

Traci Sorell: Our history, and the past has been extremely painful around having our languages in a sense, you know, essentially outlawed, right? Because if you were speaking them, it led to huge punishment. And so I hope that by including the language in the books, that people feel that connection, and that it's not something that's impossible to learn, and that they can do that, too. Because truly, our languages are the foundation of our identities and our worldviews. That's why there was a concerted effort by the federal government to keep people from speaking those languages.

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Host: Welcome to this podcast, hosted by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of English Language Acquisition, OELA. We're here today with Stephanie Nichols, Education Program Specialist at OELA. To celebrate the Native American Heritage Month, Stephanie spoke with two exceptional Cherokee children's book authors, Regina McLemore, a retired teacher and an award-winning author, and Traci Sorell, an award-winning author. During the podcast, the authors discussed their work and inspiration, the significance of the Cherokee language and culture in their writing, and read excerpts from their books.

Let's get the conversation started.

Stephanie Nichols: Thank you for joining us. I want to welcome you to our podcast today, highlighting Native American authors, specifically Cherokee authors.

We are honored and grateful to be joined today by Regina McLemore. She is the author of several books for young readers. We're going to be highlighting her book, "Cherokee Clay," today. We are also joined by Traci Sorell, and she is also the author for many books for young readers. We're going to be highlighting her book, "We Are Grateful," today.

Traci and Regina are both Cherokee authors, and we are excited to hear from them today. We're going to ask them a few questions, and get to know them better, and hear a little bit more about their work.

All right. Regina, if you don't mind, I'm going start with you.

Regina McLemore: Sure.

Stephanie Nichols: The first thing we'd like to know is what led you to become an author, and in particular, an author of children's books about Cherokee culture?

Regina McLemore: Well, if you know me, you know that I always have a book. I've always been a reader, I've always been a writer. They're both real important to me. And I found that I was drawn to historical fiction books that have a lot to do with the culture of the main characters, and I thought, okay, when I write a book, I'm going to write one about my people, about the Cherokees, and I'm going to make sure there's a lot in there about their history and their culture.

Stephanie Nichols: Wonderful.

Regina McLemore: So that's pretty much it.

Stephanie Nichols: Absolutely. We're so glad that you did.

Traci, how about you? What led you to become an author of children's books about Cherokee culture?

Traci Sorell: About a decade ago, my son was preschool age, and I was searching for books about contemporary Cherokee people, you know, and children. And I couldn't find any, which alarmed me because we have a lot of citizens, and a lot of people that write. And I also saw that there weren't any trade published books on federal Indian law and policy, and that was my background, and the work that I had done, and things I'd studied up to that point. And I found out that there's just still a big hole in the curriculum about that. So that's important for everyone in the United States, living here, to know about and understand. Otherwise, more harm is done to Native nations.

And so, both of those things kind of propelled me. As my mom would say, if you recognize there's a problem, don't tell me about it unless you want to be part of the solution. And so I then had to figure out how could I write books for young people, to start addressing what I wasn't seeing for him, and then

certainly not for other Cherokee kids, or his peers across the country, or around the world.

Regina McLemore: Now, Traci is so right. There is a great gap there. You don't find a lot of books written for young adults that talk about our Native American cultures. And I think that's something that she and I are both trying to address.

Traci Sorell: Yes. Yes.

Stephanie Nichols: Indeed. Indeed. That's one of the reasons that we were so thrilled to speak with you both, and to find out about your work. And I know that there are other authors out there, doing the same kind of work, whether they are Cherokee authors or other Native American authors, and we are just excited to have you putting a spotlight on that area of work, and hopefully inspiring some others to do more of it as well. Thank you.

Traci Sorell: Yeah, I just had a full day of school visits yesterday, and I told the kids, I said, I just want you to know how jealous I am that you get to read books by so many different Native authors now. I said, what you see on the shelves in the last five to six years simply did not exist previously. You would have maybe, you know, a couple of authors. That was it. And I said, so it is a wonderful time, from board books to young adult novels, to see people across a variety of Native nations sharing stories through words and art. It's exciting.

Regina McLemore: Yes, it is.

Stephanie Nichols: Indeed it is. Indeed. Thank you.

Regina, I'll come back to you. What ways...excuse me. I'm sorry. In what ways might your books help support parents that are hoping to inspire their children to learn their Native language?

