objective: SWBAT create an identity web connecting clans, family, and community ties to develop self-awareness.

Materials: Book excerpt (Chapter 1), chart paper, markers

Exit Ticket: Write one sentence about how where you live shapes who you are.

Day 2: Storytelling and Oral Traditions

Standard: SS06.H1.1 – Explain how cultural traditions are carried across generations.

Objective: SWBAT share and reflect on a family story to connect storytelling to cultural traditions.

Materials: Book excerpt (grandmother's stories), journals, pencils

Exit Ticket: Write the name of one story you learned from family and why it matters.

Day 3: Understanding Ceremonies

Standard: SS06.C1.1 – Describe cultural practices and community responsibilities.

Objective: SWBAT compare the Kinaaldá ceremony with other cultural milestones to understand responsibilities of growing up.

Materials: Book excerpt (ceremony discussion), comparison chart template

Exit Ticket: List one responsibility that comes with growing up.

Day 4: Community and Responsibility

Standard: SS06.C1.2 – Explain how community members support each other.

Objective: SWBAT identify support networks by creating a Support Circle Map.

Materials: Chart paper, sample circle map, colored pencils

Exit Ticket: Write one way you support your family or friends.

Day 5: Conflict and Resolution

Standard: SS06.C4.1 – Identify conflicts in communities and ways they are addressed.

Objective: SWBAT role-play conflict resolution strategies using Navajo cultural concepts of hózhó (balance/harmony).

Materials: Scenario cards, poster paper, markers

Exit Ticket: Write one peaceful way to solve conflict in school.

Day 6: Women’s Roles in Navajo Society

Standard: SS06.H2.1 – Analyze the role of individuals in maintaining cultural traditions.

Objective: SWBAT explain the importance of women’s roles in Navajo society by sharing family interviews.

Materials: Book excerpt (Changing Woman), interview guide handout

Exit Ticket: Write one strength women bring to families and communities.

Day 7: Historical Resilience

Standard: SS06.H3.1 – Explain how Indigenous communities adapted to challenges (Long Walk, Hwééldi).

Objective: SWBAT connect personal struggles to Navajo historical resilience by mapping the Long Walk.

Materials: Map of Long Walk routes, journals

Exit Ticket: Describe one way Navajo people showed resilience in history.

Day 8: Modern Life & Tradition

Standard: SS06.G2.1 – Compare traditional and modern uses of land, resources, and customs.

Objective: SWBAT compare and contrast modern and traditional life through a Venn diagram.

Materials: Book excerpt (Sam’s school vs. tradition), Venn diagram worksheet

Exit Ticket: Write one way you balance tradition and modern life.

Day 9: Community Projects & Giving Back

Standard: SS06.C2.1 – Identify civic responsibilities.

Objective: SWBAT brainstorm and plan a classroom service project to support their community.

Materials: Chart paper, brainstorming sheets, markers

Exit Ticket: Write one way you can give back to your community.

Day 10: Reflection and Celebration

Standard: SS06.C4.2 – Explain how cultural celebrations build community.

Objective: SWBAT reflect on personal growth by writing about a community event or celebration which helped you grow.

Materials: Paper, pencils, optional food for celebration

Exit Ticket: Share one thing you learned about yourself during this unit.

Teacher Resources: Navajo Kinaaldá

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- YouTube. (n.d.). "Kinaaldá: The Dine' (Navajo) womanhood ceremony" [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CFuY6WEv3WU>

Scenario Activities – Running with Changing Woman

These scenarios are designed for classroom discussion, writing prompts, or role-play activities. They focus on social-emotional learning (SEL) and social studies connections.

Scenario 1 – The Bus Ride

Sam feels embarrassed when Brenda loudly announces something personal about her on the bus. The whole bus laughs, and Sam doesn't know what to do.

Discussion Prompt: What choices does Sam have in this moment?

Writing/Role-Play Activity: Show how Sam could respond in a way that keeps her dignity.
SEL Focus: Handling embarrassment, conflict resolution.

Scenario 2 – Kim's Support

Kim wasn't at school when Sam needed her, but later she listens and comforts Sam.

Discussion Prompt: How does Kim show she is a supportive friend?

Writing/Role-Play Activity: Act out how you would comfort a friend going through something hard.
SEL Focus: Relationship skills, empathy.

Scenario 3 – Talking with Mom

Sam worries about the Kinaaldá ceremony and feels scared that she won't be strong enough. She wants to tell her mom how she feels but is nervous.

Discussion Prompt: Why might it be hard to tell parents when you feel scared?

Writing/Role-Play Activity: Act out a respectful way Sam could share her feelings with her mom.
SEL Focus: Self-awareness, communication.

Scenario 4 – Navajo Resilience

Sam learns about Changing Woman and the strength Navajo women have passed down. She wonders if she will be strong enough too.

Discussion Prompt: How does learning about Navajo history and traditions give strength today?

Writing/Role-Play Activity: Share a family story about strength or resilience.
SEL Focus: Building identity and self-confidence.

Scenario 5 – Standing Up for Others

When Brenda teases Sam, Edgar shows support by sitting with her and sharing music.

Discussion Prompt: Why is it important to stand up for others in hard moments?

Writing/Role-Play Activity: Practice what you could say if you saw a classmate being teased.
SEL Focus: Social awareness, allyship, responsible decision-making.