

Teacher Guide

Grades 7–8

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian

Sherman Alexie

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THE ABSOLUTELY TRUE DIARY OF A PART-TIME INDIAN

by
Sherman Alexie

Art by Ellen Forney

Teacher Guide

Written by
Linda Herman

Note

The 2009 Little, Brown and Company paperback edition of the book, © 2007 by Sherman Alexie, was used to prepare this guide. Page references may differ in other editions. Novel ISBN: 978-0-316-01369-7

Please note: This novel deals with sensitive, mature issues. Parts may contain profanity, sexual references, and/or descriptions of violence. Please assess the appropriateness of this book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading and discussing it with them.

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Novel Units, Inc.
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Skills and Strategies

Comprehension

Creative thinking, identifying attributes, predicting, inferring, supporting judgments

Critical Thinking

Brainstorming, research, compare/contrast, cause/effect, analysis, evaluation

Literary Elements

Characterization, story mapping, setting, conflict, theme, point of view, author's purpose, figurative language

Vocabulary

Definitions, context clues, synonyms, root words, word maps

Listening/Speaking

Discussion, oral presentation, debate, dramatizing

Writing

Creative writing, personal narrative, poetry, essay, report

Across the Curriculum

Social Studies—Native-American culture, history, stereotypes, tribal government, team mascots, recipe, biographies, time line; Geography—map; Science—bison, ponderosa pine; Health—depression, self-worth, eating disorders; Math—graphs; Art—illustration, design, models; Music—composition, soundtrack

The Black-Eye-of-the-Month Club—Because Geometry is Not a Country Somewhere Near France

Born with “water on the brain,” Junior has physical problems that make him a target for bullies. He spends most of his time at home on the Spokane Indian Reservation, drawing cartoons. He believes his drawings may be an opportunity to escape a life of poverty. Junior discovers that being helpless to care for those you love is the worst part of poverty when his dog, Oscar, becomes ill. Oscar is shot because the family cannot afford to take him to a veterinarian. The most important person in Junior’s life is his best friend Rowdy. They share their dreams, basketball, and a love of comics. Unlike his sister Mary, who hides in the basement all day, Junior looks forward to life. However, on the first day of high school, Junior’s dreams are shattered when he opens a 30-year-old geometry book and sees that his mother used the same book when she was in school. Junior realizes that his tribe cannot even afford new textbooks.

Vocabulary

serenely
 outpoured
 tribal
 poverty
 authentic
 perseverance
 depressed
 powwow
 alcohol
 brawling
 vandalism
 disorder
 persistent
 distressed
 isolated

Discussion Questions

1. What health problems does Junior have? How would you summarize Junior’s attitude toward these problems? (*Junior was born with “water on the brain,” or too much cerebral spinal fluid inside his skull. Despite having surgery, Junior’s brain damage resulted in physical problems such as too many teeth, huge hands and feet, an enormous skull, being nearsighted in one eye and farsighted in the other, headaches, seizures, stuttering, and a lisp. Answers will vary. Some students may view Junior’s attitude as positive. He is glad to be alive, realizing he could have died as an infant. Junior makes fun of his “go-ov” appearance and is more concerned about internal problems such as his susceptibility to seizures. Though Junior compensates for his health problems by staying home to avoid bullying, he enjoys drawing cartoons and sees drawing as an opportunity to escape a life of poverty on the reservation. Other students may be uncomfortable with Junior’s descriptions of his ailments, feeling that he ridicules himself too much and seems a bit too pathetic.*)

2. Describe Junior’s experiences with Indian Health Service. Do you believe this is an accurate depiction of this organization?

(*Indian Health Service only had dental work and eyeglass purchases once a year; therefore, Junior had ten teeth pulled in one visit and wears ugly glasses, the only style available. The white dentist only gave Junior half the required amount of Novorin [painkiller], believing Indians only feel half as much pain as white people. Answers will vary.*)

3. What does Junior mean when he says, “I think the world is a series of hurricanes and floods, and my cartoons are tiny little lifeboats” (p. 6)? (*Answers will vary. The metaphor explains how Junior’s cartoons provide him with a haven on an imperiled reservation. Drawing gives Junior peace of mind, hope, and dreams of a better life. Junior draws to express himself, to be noticed, and because he feels important while holding a pencil.*)
4. What can you infer from the illustration on page 6 of the novel that shows Junior juggling? (*Answers will vary. Juggling depicts Junior feeling as if he searches for his place in life. The poetry book may represent his artistic goals and dreams of leaving the reservation. The surprised rabbit may represent Junior’s confusion over how to accomplish his goals or the rural lifestyle of the reservation. The chainsaw probably represents the dangers Junior faces, whether from health problems, remaining on the reservation, or the unknown. Junior wants to be noticed, loved, and accepted for who he is.*)

tough persona he presents to others. Rowdy does not want his likeness drawn because someone else might see his softer side. Rowdy may also be afraid to really see himself. Students should note the angry face superimposed over the pensive-looking one.)

13. How is Junior's sister "good at ruining things" (p. 26)? Why is she called Mary Runs Away? (*Mary ruins the closet's safe feeling for Junior when she tells him that hiding in a closet is the equivalent of wanting to return to his mother's womb. Mary also ruins her life by "freezing" after high school and hiding in the basement. She got hurt once by running away from life.*)
14. Why is Junior worried about high-school basketball? Rowdy will most likely be on the varsity team as a freshman, while Junior may not be able to compete with the bigger and better players. Junior is afraid that Rowdy will leave him behind and start to tease him along with the other students.)
15. How does the reservation influence the type of people who become teachers there? (*The reservation's isolation and poverty only attract "liberal, white, vegetarian do-gooders and conservative, white missionary services" [p. 30]. People who come to teach at the reservation have personal missions that include "bettering" the Indians. These people must also be willing to live in poor conditions in the non-Indian world.*)
16. How does Junior react to the 90-year-old geometry book? Why does he react this way? (*Junior throws the book at Mr. P. Seeing his hopes and dreams destroyed, Junior lashes out at the unfairness of life. Expected to study from his mother's old book, Junior is understandably sad, realizing just how poor his tribe is.*)
17. **Prediction:** What will be the consequences of Junior throwing his geometry book at Mr. P?
18. **Prediction:** How will high-school basketball affect Junior and Rowdy's friendship?

Supplementary Activities

1. Comprehension/Art: Examine Junior's drawings on pages 11 and 12 of the novel. Draw a caricature of yourself as you are now. Then, draw a picture of what you would like to become if your dreams became a reality.
2. Social Studies/Viewing: Research the history and significance of Prairie Chicken Dancing. With your teacher's permission, view videos of dancers on the Internet. Then create a Prairie Chicken Dance outfit and explain your choice of designs. You may wish to draw your outfit or make a model.
3. Critical Thinking/Writing: Write an essay on whether or not you think a best friend can be more important than family. Give examples to support your response.
4. Government: Research tribal governments of Native Americans. In an original written report, explain their relationship with the United States and the role of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The Bureau of Indian Affairs' Web site is a good source of information (www.bia.gov; active at time of publication).
5. Literary Analysis: As you read the novel, keep a list of literary devices such as metaphors, similes, and personification. Cite the page number(s) of the novel on which you find each example.

Cause/Effect Chart

Directions: Make a flow chart to show decisions Junior made, the decisions he could have made, and the result(s) of each. (Use your imagination to speculate on the results of decisions Junior could have made.)