Regina McLemore: All right. I have a story to tell, and I think this is a story that's true of a lot of our Cherokee people, and our other Native American people. But my grandmother was taken to a mission school when she was young, and she was told that if she spoke her language, she would be whipped. And I think I've heard this story again and again, and you know, I wanted to show that whenever my main character, one of my main characters, Amelia,

she's kind of a keystone character, because she's the only one that's in all three books, and she is taken to a school, and she's told pretty much the same thing. And I wanted the kids to see how important our language is, and what great harm was done when the language was taken away.

And I also try to put phrases and words, common Cherokee words and phrases, for them to kind of pick up on. And I'm hoping the parents encourage them in that, and that it will be just kind of like a stepping stone to them to go on and learn the Cherokee language.

Stephanie Nichols: Absolutely. Thank you. And that's such an integral part of our NAM grant, and the work that we do with our grantees, so we're thrilled that your books are including some of those Native phrases. And I even noticed, I believe, Traci, on your website, you can hear someone read aloud in Cherokee "We Are Grateful." So hearing that Native language, and being able to read that as part of your work is exceptional.

Traci, let's go to you, and answer that same question. How could your books be of support to parents that want to help inspire their children to learn their Native language?

Traci Sorell: Well, the exciting part to me is that we do have a lot of Native nations who are working on language reclamation. So whether it's in-person classes, or online classes, there are a lot more options that are available now. And as Regina was talking about, you know, our history, and the past has been extremely painful around having our languages in a sense, you know, essentially outlawed, right? Because if you were speaking them, it led to huge punishment. And so I hope that by including the language in the books, that people feel that connection, and that it's not something that's impossible to learn, and that they can do that, too. Because truly, our languages are the foundation of our identities and our worldviews. That's why there was a concerted effort by the federal government to keep people from speaking those languages.

You know, a simple phrase such as, you know, my name is Traci Sorell in English is not said the same way in Cherokee. You know, when you introduce yourself in Cherokee, you know, I've been told that when we say that same

phrase, it translates to, "I am called by them," "They call me," you know, or "I'm named by them." And that, you know, is really part of the Cherokee language, qith relationality. It is all about relations. And so you reconnect to your heritage when you speak your language.

I had a short story in "Ancestor Approved," an anthology edited by Cynthia Leitich Smith, and the characters in that one are from the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe, so they speak Ojibwe. And I use Ojibwe words in that book, when the characters are talking to each other, referring to different family members, because that's how they would speak in their household. And so it's just kind of normalizing use of the language. And my hope is that regardless of how few words people know, they'll use them on a regular basis, right, to honor their ancestors, and to connect to the heritage.

Regina McLemore: Very good. I agree with you 100%.

Stephanie Nichols: Yes, thank you so much. Absolutely.

Back to you, Regina. How many books have you written and published so far? And can you tell us about anything you're currently working on?

Regina McLemore: Okay. I have written and published three books. It's really a trilogy, a historical fiction trilogy. Cherokee Clay, Cherokee Stone, and Cherokee Steel. They start with a girl who's trying to get away from the soldiers who are coming to take her and her mother away, and they go all the way to the year 2000 for the third book.

One time I was...I was an English teacher, and I had a class, and this class I was particularly close to, and I read a little passage from my book that I was writing on then, "Cherokee Clay," and one of the girls said, "You know, that reminds me of a Native American 'Roots,'" and I said, "Yeah, I guess it is kind of like that."

But anyway, that's the whole basis of that historical fiction trilogy.

And I also wrote a book called "Wesa Goes on a Treasure Hunt," and that's in the final editing stages. It will come out next year. Wesa is cat in Cherokee, and this little girl, her Cherokee name is Cat, because a lot of children have

Cherokee names, that are raised in the culture. And I've got two other books that go along with the Wesa series, and I'm working on a middle-grade book right now about Wesa. I'm using that same character, only I'm moving her into a different environment. She's leaving the secure rural community that she's always known, and she's living in the big city, and she's trying to adapt to a new culture, and a new way of living. And that's what I'm doing right now. Hopefully, I'll get that finished this year, and submitted.

Traci Sorell: That's exciting.

