

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian
by Sherman Alexie

Rationale by members of the BHS English Department: Sasha Almendinger, Melissa Bartlett, Gina Bernard, Megan DeChaine, Paul Goodwin, Anna Hamann, Jessica Kemp, and Jacob Westrum

Bibliographic Citation:

Alexie, Sherman. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. New York, Little, Brown & Co., 2009.

Grade Level and Audience

The Minnesota Department of Education recommends *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* for grades 6-8; however, students in grade 9 also serve as an appropriate audience. The novel's narrator and protagonist is 14-year-old Arnold Spirit Jr., who writes in a raw, honest, and often humorous voice that young adolescents find genuinely relatable. The length and pace of the book (240 pages split into short chapters), level of text complexity (lexile 600), and inclusion of illustrations by the artist-narrator increase the novel's appeal to reluctant readers. Students acknowledge that this is a book they "actually enjoyed" reading or to which they could "really relate." The novel is well suited to addressing a variety of thematic topics, including but not limited to:

1. Coming-of-age/search for self/identity and self-esteem
2. Racism, racial stereotypes, and discrimination
3. Poverty
4. Family and friendships
5. Bullying
6. Alcoholism and violence
7. The Hero's Journey archetype
8. Love, adolescent relationships, and sexuality
9. Loss, death, and grief
10. Teamwork, athletics, and competition

Plot Summary

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian is a coming-of-age story narrated by 14-year-old Arnold Spirit Jr, or "Junior." Junior, a member of the Spokane Indian Tribe, has spent the entirety of his young life on the reservation. Junior's voice immediately grabs the attention of young readers and keeps them engaged with short chapters interspersed with comic illustrations. Though Junior's voice makes students laugh out loud, the content of the book is often sad: Junior's family lives in poverty and has an unhealthy relationship with alcohol. He loses many loved ones over the course of the book, including a beloved pet, his sister, his

grandmother, and a close friend of his father's. Junior faces other challenges, too. Inspired by his anger over a broken school system, he seeks new opportunities at a school off the reservation. Junior faces racism and internal struggles with identity and self-esteem. Alexie weaves black humor and authentic storytelling with no-nonsense explanations of the seemingly insurmountable challenges in Junior's life to make the reader a champion for the protagonist. Junior's narration reveals his emotions and complicated dreams for his future as the plot moves through his freshman year at a new school. Through it all – books, love interests, basketball games, funerals, and more – Junior never loses hope. Junior eventually returns home and reconciles his future and present with his past to show that, while circumstances and details may vary, the journey of adolescence is a universal one.

Standards Alignment

The Minnesota Department of Education recommends *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* for grades 6-8 to meet Minnesota English Language Arts (MN ELA) standard 8.4.9.9: *Analyze how a modern work of fiction draws on themes, patterns of events, or character types from myths, traditional stories, including stories, poems, and historical novels of Minnesota American Indians, or religious works such as the Bible, including describing how the material is rendered new.*

The BHS English Department uses this text to meet the following MN ELA standards:

MN ELA standard 9.4.9.9: *Analyze how an author draws on and transforms source material in a specific work (e.g., how Shakespeare treats a theme or topic from Ovid or the Bible or how a later author draws on a play by Shakespeare **or how a Minnesota American Indian author uses oral tradition to create works of literature.**)*

MN ELA standard 9.9.1.1: *Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9–10 topics, texts, and issues, **including those by and about Minnesota American Indians**, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.*

MN ELA standard 9.12.9.9: *Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources, **including texts from various cultures and Minnesota American Indian culture.***

Theoretical Support and Redeeming Values

The Bemidji School District is strengthened by its diverse population and proximity to three Native American reservations. Including Native American authors in our English curriculum is not only required by the MN ELA standards, but also imperative in providing representation for our Native American students. In its strategic plan, the district includes a belief that “Our school district values and reflects culturally diverse talents, backgrounds and viewpoints.” As a

department and as a school, this belief comes to fruition by including *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* in our curriculum.

Alexie's novel serves as both a mirror and a window for our students. For those who can relate firsthand to Junior's lived experiences, the book acts as a mirror through which students may see their circumstances and process them through the text. Alexie justifies his inclusion of such difficult realities thus:

"I write books for teenagers because I vividly remember what it felt like to be a teen facing everyday and epic dangers. I don't write to protect them. It's far too late for that. I write to give them weapons - in the form of words and ideas - that will help them fight their monsters" ("Why the Best Kid Books are Written in Blood").

Alternately, students who do not draw direct parallels between their own lives and Junior's benefit from exposure to issues that their peers and neighbors may face. In this way, the book acts as a window to a different cultural experience. Gaining insight into the lives and experiences of others breaks down stereotypes and builds empathy, which is a cognitive response necessary to achieving the mission of the district: "[To] empower each learner to succeed in our diverse and changing world" (Bemidji Area Schools Strategic Plan). Alexie's novel is an important tool that our department uses to work towards this goal.

Awards and Recognition

National Book Award Winner for Young People's Literature, 2007; Boston Globe-Horn Book Award for Fiction; #1 New York Times Bestseller; Time Magazine Best Young Adult Book of All Time; Publishers Weekly Best Book of the Year; American Library Association Best Book of the Year; Odyssey Award for best audiobook, 2009

Possible Objections

According to the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* has been challenged for (but not limited to) the following: sexual references, profanity, violence, gambling, and underage drinking, and for its religious viewpoint ("Top 10 Most Challenged Books Lists," 2020).

Alternative Text

Gansworth, Eric. *If I Ever Get Out of Here*. New York, Scholastic Inc., 2013.

Additional Resources and References

Alexie, Sherman. *Sherman Alexie*. FallsApart Productions, 2021, <https://fallsapart.com/#/absolutely-true-diary-of-a-parttime-indian/>. Accessed 6 January 2022.

Alexie, Sherman. "Why The Best Kids Books Are Written in Blood." Speakeasy. *Wall Street Journal*. 9 June 2011, https://cdn.ncte.org/nctefiles/involved/action/censorship/authors-rationales/alexie_sherman_bestkidsbookswritteninblood.pdf. Accessed 6 January 2022.

Banned and Challenged Books: A Website of the ALA Office For Intellectual Freedom, <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/top10>. Accessed 6 January 2022.

Bemidji Area Schools Strategic Plan 2017 - 2022, <http://www.bemidji.k12.mn.us/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Bemidji-Area-Schools-Strategic-Plan.pdf>. Accessed 6 January 2022.

Indigenous Representations: Resources Aligned to Kindergarten – Grade 12 Minnesota Education Standards, https://files.dnr.state.mn.us/education_safety/education/plt/activity_sheets/ojibwe-dakota-lessons/2019-native-authored-book-collection.pdf. Accessed 6 January 2022.

"Lexile Find a Book." *Lexile and Quantile Tools*, <https://hub.lexile.com/find-a-book/book-details/9780316013680>. Accessed 6 January 2022.

Noone, Katherine. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian: Teaching Support Kit*, <https://cdn2.penguin.com.au/content/resources/The%20Absolutely%20True%20Diary%20Of%20A%20Part-Time%20Indian.pdf>. Accessed 6 January 2022.