

Asha and Baz Meet Elizebeth Friedman

Caroline Fernandez

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Asha and Baz Meet Elizebeth Friedman is an intriguing novel that centers an underlauded woman pioneer in the sciences.

In Caroline Fernandez's adventure novel *Asha and Baz Meet Elizebeth Friedman*, best friends travel through time to learn about code breaking during World War II.

The story begins with an encoded message from Asha and Baz's teacher and the promise of a prize to the pair that cracks the code. Eager to win, Asha and Baz bring the puzzle to recess with them, along with their magic stick (a plot device that series returnees will recognize but that is not explained in this volume). The stick enables them to travel back in time to seek help from historical figures in solving their problems.

This time, the stick takes them to Elizebeth Friedman, a STEM foremother who used math, science, history, engineering, and pattern recognition to spot and crack codes. Expecting new trainees, she invites Asha and Baz into her home—though her easy acceptance of these two children as encryption trainees for the military is at odds with the secrecy that surrounds her work. Even Friedman's husband will not enter the room when she works, and he covers his eyes when he speaks from the door. Still, Friedman shares the basics of code with Asha and Baz in accessible terms, complete with the use of a spy name and file pulled straight from history. Through collaboration and teamwork, the three break the encryption, leading to an important discovery that saves lives. However, the relaxed pace at which they do this work belies its urgency.

Though most of the story belongs to Friedman, Asha and Baz also develop their friendship in its beginning and end: they work together, and they encourage and support each other. Back in their own time, Asha and Baz, with their newfound knowledge, work on their code—and on helping shy Baz find his voice and social courage. The illustrations focus on the facial expressions of the children, revealing their reactions to events and conveying Baz's social anxiety and Asha's confidence.

Still, where the story settles its gaze on Friedman, Asha and Baz are relegated to mere plot devices and vehicles for the book's messages. They observe the impact of sexism on Friedman; they also witness her fascinating ability to overcome such roadblocks. Her relationship with her fellow codebreaker husband, and her relationship with an ambitious military leader who is eager to use Friedman and her work for his own advancement, further show what it meant for a woman to work within a system made for men.

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CAMILLE-YVETTE WELSCH (September 5, 2023)

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