Stephanie Nichols: Thank you. Thank you. That's very exciting. I know, I can't wait to see and read those. Wonderful.

Traci, how about you? Tell us about the books that you've published so far, and what you're currently working on.

Traci Sorell: Well, over the past six years, I've had 16 books come out in fiction and nonfiction, and then nine shorter works and anthologies, from poetry to letters to chapters, etc. Right now, I'm finalizing two nonfiction books that are going to come out in 2026, an illustrated picture book, and a photo illustrated middle-grade work. And then I have one story that I wrote that has not been published, a picture book manuscript, but I'm looking to turn that into a chapter book series, once I'm done working on these two nonfiction books. So lots of things percolating on the horizon.

Next year I just have an acrostic poem in an anthology of other authors who have had their books banned, called "Banned Together." And so I'm hoping to get a lot more writing done since I won't be on the road, touring for new books.

Regina McLemore: That sounds exciting. I would love to read more of your books, Traci.

Another thing I do, I didn't mention this, but I also am a columnist for a Western magazine called "Saddlebag Dispatches," and I do a lot of articles about rural communities, about Cherokee communities, that are published in newsletters, and through newspapers and that sort of thing. Because history is another great passion of mine. Cherokee history and Cherokee culture, you

really can't separate the two, they're together. And I do nonfiction writing as well.

Stephanie Nichols: Wonderful, thank you for that, Traci. And Regina, thank you for adding that as well. And you are so correct, and we believe the language is part of that that can't be separated either, the language culture with the history. So I appreciate you pointing that out.

All right, we would really love to get you each to read a brief excerpt from the books that we're highlighting today. Regina, we ask you to select a brief excerpt to read to us aloud from "Cherokee Clay." If you'd like to go ahead with that, we're excited to hear it.

Regina McLemore: Okay. This is from page 197 of "Cherokee Clay," and it's about Amelia. I'll kind of set the background a little bit. Amelia has just been left at the mission school. She's six years old, and she's very scared. And her father looks at her, "He looked into the frightened deer eyes of his youngest child, and said, 'I have to leave you now, my little one, my Usti. Soon you will learn to be a big, smart girl.' Later, at the school, the matron says, 'Sarah, tell the little fool she must never speak in Cherokee again, and tell her the penalty if she's foolish enough to do so.' Sarah, speaking to Amelia, 'Little one, you must no longer speak Cherokee. If you do so, you will be badly beaten.'"

And that's kind of a recounting of my grandmother's experience, as well.

Traci Sorell: Mm, mm, mm. That is...yeah, that's a far too familiar story.

Regina McLemore: Yes.

Stephanie Nichols: Indeed. That echoes exactly what you shared with us about your grandmother. Thank you for reading and sharing, Regina.

Traci, we'd love to hear you read from "We Are Grateful."

Traci Sorell: Yes, so "We Are Grateful," *otsaliheliga* is how we say the sentence, we are grateful, in Cherokee, and the book does have Cherokee words kind of sprinkled throughout. And because we're in fall, and Cherokee New Year just started early last month, I will read the opening, and the fall section for us.

"Cherokee people say otsaliheliga to express gratitude. It is a reminder to celebrate our blessings, and reflect on struggles daily, throughout the year, and across the seasons. Ulagohvsi, fall. When cool breezes blow and leaves fall, we say otsaliheliga. As shell shakers dance all night around the fire, and burnt cedar scent drifts upward during the great new moon ceremony, as we clean our houses, wear new clothes, enjoy a feast, and forget old quarrels to welcome the Cherokee new year. While we collect buck brush and honeysuckle to weave baskets, to remember our ancestors who suffered hardship and loss on the Trail of Tears, and have hope as our elesi, grandma, cradles the newest member of the family, and reveals his Cherokee name."

And then, the book continues on from there with a different stanza in the poem for each of the four seasons, and about how Cherokee people...you know, it weaves in our culture and history, and how we express gratitude all year long.

Regina McLemore: Mm, that's beautiful.

Traci Sorell: Wado. Thank you.

Stephanie Nichols: That's beautiful, yes. Thank you. Thank you, both.

All right, Regina, what would you say to someone who's thinking of writing a book?

Regina McLemore: I would say, number one, you will learn patience. Because it takes a long time to get a book published, or at least that's been my experience.

