

A First Opinion: Breaking Down Stereotypes of Contemporary American Indians

Alexie, Sherman. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. New York: Little, Brown & Company, 2007.

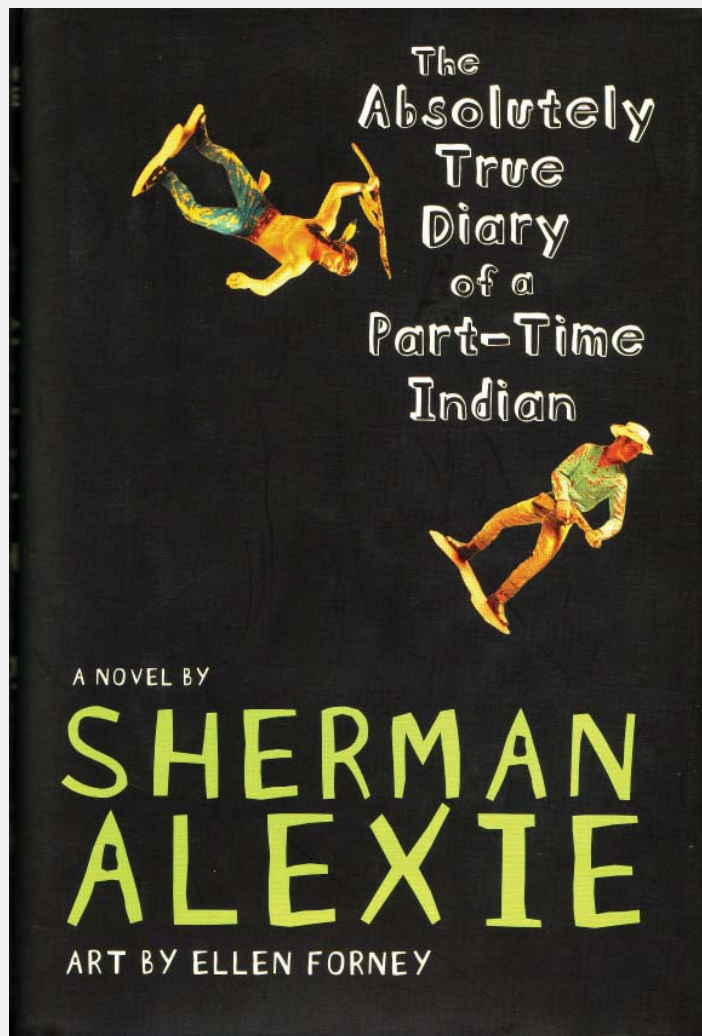
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Contemporary Native American writers have been lionized for their unvarnished portrayals of Indian characters and communities, whether present-day or historical. The significance of such realism is only heightened by longstanding stereotypes of Indians still perpetuated by Hollywood westerns and school mascots. The emerging canon of such literature—novels by Momaday, Silko, Erdrich, and Welch, for example—is rich in social realism, though sometimes tempered by literary techniques that have been likened to magical realism. Alexie’s own fiction, including this first foray into writing for young adults, is certainly no exception. After all, his popularity and reputation—witness the success of his film *Smoke Signals*—have been built on consistently irreverent accounts of Indian identity and intercultural experience. Given his celebrated wit, it is little surprise that Alexie would shine while writing a YA novel, as receiving a National Book Award attests.

Much of the charm of *The Absolutely True Diary* comes from the voice and perspective of its narrator, a fourteen-year-old Spokane Indian who transfers to a high school in a wealthy, white farm town neighboring the reservation. By turns wise and naive, Junior contends with the personal and social fallout of this choice. The narrative is perfectly complemented by cartoons (courtesy of Ellen Forney) that Junior purportedly draws to escape his fears and grief (“my only real chance to escape the reservation,” he tells us). Some of the most telling include a sketch of his parents’ unfulfilled dreams, the cover of an “Indian Romance Novel,” and a self-portrait: half Indian, half white. Adding realism and “authenticity” is the fact that the story is semi-autobiographical. According to Alexie’s website, he grew up on the Spokane Indian reservation himself and, just like the book’s narrator, attended high school in nearby Reardon, “where he knew he would get a better education.” Accepting the National Book Award, Alexie explained, “It feels like a validation not only of my work, but of my life choices.”

