

Literary Guide for *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, by Sherman Alexie

Literary Guide written by Blair Lee

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian is a first person narrative written as a diary. This book has both comedic and darkly poignant elements woven through. One thing that makes Alexie's writing so powerful is the humor he uses when discussing serious issues. The story compares and contrasts elements from the Spokane Indian and white culture. Alcoholism, bullying, and poverty are other themes in the book. In addition to the thematic elements, we will discuss the method Alexie chose to use as a vehicle for his story.

Chapter questions:

Page 5, Alexie writes

"I draw because words are too unpredictable.

I draw because words are too limited.

If you speak and write in English, or Spanish, or Chinese, or any other language, then only a certain percentage of human beings will get your meaning.

But when you draw a picture, everybody can understand it."

- How does the use of mixed-media affect the story?
- Books with written text and pictures are called mixed-media, because they convey the story from the perspective of the written word and pictorially. Is it limiting because it narrows the possibilities of how characters and scenes can be imagined by the reader, or does it enrich the story by making it clearer what the author's intended purpose was?

Page 11 – 14 "The worst thing about being poor is really hard"

- What did you think of this section? The two paragraphs on page 14 were profound. Let's go over them when we meet. In two paragraphs, I think that Alexi sums up poverty and the worst thing about being poor more effectively than anything else I've ever read. What do you think?

On page 49, Rowdy says, "You better quit saying that," he said. "You're getting me mad."

- Anger seems to be the only emotion Rowdy is comfortable with, why do you think that might be?

Starting on page 54, "How to Fight Monsters"

- I think the monsters Arnold is fighting are all inside him. Can you find at least one example of what I mean?

Starting on page 114, "Rowdy Gives Me Advice about Love"

- This is an interesting chapter. It deals with racism and objectification. Then on page 127, Alexie returns to it, and shows depth from Roger and Penelope. Then the last sentence of the chapter on page 129, "If you let people into your life a little bit, they can be pretty darn amazing." What did

Alexie just do with this? Answer in terms of what it means to objectify someone and then how that changes when people are humanized.

Page 132, “Well life is a constant struggle between being an individual and being a member of a community.” Arnold is feeling outside of his community, so he forms one of his own with Roger, Geordy, and Penelope.

- Do you think it is ironic that Arnold chooses to form a community with white kids from Reardon? I ask this because throughout the last half of the book there are several instances where the community in Wellpinit is compared to the one in Reardon, and it is clear that Wellpinit has a stronger community. Why then would Arnold choose to form his community in Reardon?

Page 150 – 158, This covers two chapters.

- In these two chapters, how does Alexie explore alcoholism and its effects from multiple perspectives?

Page 195 – 196, At the bottom of page 195, Alexie uses the literary technique of repeating the phrase, “I knew...” on Page 196 he does it again when he repeats the phrase, “I suddenly...” he then repeats the phrase, “I was crying...”

- Arnold gets just what he really wants, and then he is sorry he gets it. How do you think this technique helps convey that?

Discussing how authors choose to package and convey their story can be very interesting. There are real benefits to one’s own writing to be gained from studying the writing of others.

1. The serious social issues Alexie writes about.

- As you read through the book make a note of what social issues Alexie talks about.

How would you describe the way he discusses serious issues? In other words, is it serious, humorous, educational, casual, or something else?

Do you think his purpose is to educate, tell a story, or to explore his own feelings?

- Alexie develops some issues more than others. One issue that he does not give much detail about is the boarding school system. After you have read the chapter “Hope against Hope” (starts on page 32), go back to page 43 and re-read the conversation he has with his teacher.

What do you think about what his teacher says to him? When you read it the first time did you pay much attention to it? Why or why not?

After you answer the question above, watch this video. <https://vimeo.com/76653540> or read this article <http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/5127:new-documentary-tracks-cultural-genocide-of-american-indians>

After watching the documentary re-read the conversation between Arnold and his teacher. What do you think about what his teacher says to him now? The situation he is talking about is almost certainly one that occurred at a boarding school. Do you think Alexie should have gone into more detail about the significance of the conversation with his teacher? Or do you think the conversation is more powerful because of the low-key way he presents it?

- Alexie uses a technique I think of as “unpacking” when he discusses serious social issues. Let’s use two of these issues to explore the difference to the reader between issues that are barely unpacked and those that are unpacked more fully.

The issue of boarding schools, as you can see from either your reading or watching, is a big issue. Using the analogy of unpacking, imagine that Alexie has a mind full of information, ideas, and thoughts he could put in his story. Each of the themes in his book is a packed box in his mind. Some boxes he opens, shows readers a glimpse of what’s inside, and closes the box without unpacking it. This is what Alexie does with the topic of boarding schools. If you are wondering if that is because he didn’t know much about the issue, I do not think that is the case. The boarding school system did not end until the 1980’s. His grandparents and possibly his parents attended a boarding school. It is something commonly discussed on the Pine Ridge Reservation. I expect that is the case for most if not all tribes.

“It was not until 1978 with the passing of the Indian Child Welfare Act that Native American parents gained the legal right to deny their children’s placement in off-reservation schools.”

http://www.nrcprograms.org/site/PageServer?pagename=airc_hist_boardingschools

The issue of alcoholism is one Alexie unpacks much more fully. (No spoilers going forward, so I am being vague.) The revelations from the chapter “Red versus White” through to the end were so sad and at times shocking. I did not see them coming. After reading the book, how do you think the two topics, the boarding school system and alcoholism are affected by the difference in how Alexie “unpacks” them?