Traci Sorell: Yes, it does.

Regina McLemore: You know, you get the idea...you get the idea, and then you finally get it on paper, and then you have to go find a publisher, you have to go through all these edits, and you know, it just takes a long... And then it has to be printed, and it may be a while before it's ready to be out there, you know? So you have to wait, and be patient, and work on other things while you're waiting on that book to come out.

And also, I think really, you need to think about it before you really start your book. You have to think, now, what am I trying to say? What message am I



trying to get across? And who's going to be my audience? Who am I writing for? And then, you know, it takes a while, really, to go through the process. And it's not fast, by any means.

Traci Sorell: I absolutely agree with that.

Regina McLemore: Yes.

Stephanie Nichols: Yes, Traci, anything else to add?

Traci Sorell: Yes. And because I haven't written books for adults, I can't really speak to that. So whoever is listening, this really is targeted at those who want to write for young people. And the first thing I would say to do is read, read, read, and read some more.

Regina McLemore: Yes. Yes.

Traci Sorell: You need to get very familiar with what has been published in the last two to three years. The books of your childhood are not relevant in today's world, to young people. The way they take in information is much more visual than we had access to as children, so books are more highly illustrated. And that doesn't mean just picture books. Graphic novels are very popular. But illustrations in middle-grade, and YA novel spot art is very typical now. And so as a result, the writing is very tight. It is lyrical language, you have to keep the action moving. And it's almost ruined me for reading adult work, because they'll go on and on about a scene, and scene setting, and with writing for young people, you brush stroke it in, and keep the story moving.

So when I say to read, like I say, books published in the last two to three years, at least a hundred picture books, or if there's novels, at least 40 to 50 of them. And if you're writing for young people that are Native, go to the American Indian Library Association, look at their Youth Literature Awards, as a great place to start. We Need Diverse Books also has a site called [indigenoureadsrising.com](http://indigenoureadsrising.com). Teachers and librarians who are Native put those lists together for them. And so those are great places to start, and really get a handle on that part.

And then as Regina talked about, you know, get your ideas down, and figure out, you know, what is the format that I want to use? Is it a novel in verse? Is it a picture book? Am I writing fiction, am I writing nonfiction? And go from there. But bookmaking is a team process. And so you have to be very willing to be humble, and put your ego aside about, you know, what ideas are truly precious to you, because lots of people have a lot of say. And when you're writing for young people, understand that the way you're going to get that book to young people, generally speaking, is to have it trade published. And so, you know, whether that's a large trade publisher like Charlesbridge...I mean, Penguin Random House, or a smaller family-owned one like Charlesbridge, or medium-sized, Lerner, whoever it is, they're the ones who have the set-up purchase channels with schools across the country, libraries, as well as, you know, bookstores and all retailers. And so you'll never get anything else written if you're trying to sell all your own books, and establish accounts, and do all the marketing with that.

So start, though, by really reading and getting a handle on what's in the marketplace today, and then think about your own background, culture, and heritage, and what you can bring to share with young people, that's not out there. And since we, you know, have a growing number of stories, but not enough, there is plenty of room for stories, fiction and nonfiction to be out in the world. But work with those within your community to, you know, make sure that, like, no harm is done, right? That you've got it really centered in the culture, the language, the worldviews, and also understand that there's a whole team, once you connect with a publisher, in terms of the editor and art director, and all of these folks who will be working along with you to make that book as polished as possible. It's a lot of fun, but it is a lot of work, and requires a tremendous amount of patience.

Regina McLemore: Yes, it does. I'm glad that you mentioned the illustrator, because I am just now learning to work with an illustrator. You know, my first books were young adult, so there were no illustrations, and so this is something new for me.

Traci Sorell: Yeah. Yeah, you don't tell them what to write. I mean, unless you're paying for it, you know, with self-publishing. Because they have to take

that, your words, and elevate it to a whole other level. They are telling their part of the story. And I am so grateful, because I have no visual artistic abilities whatsoever, and I feel like every time I'm paired with an illustrator, they have taken my text and created a more incredible story than I ever envisioned. Because I have a movie playing in my head when I write. I don't see actually how it will look on the page. I don't think about that. I just think about what people are doing, or what has happened, you know, what I've gotten from the nonfiction text. It's been an incredible process.

