



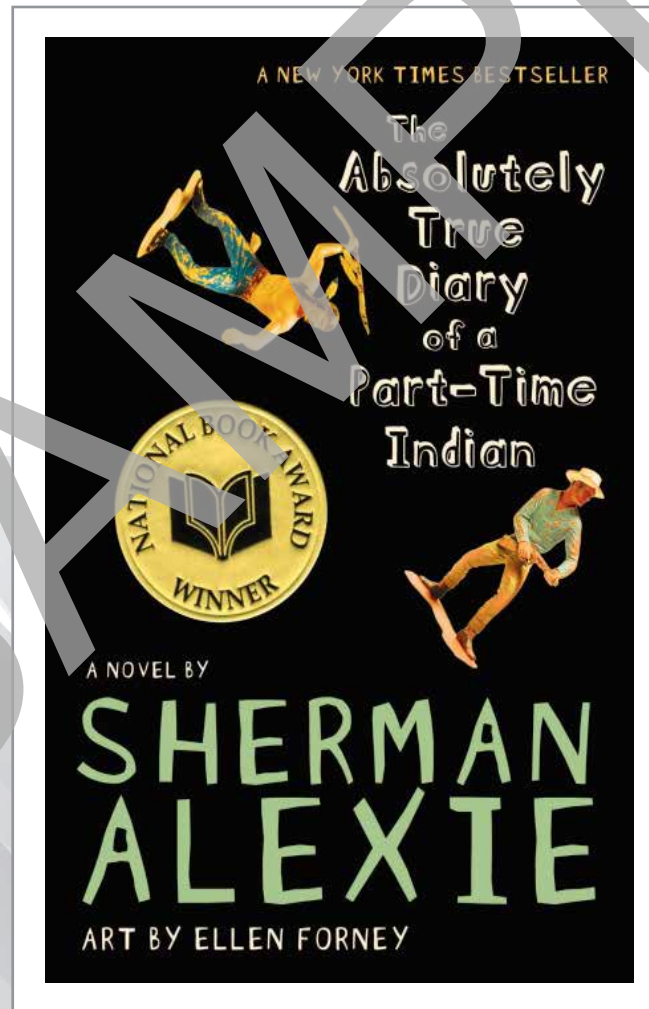
TEACHER GUIDE

GRADES 9-12

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian

Sherman Alexie



READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian

Sherman Alexie

TEACHER GUIDE

NOTE:

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

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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

Genre: realistic fiction (semi-autobiographical)

Setting: Spokane Indian Reservation in Wellpinit, Washington; all-white school 22 miles away in Reardan

Point of View: first person

Themes: identity, independence, familial and tribal expectations, community, culture, racism and stereotypes, death, poverty, alcoholism, bullying, isolation, revenge, relationships, coming of age

Conflict: person vs. self, person vs. person, person vs. society

Style: narrative

Tone: candid, conversational, thought-provoking, humorous, sad

Date of First Publication: 2007

Summary

Arnold Spirit, Jr., lives on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Wellpinit, Washington. Though born with hydrocephalus, Junior is witty and intelligent. His dreams of becoming someone important and escaping the never-ending cycle of poverty and alcoholism on the reservation are shattered when he receives a 30-year-old geometry book in school, the best his tribe can afford. Encouraged by a teacher, Junior transfers to Reardan, a rich, all-white school 22 miles away from the reservation. Surprisingly, Junior's family supports his decision but Rowdy, Junior's best friend, becomes his worst enemy upon hearing the news. Junior endures racism at Reardan but eventually gains the respect of some of the most popular students there. The alcohol-related deaths of Junior's grandmother, his sister, and a family friend overwhelm Junior with grief. New friends and insights and renewed determination remotivate Junior. Basketball games between Wellpinit, where Rowdy is the star player, and Reardan, where Junior is the best shooter, mirror the rivalries between Native Americans and whites and Junior and Rowdy. Junior earns the respect of both communities as he fights to find his place in life. In the end, his identity depends on independence, leaving his tribe, and accepting his role as a "part-time Indian" in two worlds that have more similarities than expected.

