



The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian
Discussion Questions

1. On his reservation, Alexie's main character is known as "Junior." But when he switches to a new high school, Reardan, people call him by his formal name, Arnold. "I felt like two different people inside of one body," he says. Do you think Junior/Arnold was just talking about his name? Or did he feel split in other ways, too? Why does he call himself a "Part-Time Indian"?
2. Hope and happiness, or the lack of hope and happiness, are big themes in this book. Do you think that the white people in Reardon are really any happier than the Indians living on the reservation? What is the biggest difference between people living in Reardon and people living on the reservation?
3. Arnold's math teacher at Wellpinit High School, Mr. P, tells him that the teachers at the school used to beat the Indians with a stick: "That's how we were taught to teach you. We were supposed to kill the Indian to save the child." What did he mean?
4. Why is Arnold's best friend, Rowdy, so angry when Arnold changes schools? Why doesn't Rowdy want to transfer with Arnold? Do you think that Arnold was betraying his people by attending the white school in Reardon?
5. At his new school, Reardan, Arnold gets to know a book-lover named Gordy, who says that "life is a constant struggle between being an individual and being a member of the community." How does this idea relate to Arnold's life?
6. Arnold tells Gordy that some Indians taunt him: "They call me an apple because they think I'm red on the outside and white on the inside." What did they mean? Did their comment describe Arnold accurately?
7. What's the purpose of the humor in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*? Why does Alexie use it when Arnold is clearly angry about a lot of things?
8. Do you think Ellen Forney's illustrations add to the story? Do they help you better understand Junior's thoughts and feelings? Why or why not?
9. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is largely an autobiographical tale. Does knowing that the story is true change your understanding of it in any way?
10. Critics have charged that Alexie paints an unfairly bleak picture of life on the reservation. Do you agree? Why do you think Alexie's depiction is so grim? Do you think the story ends on a hopeful note? What was your overall reaction to the book?

About the Author

Sherman Alexie was born on October 7, 1966 to a Spokane Indian mother and a Coeur d'Alene Indian father on the Spokane Indian reservation in Wellpinit, Washington. He was born hydrocephalic, or with water on his brain, and underwent brain surgery at 6 months old, and was not expected to live. After overcoming the odds of an early death, doctors predicted that he would have severe mental retardation, and, once again the doctors were wrong. Although there was no sign of retardation Alexie suffered from seizures and uncontrollable bed-wetting throughout his childhood.

Despite his early hardships, Alexie grew into a bright child, learning to read by age three and devouring novels like John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* by age five. As a result, he was constantly ostracized and teased by his peers.

Alexie was educated on the Indian reservation until he found his mother's name in a textbook at his school. Not wanting to become like the rest of his peers and stay on the reservation for his entire life, Alexie decided to go to high school outside of the reservation. Alexie ended up going to Reardan High where he was "the only Indian...except for the school mascot." At Reardan High, he excelled in academics and played for the school basketball team.

After graduating from Reardan High, Alexie attended Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington, before transferring to Washington State University (WSU) after two years. There, he pursued his career as a doctor until he "fainted three times in human anatomy class and needed a career change." He found his new career in a poetry workshop taught by Chinese-American writer and poet, Alex Kuo. At the workshop he became immersed in the works of Linda Hogan, Simon Ortiz, [Joy Harjo](#), James Walech, and Adrian Lewis, all poets who had written about reservation life. The line that really made up his mind was in a poem by Adrian Lewis. "Oh, Uncle Adrian, I'm in the reservation of my mind." Something clicked, and in 1989 Alexie started writing.

In 1991, Alexie received the Washington State Arts Commission Poetry Fellowship in 1991, in 1992, he received the National Endowment for the Arts Poetry Fellowship. Shortly after receiving his second fellowship, two of his poetry collections were published. The 23-year-old Alexie, having a problem with alcoholism since he had begun school at Gonzaga, immediately sobered at the news.

Alexie now lives with his wife and two sons in Seattle, and has published 14 books of poetry and short stories about life on a contemporary Indian reservation, and Indian-white relationships. Although Alexie's writing is often emotionally cathartic, he writes for his people as well as for himself. In a 1995 interview he told the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* that he cherishes the difference his stories and poems have made in the lives of reservation Indians and he continues to write for this audience. Alexie feels that many Native American writers focus on the angst of Native Americans living in urban settings and the reservation Indians, who play prominent roles in his stories and poetry, are unfortunately ignored. Alexie told an audience of writers at the Native American Journalists Association that only American Indian writers can write of their people as only they, regardless of the sincerity of non-Indian writers, have the empathy and the intrinsic awareness of their people's emotions, lives, and humor.

