

# READING GROUP GUIDE



## The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian



# SHERMAN ALEXIE

Based on the author's own experiences, this heartbreaking, funny, and beautifully written tale chronicles the contemporary adolescence of one Native American boy as he attempts to break away from the life he seems destined to live.



Little, Brown and Company  
Hachette Book Group USA

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

© Rob Casey



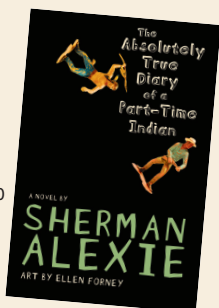
An award-winning author, poet, and

filmmaker, **SHERMAN ALEXIE** is the master behind such adult titles as *Ten Little Indians* and *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. Sherman was named one of Granta's Best Young American Novelists and has been lauded by the *Boston Globe* as "an important voice in American literature."

Renowned graphic artist **ELLEN FORNEY** provides the poignant drawings in Sherman's first young adult novel, *THE ABSOLUTELY TRUE DIARY OF A PART-TIME INDIAN*. She has been a professional cartoonist/illustrator since 1992.

**THE ABSOLUTELY  
TRUE DIARY  
OF A PART-TIME  
INDIAN**  
By Sherman Alexie

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Discussion Guide prepared by Beverly Slapin, Oyate, co-editor,  
*A Broken Flute: The Native Experience in Books for Children*.

To order contact your Hachette Book Group USA sales rep or call  
1-800-759-0190.

# PRAISE

## THE ABSOLUTELY TRUE DIARY OF A PART-TIME INDIAN

“Excellent in every way.” —Neil Gaiman

“So original...I laughed consistently from  
beginning to end.”

—Amy Sedaris, actress, comedian and author of  
*I Like You: Hospitality Under the Influence*

“Heartbraking, honest, and  
stubbornly memorable.”

—Deb Caletti, author of *Honey, Baby, Sweetheart*

“Fierce, fearless, funny and  
unforgettable.”

—Cecil Castellucci, author of *Boy Proof*

★“Realistic and fantastical and funny and  
tragic—all at the same time.”

—VOYA (starred review)

★“Alexie nimbly blends sharp wit with  
unapologetic emotion in his first foray  
into young adult literature.”

—Kirkus Reviews (starred review)

### Sherman Alexie’s previous novels:

#### RESERVATION BLUES

“His talent is immense and genuine....  
Sherman Alexie is one of the best  
writers we have.” —*The Nation*

“Hilarious but poignant...dead-on  
accurate with regard to modern  
Indian life.” —*Publishers Weekly*

#### INDIAN KILLER

★“A haunting, challenging articulation  
of the plight and the pride of  
contemporary Native Americans.”

—Kirkus Reviews (starred review)

“Characters in Mr. Alexie’s work are not  
the usual kind of Indians....They are not  
tragic victims or noble savages...they  
listen to Jimi Hendrix and Hank Williams;  
they dream of being basketball stars...  
And unlike most Indians in fiction, they  
are sometimes funny.” —*New York Times*

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

**1.** Consider the adjectives, “absolutely true” and “part-time.” What concepts appear to be emphasized by the images and the title? Does the cover appear to reference Junior’s internal struggle, or a struggle between Junior and the white power structure, or both, or neither?

**2.** By drawing cartoons, Junior feels safe. He draws “because I want to talk to the world. And I want the world to pay attention to me.” How do Junior’s cartoons (for example, “Who my parents would have been if somebody had paid attention to their dreams” and “white/Indian”) show his understanding of the ways that racism has deeply impacted his and his family’s lives?

**3.** When Junior is in Reardan (the white town), he is “half Indian,” and when he is in Wellpinit (his reservation), he is “half white.” “It was like being Indian was my job,” he says, “but it was only a part-time job. And it didn’t pay well at all.” At Reardan High, why does Junior pretend he has more money than he does, even though he knows “lies have short shelf lives”?

**4.** Junior describes his reservation as “located approximately one million miles north of Important and two billion miles west of Happy.” Yet when he and Rowdy look down from almost the top of an immense pine, he says, “We could see our entire world. And our entire world, at that moment, was green and golden and perfect.” What forces drive the dichotomy of Junior’s perceptions of his world and allow him to see the land in apparently disparate ways?

**5.** Cultural outsiders who write young adult fiction tend to romanticize the impoverishment of Indians. Junior is having none of this: “It sucks to be poor, and it sucks to feel that you somehow deserve to be poor. You start believing that you’re poor because you’re stupid and ugly.

And then you start believing that you're stupid and ugly because you're Indian. And because you're Indian you start believing that you're destined to be poor. It's an ugly circle and there's nothing you can do about it. Poverty doesn't give you strength or teach you lessons about perseverance. No, poverty only teaches you how to be poor." How does Junior's direct language address this stereotypical portrayal of Indians? What about his language draws the teen reader into the realities of his life?

**6.** Junior's parents, Rowdy's father, and others in their community are addicted to alcohol, and Junior's white "friend with potential," Penelope, has bulimia. "There are all kinds of addicts, I guess," he says. "We all have pain. And we all look for ways to make the pain go away." Compared to the characters in Jon Hassler's young adult novel, *Jemmy* (Atheneum, 1980), how does Junior's understanding of addiction transcend ethnicity and class?

**7.** Junior refers to his home reservation as "the rez," a familiar name for the place he was born, the place his friends and relatives for many generations back were born and are buried, and the land to which he is tied that, no matter how bad things get, will now and forever be called "home." What would Junior think of a cultural outsider, such as Ian Frazier, who visits a reservation to gather material for a book and then calls his book "On the Rez"?

**8.** At Junior's grandmother's funeral, Junior's mother publicly gives a white billionaire his comeuppance to the delight of the whole community. "And then my mother started laughing," Junior says. "And that set us all off. It was the most glorious noise I'd ever heard. And I realized that, sure, Indians were drunk and sad and displaced and crazy and mean but, dang, we knew how to laugh. When it comes to death, we know that laughter and tears are pretty much the same thing. And so, laughing and cry-

ing, we said goodbye to my grandmother. And when we said goodbye to one grandmother, we said goodbye to all of them. Each funeral was a funeral for all of us. We lived and died together.” How does this reflect a cultural insider’s perspective and how does it disrupt stereotypes about stoic Indians?

**9.** “I’m fourteen years old and I’ve been to forty-two funerals,” Junior says. “That’s really the biggest difference between Indians and white people.” In the community of Wellpinit, everyone is related, everyone is valued, everyone lives a hardscrabble life, everyone is at risk for early death, and the loss of one person is a loss to the community. Compare Wellpinit to Reardan, whose residents have greater access to social services, health care, and wealth, and people are socially distanced from each other. How does Junior use this blunt, matter-of-fact statement to describe this vast gulf between an impoverished Indian community and a middle-class white town just a few miles away?

**10.** In many ways, Junior is engulfed by the emotional realities of his life and his community. Yet his spare, matter-of-fact language and his keen sense of irony help him to confront and negotiate the hurt, the rage, and the senselessness of Wellpinit’s everyday realities. How does Junior use language to lead readers, whose lives may be very different from his own, to the kind of understanding that they will not get from young adult fiction whose writers do not have this kind of lived experience?

**11.** Cultural markers can be defined as the behaviors, speech patterns, ways of seeing the world, ethics, and principles that identify a person as belonging to a particular culture. When Rowdy and Junior play one-on-one at the end of the book—and they don’t keep score—how is their friendship solidified by their deep knowing of who they are and what they come from?