About the Author

Born in 1966, Sherman Alexie, Jr., is a Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian who grew up on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Wellpinit, Washington. Like his main character in the semi-autobiographical *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Alexie was born with hydrocephalus, or water on the brain, that required brain surgery at six months of age. Hospital stays and years of physical therapy exposed Alexie to life outside the reservation and encouraged his desire for a good education and a better life. At Wellpinit High School, Alexie decided the only way to obtain a good education was to transfer to the high school in Reardan, which he describes as "an anti-Indian town." He describes the decision as "epic," saying, "It was only 22 miles, geographically. But I might as well have been Lewis and Clark for the journey it took." After graduating from Reardan, Alexie attended Gonzaga University in Spokane before transferring to Washington State University, where he graduated with a B.A. in American Studies. Originally, Alexie planned to become a doctor, but after repeatedly fainting in anatomy classes, he discovered writing in a poetry workshop. In addition to publishing poetry, Alexie writes short stories, novels, and screenplays. In 2002, he directed *The Business of Fancydancing*, an award-winning film based on his first poetry collection. Alexie is a public speaker and has appeared on television shows such as the "PBS NewsHour,"

“Politically Incorrect,” “60 Minutes II,” and “NOW with Bill Moyers.” He has also taught courses in American Ethnic Studies at the University of Washington and performed public readings and standup comedy. He works on various projects simultaneously, including producing a documentary for the Hydrocephalus Association.

Alexie’s distinguished list of awards includes being named one of *Granta Magazine’s* Twenty Best American Novelists Under the Age of 40; a four-time World Heavyweight Poetry Champion; a PEN/Hemingway Award for Best First Book of Fiction for his first collection of short stories, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*; the Before Columbus Foundation’s American Book Award for his first novel, *Reservation Blues*; and a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year award for his second novel, *Indian Killer*. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Alexie’s first young-adult novel and a *New York Times* Bestseller, has won numerous awards, including the 2007 National Book Award for Young People’s Literature, the 2008 Boston Globe-Horn Book Award for Excellence in Children’s Literature in Fiction, and the 2009 Odyssey Award for the novel’s audio version. Alexie lives in Seattle with his wife and two sons.

Characters

Junior (Arnold Spirit, Jr.): born with physical handicaps; intelligent, witty high-school student; cartoonist; determined to escape poverty and alcoholism on his reservation; transfers to an all-white school

Dad (Arnold Spirit, Sr.): caring; depressed; alcoholic; gambler

Mom (Agnes Adams Spirit): caring; intelligent; recovering alcoholic; eccentric

Mary (“Mary Runs Away”): Junior’s sister; dreams of being a romance novel writer; spends seven years hiding in the basement before eloping to Montana

Grandma: wise; tolerant; non-drinker; loves people and life

Rowdy: Junior’s best friend; mean and angry to everyone but Junior; loves comics; star athlete

Rowdy’s dad: abusive alcoholic; regularly beats his wife and son

Eugene: Dad’s best friend; always drunk but very kind; rides a vintage motorcycle

Mr. P: geometry teacher on the reservation; sometimes forgets to come to class and often arrives wearing pajamas; confesses to hurting students in the past and “trying to kill Indian culture” (p. 35); encourages Junior to leave the reservation

Roger: basketball star at Reardan; bullies, then befriends, Junior

Penelope: beautiful, popular girl at Reardan; bulimic; dates Junior

Earl: Penelope’s father; racist

Gordy: “Genius White Boy” at Reardan; Junior’s friend; tutors Junior, teaching him that hard work is joyous

Coach: basketball coach at Reardan; befriends and encourages Junior

Mr. Dodge: Junior’s science teacher at Reardan; angry that Junior knows more about petrified wood than he does

Mrs. Jeremy: Junior’s social studies teacher at Reardan; mocks Junior for missing school while grieving

Miss Warren: guidance counselor at Reardan; notifies Junior when his sister dies

Don't Trust Your Computer—Red Versus White

Junior misses Rowdy and his craziness, which is the opposite of the repressed Reardan students who act like “middle-aged business dudes.” He tells Gordy that many Indians call him an apple, red on the outside and white on the inside. Gordy replies, “...life is a constant struggle between being an individual and being a member of the community” (p. 132). Mary writes about job searching, writing her life story, and moving to her gorgeous new home—a trailer that Junior describes as looking like a TV dinner tray. At Reardan basketball tryouts, Junior proves he is not a quitter, earning a place on the team and the respect of the coach and players. Their first game is at Wellpinit, where the Indians taunt Junior and Rowdy knocks him unconscious. Junior’s father goes on his usual Christmas drinking binge but shares a tender moment with Junior. Despite his parents’ faults, Junior realizes they treat him better than many Reardan parents who ignore their children. A drunk driver hits Grandma as she is walking home from a powwow. Before she dies, Grandma—true to her tolerant and loving nature—asks her family to forgive the drunk driver.

