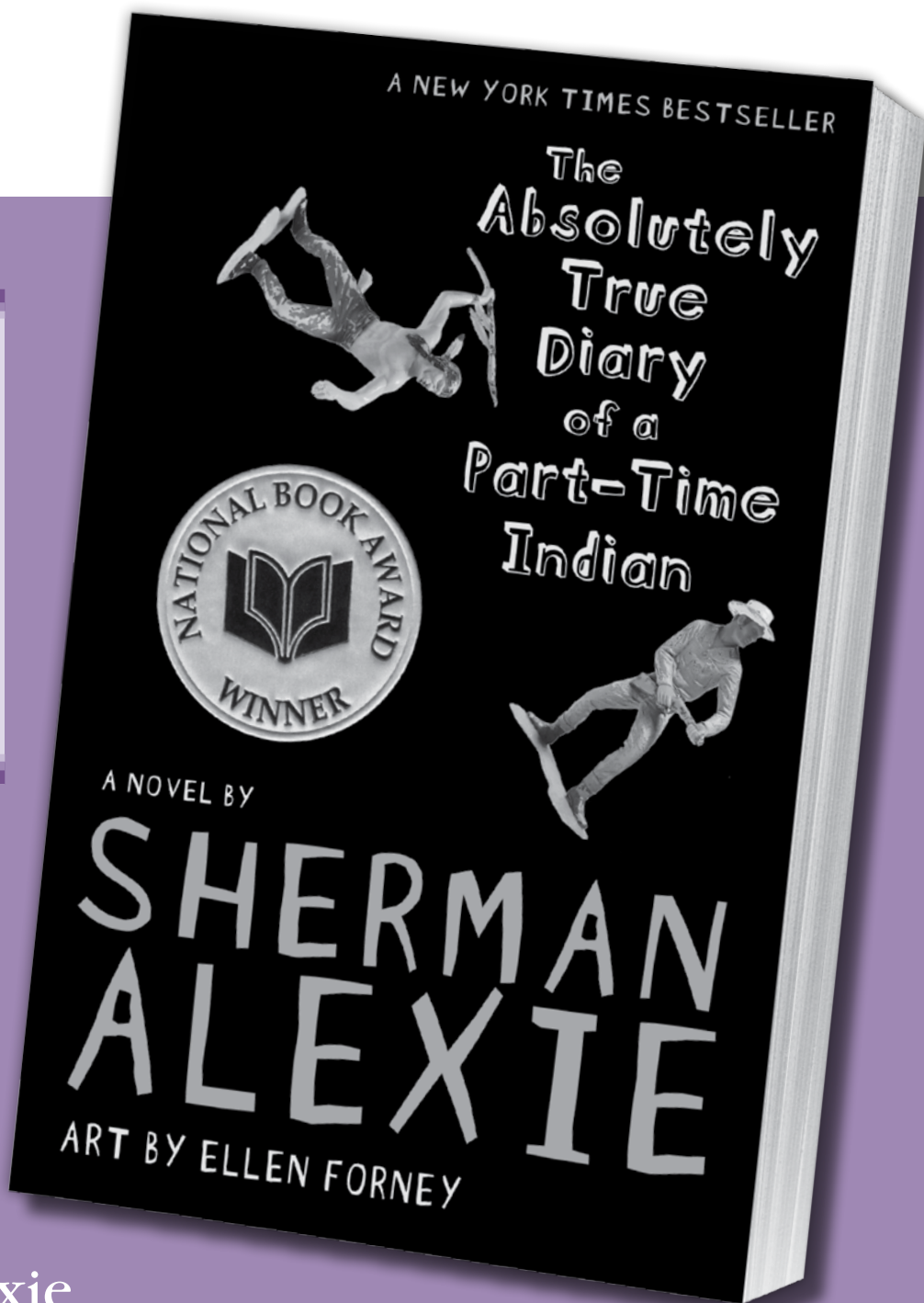


The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian

thematic connections

- ❖ Multiculturalism
- ❖ Family
- ❖ Overcoming Challenges

Ages: 12+



by
Sherman Alexie

CRITICAL DISCUSSION AND TEACHING GUIDE

PRE-READING ACTIVITY SUGGESTIONS

Share with students that while *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is a work of fiction, the author infuses a number of autobiographical elements into the story, including being born with hydrocephalus, experiencing seizures during his childhood, growing up on the Spokane Indian Reservation in eastern Washington, and enrolling at Reardon High School rather than attending high school on the reservation.

Introduce students to the different Native American tribes of the northwest United States, especially those in Washington and Montana. Encourage students to explore the diversity of the tribes, their traditions, and their histories.

Have students become familiar with the locations and histories of the Spokane Indian Reservation in Washington and the Flathead Indian Reservation in Montana. Additionally, ask students to explore the surrounding geography and demographics of Washington and Montana, including their capitals and major cities: Olympia, Seattle, Spokane, and Tacoma in Washington, and Helena, Billings, Missoula, and Great Falls in Montana.

Invite students to create up to five personal lists:

- A list of the people who have given them the most joy in their lives (people they know personally);
- A list of the musicians who have brought them the most joy;
- A list of their favorite foods;
- A list of their favorite books;
- A list of their favorite athletes/artists/celebrities/ heroes (people they do not know personally).

After students have constructed their lists, have them fold the paper and use it as a bookmark for this novel. (The relevance of this exercise will become apparent to them as their reading of the novel progresses.)

Individually, in small groups, or as a class, invite students to define what it means to be someone's "best friend." As students advance through the text, ask them to assess which characters meet their criteria as a "best friend" to Junior. (At the end of their reading, have students revisit their original definition of a "best friend." Does their definition still hold water or need revision?)