The novel gives a glimpse into the emotional gymnastics of its young protagonist attempting to fit in as he navigates unfamiliar cultural terrain. While repeatedly coming to

terms with the loss of friends and family, he finds a kind of salvation in sports, becoming a local basketball hero. Ironically, this pits him against his friends and former teammates at the reservation school, who now view him as a traitor—not only for leaving but also for succeeding. Alexie explores such delicate themes as social acceptance, tolerating difference, and even interracial romance with characteristic candor. The work's darker moments involve alcoholism, violence, and death. Yet, as Alexie himself laments, it is the slightly off-colored sexual innuendos that have drawn attention. While such passages



are invariably tongue-in-cheek, teachers are still well advised to consider the mores and expectations of their own communities when assigning this work.

Given its playful illustrations, disarmingly candid narrator, and pitch-perfect humor—as well as its revision of familiar coming-of-age scripts—*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is likely to captivate and delight many young readers.

A Second Reaction: A Strong Adolescent Voice Reflects American Indian Life

Alexie, Sherman. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. New York: Little, Brown & Company, 2007.

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American middle- and high-school literature textbooks typically include Indian/Native American poetry, vignettes from sacred Indian stories, oratories, or tribal trickster tales. Adolescent students may be learning about the history of Indian tribes through the pieces they encounter in their literature textbooks, but they are probably not exposed to how Indians live today. Betty Booth Donohue, an English teacher and member of the Cherokee West Nation, says, "If you really want to teach Indian/Native American literature, use a novel" (personal communication, 4 April 2008).

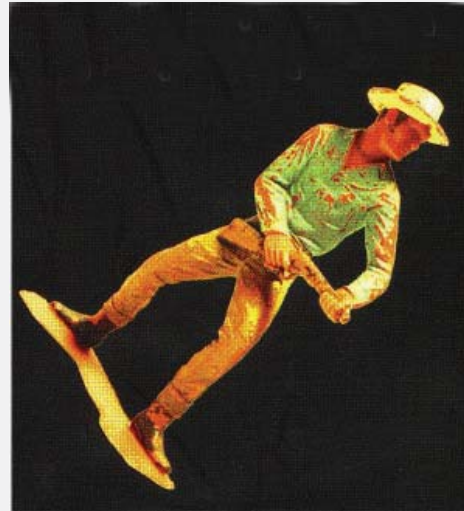
In order to look at the contemporary issues Indians face, junior and senior high school teachers should check out Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Alexie's first novel for young adults takes readers through Arnold (a.k.a. Junior) Spirit, Jr.'s freshman year of high school. During the first week of classes, Junior decides to transfer from Wellpinit, the Spokane Indian Reservation School, to Reardan High, which is off of the reservation and twenty miles away. As the only Indian student at Reardan, Junior encounters intolerance, but also kindness and inclusion. The protagonist becomes a "part-time" Indian because he lives in two different worlds—one where he is going nowhere and the other that offers hope for changing his destiny. By the end of this story of this coming-of-age story, Junior learns that friends will be there for you in the end, no matter what happens, and that "if you let people into your life a little bit, they can be pretty amazing." (129).

Junior's story is based on Alexie's own teenage experience—from finding his mother's name in a textbook that was assigned to him to becoming a star basketball player on the Reardan High School team. With this perspective, Alexie is able to speak directly and honestly in a truly authentic and often witty voice. The sarcastic, self-deprecating humor in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* will draw in adolescent readers, because the language is recognizable and the situations will seem familiar to teens.

Ellen Forney's cartoon drawings illustrate Junior's fears, hopes, and insightful observations and poignantly add personal reflection to the novel. Reluctant readers may gravitate

toward and enjoy these drawings and changes in fonts.

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian would be a great read-aloud for accompanying a unit on American Indian literature or history. I paired this novel with Joseph Bruchac's *Heart of Chief* in a sixth-grade language arts unit. If choosing to ask each student to read *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* story on his or her own though, consider the following caveats: there are instances of explicit, yet realistic language (including a racist joke on page 64); the book portrays the harsh realities of oppression, poverty, alcoholism, violence and, death; and some of the raw, quick wit may be tricky for some struggling readers to understand.



I found *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* to be a valuable classroom resource. Junior's voice will stay with adolescent readers and help them understand the reservation experience, haunted by alcohol abuse and oppression but rich in family love, and know something about what it feels like to be American Indian in a White world.