I have volunteered twice over the past two years at the Lakota Reservation at Pine Ridge, South Dakota. While there I attended talks given by members of the Oglala Sioux Tribe. One of the issues the speakers talk about is the historical trauma affecting tribes today.

“Historical trauma: cumulative exposure of traumatic events that affect an individual and continue to affect subsequent generations.”

<http://www2.isu.edu/irh/projects/ysp/downloads/CulturalIssuesinHistoricalTrauma.pdf>

The people I talked to think the historical trauma from the boarding school system accounts for many of the social issues, including alcoholism, the tribe is dealing with today. Do you think Alexie should give more information about boarding schools and the link between the historical trauma? Or is it enough? Would it change the story too much?

2. The genre he used to tell this story.

- Genre is defined as a category of artistic composition. Works that are categorized as being in the same genre have similarities in form, style, or subject matter.

Let's figure out what genre this book is. Circle all that apply, even if they are in the same grouping.

- Fiction or non-fiction
- Comedy, drama, horror, romance, satire, tragedy, tragicomedy
- classic, crime/detective, fable, fantasy, fairytale, folklore, historical fiction, humor, legend, mystery, mythology, realistic fiction, picture book, science fiction, short story, Western, suspense
- biography, essay, journalism, lab report, memoir, narrative nonfiction

These are not all of the types of genre. If you want to read a complete list you can look at the list on Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_writing_genres.

Before we have our session think about the genre Alexi uses. We will discuss the genre as a group. Deciding if a book is fiction or nonfiction is usually easy. Some of the other classifications for genre can be subjective. Let's see if we have any differences of opinion in our group. If we do, my guess is there are elements of both types of genre.

**Speaking of genre what do you think about the title? Is this book absolutely true? Is it a diary?
How can a person be a part-time Indian?**

What do you think of Alexi's choice, a fictional diary – a humorous personal narrative, to discuss serious issues? Very few books written for young adults deal with big issues like alcoholism on the level Alexi does in this book. How does the use of humor soften the message? Is his humor important when writing about this topic?

Why do you think Alexi felt it was important to write a book for young adults about a topic that mainly affects adults?

Now that you have decided on the genre, here is Alexie's biography.

Alexie was born on October 7, 1966,^[6] at Sacred Heart Hospital in Spokane, Washington. He lived as a child on the Spokane Indian Reservation, in Wellpinit, WA. His father, Sherman Joseph Alexie, was a member of the [Coeur d'Alene](#) tribe, and his mother, Lillian Agnes Cox, was of [Colville](#), [Choctaw](#), [Spokane](#) and [European American](#) ancestry.^[8] One of his paternal great-grandfathers was of [Russian](#) descent.^[9] Alexie was born with [hydrocephalus](#), a condition that occurs when there is an abnormally large amount of cerebral fluid in the cranial cavity.^[10] He had to have brain surgery when he was six months old, and was at high risk of death or [mental disabilities](#) if he survived.^[8] Alexie's surgery was successful; he suffered no mental damage but had other side effects.^[10]

His father was an [alcoholic](#) who often left the house for days at a time. To support her six children, Alexie's mother Lillian sewed quilts and worked as a clerk at the Wellpinit Trading Post.^[10]

Alexie has described his life at the reservation school as challenging because he was constantly teased by other kids. He was nicknamed "The Globe" because his head was larger than usual, due to the hydrocephalus as an infant. Until the age of seven, Alexie suffered from seizures and bedwetting; he had to take strong drugs to control them.^{[10][11]} Because of his health problems, he was excluded from many of the activities that are rites of passage for young Indian males.^[11] Alexie excelled academically, reading everything available, including auto repair manuals.^[12]

Education^[edit]

In order to better his education, Alexie decided to leave the reservation and attend high school in [Reardan, Washington](#).^[10] The school was twenty-two miles off the reservation and Alexie was the only Native American student.^[11] He excelled at his studies and became a star player on the basketball team, the Reardan High School Indians.^[10] He was elected as class president and participated as a member of the debate team.^[10]

His successes in high school won him a scholarship in 1985 to [Gonzaga University](#).^{[10][11]} Originally Alexie enrolled in the pre-med program with hopes of becoming a doctor,^[11] but found he was squeamish during dissection in his anatomy classes.^[11] Alexie switched to law, but found that was not suitable, either.^[11] He felt enormous pressure to succeed in college and he began drinking heavily to cope with his anxiety.^[13] Unhappy with law, Alexie found comfort in literature classes.^[11]

In 1987 he dropped out of Gonzaga and enrolled at [Washington State University](#) (WSU),^[11] where he enrolled in a creative writing course taught by [Alex Kuo](#), a respected poet of Chinese-American background. Alexie was at a low point in his life, and Kuo served as a mentor to him.^[8] Kuo gave Alexie an anthology entitled *Songs of This Earth on Turtle's Back*, by [Joseph Bruchac](#). Alexie has said this book changed his life as it taught him "how to connect to non-Native literature in a new way."^{[8][11][14]} He was inspired by reading works of poetry written by Native Americans.^[8]

With his new appreciation of poetry, Alexie started work on what was published as his first collection, *The Business of Fancydancing: Stories and Viviane Poems*, published in 1992 through Hanging Loose Press.^{[8][15]} With that success, Alexie stopped drinking and quit school just three credits short of a degree. In 1995 he was awarded a bachelor's degree from [Washington State University](#).^[11]

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sherman_Alexie

- Does this sound familiar? Do you still consider Alexie's work fiction? When you are writing fiction do you ever use elements from your own life or situations that have happened to you?