Invite students to read and discuss Sherman Alexie's 2011 essay, "Why the Best Kids Books Are Written in Blood," as well as the essay that inspired it, Meghan Cox Gurdon's "Darkness Too Visible."

QUOTATIONS

Discuss the following quotations, their context, and their connection to larger themes, events, and attitudes that appear throughout the novel.

"I think the world is a series of broken dams and floods, and my cartoons are tiny little lifeboats." (6)

"A bullet only costs about two cents, and anybody can afford that." (14)

"I didn't believe that. There's never enough time to change your life. You don't get to change your life, period." (40)

"Every white person on this rez should get smashed in the face. But let me tell you this. All the Indians should get smashed in the face, too." (43)

"You punched me," Roger said . . . "I can't believe you punched me." (65)

"We are absolutely tribal. For good or bad, we don't leave one another. And now, my mother and father had lost two kids to the outside world." (89)

“Traveling between Reardon and Wellpinit, between the little white town and the reservation, I always felt like a stranger.” (118)

“We had killed the Redskins. Yep, we had humiliated them.”
(194)

CHARACTER DISCUSSION

At one point, Gordon declares that “. . . life is a constant struggle between being an individual and being a member of a community” (132). Discuss various characters from the book and explain their encounters with this issue. For each character being discussed, describe the extent to which s/he succeeds in finding a balance between individuality and community expectation and membership.

How do Junior’s parents compare to the others depicted in the novel? In what ways are they perhaps superior? In what ways are they maybe lacking?

Why does Rowdy remain in Wellpinit for high school?

Do Penelope and Junior tend to vomit for the same or different reasons?

In a letter to Junior, Mary contemplates titling her life story, *How to Run Away From Your House and Find Your Home*. Has Mary, by literally running away, stopped running in a figurative sense?

To what extent are characters motivated and their actions defined by gender norms and expectations? Is gender as determining a factor for characters as their ethnicity or economic standing in this novel?

ESSAY QUESTIONS

By the close of the novel, all signs seem to suggest that Junior will succeed in escaping reservation life. Why does Junior succeed at this where others do not, and is the root of his success internal or external?