Vocabulary

repressed
primitive
banished
sentimental
humiliation
optimistic
intimidate
pelted
contempt
taunted
concussion
endeavor
eccentric
binge
tolerant

Discussion Questions

1. How is Rowdy the opposite of the students at Reardan? Whose attitude do you believe is the most positive? (*Reardan students worry so much about grades, sports, and their futures that they sometimes act repressed like middle-aged businessmen. Rowdy is the opposite of repressed, as shown by his e-mailing Junior a picture of his bare backside. Answers will vary, but students should note that Rowdy is headed toward a bleak future, while Reardan kids take their futures seriously. Discussion could cover finding a balance in life between responsibility and fun.*)
2. Junior says, “...some Indians think you have to act white to make your life better. Some Indians think you *become* white if you try to make your life better, if you become successful” (p. 131). Do you think going to an all-white school means Junior is trying to be someone he is not? Explain your opinion. (*Answers will vary. Some students may think leaving the reservation shows that Junior believes he must remove himself from the Indian world in order to be successful. Others may think Junior will hold onto his Indian heritage, but leaving the reservation is the only way he can get a better education. Discussion could also cover whether or not Junior’s tribe uses these opinions as an excuse to avoid change.*)
3. Gordy says, “Well, life is a constant struggle between being an individual and being a member of the community” (p. 132). How does this statement apply to Junior? (*Answers will vary. As an individual, Junior leaves the reservation for personal reasons—to get a better education and make a better life for himself. However, his action creates discord in his community, resulting in his being called “an apple,” or traitor. Junior is struggling to fit in while doing what is best for him, which requires ignoring others’ expectations.*)
4. Why do you think Mary describes her new home, a small trailer, as “the most gorgeous place in the world” (p. 134)? (*Answers will vary, but students should infer that Mary is happy and, after years of hiding in the basement, she is enjoying life. Even though she is having trouble finding a job, Mary is content and looking at the bright side of everything.*)

should cover what it means to be a loving, caring, and attentive parent. Simply providing the basic survival needs [food, clothing, shelter] for a child does not make one a good parent. A child needs attention, love, encouragement, stability, protection, and mental stimulation from an emotionally present parent.)

13. According to Junior, what is the reason Indians have become intolerant of others? Why does Grandma still have “that old-time Indian spirit” (p. 155)? (*Indians have become judgmental and hateful ever since “white people showed up and brought along their Christianity and their fears of eccentricity” [p. 155]. Answers will vary but should include that Grandma is a special person. She loves meeting people, can empathize with others, and keeps an open mind.*)
14. Why doesn’t Grandma drink alcohol? What is ironic about her death? (*Grandma does not drink alcohol because it would affect her senses; drinking would prevent her from experiencing the world. Grandma is one of the few Indians on Junior’s reservation who does not drink, yet she is killed by a drunk driver.*)
15. **Prediction:** How will Grandma’s death affect Junior?

Supplementary Activities

1. Comprehension: Write about a time you or someone you know had a friendship that overcame stereotypes.
2. Creative Writing: Write a letter or an e-mail from Junior to Mary. Summarize Junior’s thoughts about the events in Mary’s life, and explain how they affect his life.
3. History: Prepare a time line highlighting the history of basketball. Include visual displays and brief reports about the game and the players.
4. Critical Thinking: Consider the following quotes from U.S. football coach Vince Lombardi. Explain which you think is most important and why.
 - “Once you learn to quit, it becomes a habit.”
 - “Perfection is not attainable. But if we chase perfection, we can catch excellence.”
 - “We would accomplish many more things if we did not think of them as impossible.”
5. Literary Analysis: Select a 75- to 100-word passage from the chapter titled “Red Versus White.” In a brief report to the class, explain how the author’s choice of words and sentence structure reveal his feelings about the passage’s subject matter.