Regina McLemore: Yes, it has. I like what you said about movie, because you know, I'm that way, too. I see things in scenes, you know?

Traci Sorell: Mm-hmm.

Regina McLemore: I'll think, okay, here's this scene, and I'll go ahead and write it, and then I'll think, and then, here's this... So yes, I think I'm much the same. I see it visually that way.

Traci Sorell: Yeah. The process of publishing would be a little quicker if I was an author-illustrator, but like I say, I don't have that ability. And I'm so grateful for all the work that they do, like I say, to bring such a richer story in the illustrations to young readers.

Regina McLemore: Well, I'm like you, I have no artistic ability. I appreciate art, but I can't draw a stick figure very well, you know?

Traci Sorell: But you have the gift of art in words, you know? That's the way I try to look at it. It's like, well, I'm crafting things with words, but...not anything else.

Regina McLemore: That's true. That's true.

ALJ FERLICCA: Wonderful. Thank you both. Such wonderful insight. Thank you for all those details.

One last question for each of you. How do you think...or educators, if educators have used your books in any innovative ways, can you tell us a little bit more about that?

Regina McLemore: Sure. There is a professor, I think she's retired now, but Clarissa Willis, she was a professor at the University of Southern Indiana, and she read my book, "Cherokee Clay," and she incorporated it in her children's literature class. And I asked her a little bit about how she did it, and she said she required that the students read the book, and then be able to discuss the role of indigenous literature that depicts life in an authentic manner. And to me, that was a great tribute, that she considered my book to be authentic, because I certainly wanted it to be.

And I also use my book, because I do a lot of speaking about history, Cherokee history, and I use some historical characters my book. Like Ned Christie, Redbird Smith, Sam Sixkiller, Tom Starr, they're all in my book, my "Cherokee Clay" book. And I like to speak about them, and tell about their history, because it's so fascinating, and it was so important in Cherokee history. So that's a couple of things that I can think of.

Traci Sorell: Nice. I love that.

For myself, during the pandemic, in fall of 2021, I visited the Cherokee Language Immersion School. So the children have lessons in Cherokee, and they're talking the Cherokee language all day long, and I visited Carolyn Swepston's third grade students. And I was going to talk to them about being an author, and share Pow Wow Day with them. Well, unbeknownst to me, she had had them read "We Are Still Here," which is a book, a nonfiction book that I wrote about, you know, what are the policies, what's the history moving forward after the United States says we're not signing any more treaties with Native Nations? Diplomacy doesn't stop, you know, government-to-government relations continue, of course, and still continue to this day.

And so, they had each selected one of the 12 topics. There were 12 students in our class, and they had each selected a topic, and they had made... If you're familiar with that book, in the back, you know, all the students are getting a topic, and then, in the end, there is a wordlist spread that shows each of the students with a trifold, you know, on Indigenous Peoples Night, like all their families and community members, and other people from the school have come

to see their presentations. And so they're taking turns explaining their [inaudible 00:28:47]

So each of these students pulls out their trifolds while I'm there, and they have written in our Cherokee syllabary about their experiences with each of these topics. And I just started crying, because, you know, I could never have envisioned that that was how the book would be used, you know? I just knew that students across the country had a, you know, kind of generic Native American unit sometime in upper elementary between third through fifth grade, and I wanted something that showed them, you know, even though we disappear in curriculum after 1900, we are very much still here. We've had contributions, and Native Nations and citizens have been very active, and have a lot of agency, and we just, you know, haven't seen that in books.

And so, to have a student talk about, you know, being able to go to the ceremonial grounds, and stomp dance without fear of arrest or being prosecuted, as would have happened to our ancestors previously, or another student to talk about with the Indian Child Welfare Act passed, being able, when they're not able to stay with their parents, that their grandparent could adopt them, and instead of being adopted out to a non-Native family, and being able to stay within the culture and the family and their community. Like I say, it was just...it was just tremendous, and I was so personally touched by that.

And I know other classes have, you know, for like those in middle school or high school, have used the book as kind of an entry point for their study of Native law and policy, and then students have drilled down and looked at, okay, how did relocation, the relocation program that the feds had from the late '40s through the '60s, how did that impact the Native Nations in our area? Or the one that our school is on, but it's been, you know, that Tribe has been relocated to somewhere else. And really looking at, you know, were they one of the Tribes that was terminated, the 109 Native Nations that was terminated, and had their relationship with the federal government terminated, which made them, most of those folks, automatically homeless, if they couldn't buy the land at the price the federal government set, and were moved into cities?