Throughout the novel, Junior maintains that Rowdy is his “best friend.” Do you agree or disagree with this assessment?

To which community does Junior *most* belong by the end – Wellpinit or Reardon?

Which supporting character do you believe has the *greatest* impact on Junior?

Who, overall, is depicted more favorably in the novel – Indians or white people?

Hope and fear both play important, albeit competing, roles in shaping outcomes throughout the novel. Choose three characters and identify for each an instance in which his or her hopes and fears collide. For each instance, explain whether or not you believe the character’s hope or fear prevailed.

What lessons and opportunities do sporting or artistic endeavors offer characters in the novel that core subject classroom experiences perhaps do not?

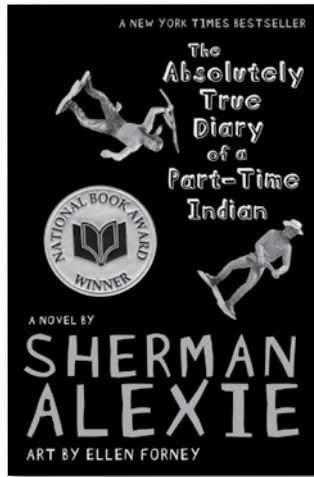
BEYOND THE TEXT

Both high schools highlighted in the novel have Native American nicknames for their sports teams. Have students research and explore this issue, which has involved scores of educational institutions and sports franchises in recent decades. Explain how certain institutions have dropped nicknames, symbols, and mascots referencing Native Americans, while a number of others have not.

Junior states late in the novel that, “Reservations were meant to be prisons, you know? Indians were supposed to move onto reservations and die. We were supposed to disappear” (216). Have students research the history of specific Indian reservations throughout the country, including their establishment, administration, and any significant transformations that have occurred with them over time.

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian

about the book



THE ABSOLUTELY TRUE DIARY OF A PART-TIME INDIAN

by Sherman Alexie

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AR: 4.0

F&P: Z+

Sherman Alexie tells the story of Junior, a budding cartoonist growing up on the Spokane Indian Reservation. Determined to take his future into his own hands, Junior leaves his troubled school on the rez to attend an all-white farm town high school where the only other Indian is the school mascot. Heartbreaking, funny, and beautifully written, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, which is based on the author's own experiences, coupled with poignant drawings that reflect the character's art, chronicles the contemporary adolescence of one Native American boy as he attempts to break away from the life he thought he was destined to live.

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian has quickly become a beloved and influential modern YA novel. Winner of the 2007 National Book Award for Young People's Literature and the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award, it was cited as a Best Book of the Year for 2007 by both *Publishers Weekly* and *School Library Journal*. It has been nominated for 32 statewide young reader awards and was voted the winner by teens in California, Delaware, Michigan, and Washington.

about the author



Photo © Rob Casey

Sherman Alexie is a Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian. He earned a 1994 Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Writers' Award, was a citation winner for the PEN/Hemingway Award for the Best First Book of Fiction, and was recently named one of Granta's Best of the Young American Novelists. Alexie is the author of *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, which served as the basis for a film that premiered at the 1998 Sundance Film Festival. His book *Reservation Blues* won the Before Columbus Foundation's American Book Award. Alexie's books of poetry include *I Would Steal Horses*, *Old Shirts & New Skins*, *First Indian on the Moon*, and *The Summer of Black Widows*.

praise for *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian*

- ★ "Alexie bounds into YA...A Native American equivalent to Angela's Ashes." —PW, starred review
- ★ "Junior's narration is intensely alive." —*The Horn Book*, starred review
- ★ "Breathtakingly honest, funny, profane, and sad." —KLIATT, starred review
- ★ "Delivers a positive message in a low-key manner." —SLJ, starred review
- ★ "Enough to leave a reader gasping." —*The Bulletin*, starred review



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