And then, what was the experience of people, you know? How many people have stayed off, out of those Tribal lands, if they were able to get status restored, or others that moved out? And we lost a lot of Cherokee people through relocation, and we have...you know, most of our population lives outside of the Reservation now because of that time period.

So it's been wonderful to just see with just that one book, and I've got stories with all the different books, but how I knew there was this gap in the curriculum, and I was like, if I can just get some level of understanding out there... Because it's not like this information isn't known, it just hasn't been incorporated in the curriculum, and I don't know if it ever will be. But I wanted to provide, at least through trade publishing, a way for parents and teachers and librarians to have access to this, thus having...as the gatekeepers, provide that to young people. But seeing that within my own Nation, and our own kids, wow, it was just, like I say, tremendous. And I was like, you know what? If nothing else good ever happens in my writing life, like, this has made it for me.

Regina McLemore: Wow. Yes, that's quite an experience, Traci. I know that had to be rewarding.

I know Carolyn Swepson, too. She's a great lady, and a great crafts lady, too. She's very good at basket making, as well as language.

Traci Sorell: Yeah, I'm wearing some earrings that she made right now.

Regina McLemore: Yes. I have some, too.

Traci Sorell: They're good luck earrings, I'm wearing those this morning.

Regina McLemore: Yes, yes. Our Cherokees are so talented, you know? They really are. We have so many people that are talented in many areas, and they're so free with their talents. They share them with all their people, you know? That's just part of being Cherokee, I guess.

Traci Sorell: Yeah, it is.

Stephanie Nichols: Well, it's very exciting to hear the incredible impact that you are aware that your work has had. And I can't imagine even how much more of

that there is that you might not be aware of. But how wonderful to see, and be able to hear about that impact.

We just want to thank you both so much. We are grateful to have had a brief amount of time to talk with you, and get to know you better. We are hopeful that our listeners to this podcast will want to dive in further to your work, and not just your work, but the work of other Cherokee authors, and Native American authors as well. And we certainly hope that this is not the last time that we get to visit with you, and check in maybe soon, and get an update on those things that you said were forthcoming, and hopefully by the next time we speak, we'll get to hear a little bit more about them.

But I just want to thank each of you today. And if there's anything that you want to close with, we just want to say how much we appreciate you, and letting us highlight you for the work that you're doing to help connect Native American culture and language, which is so important.

Regina McLemore: Well, I want to say wado for this opportunity. I'm very thankful that I got this chance to speak about my work, and to meet Traci, you know, this way, and learn more about her, and learn more about you, the Department of Education. And it just encourages my heart to go on, you know, to keep writing, to keep, you know, trying to connect with the Cherokee people, and to promote their culture and their history, because those are very important to me.

Again, wado.

Traci Sorell: Yes, wado. I am extremely grateful for the opportunity just to encourage, you know, families and our kids to learn our language, and speak your languages, honor your ancestors, read books by Native authors and illustrators. There's a whole world of storytelling that's happening now, that we couldn't even envision, like I say, even a decade ago. It's a tremendous time. But we certainly need more voices, and we definitely need more books in our languages. You know, you are a more enriched person, the more languages that you speak, but speaking the language of your ancestors, there's just nothing that beats that connection to those that have come before you, and a different way of seeing the world, and being anchored in that is one that's very important.

So again, I'm honored to have been able to spend time with you all, and to get to be introduced to Regina and her work. Like I say, we have over 400,000 Cherokee people, so we don't all know each other. And I'm just excited for all the work that she has forthcoming, as well as, like I say, other things that I know that are in the works from other Cherokee authors, and other Native authors and illustrators. It's a wonderful time, and I hope our young people continue to add to that in the years to come. Wado.

Stephanie Nichols: Thank you both. We wish you all the best.

Host: A big thank you to our panelists for discussing their work, sharing their experiences, and reading from their books.

We also encourage our listeners to visit the NCELA website, at [www.ncela.ed.gov](http://www.ncela.ed.gov), and check out the many educator resources available there.

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