

# Book Club

## Discussion Guide

### Author Information

Sherman Alexie was born on October 7, 1966 on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Wellpinit, Washington. His father, Sherman Joseph Alexie, was of Coeur d'Alene descent and his mother, Lillian Agnes Cox, of Colville, Flathead, Spokane and Caucasian descent. He was born with hydrocephalus, a condition that occurs when there is an abnormally large amount of cerebral fluid in the cranial cavity. Because of the hydrocephalus, Alexie underwent brain surgery when he was six months old. It was a surgery that he was not expected to survive, and if he did only with permanent mental disabilities. However, Alexie's surgery was successful and he survived with no damage to his mental faculties. Alexie grew up in Wellpinit, Washington, on the Spokane Indian Reservation. 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.

Alexie has described his life at the reservation school as challenging because he was constantly teased by other kids. He recalls being nicknamed "The Globe" because he had a large head due to the hydrocephalus. Until the age of seven, Alexie suffered from seizures and bedwetting and had to take strong drugs to control them. He was excluded from many of the activities that are rites of passage for young Indian males because of his health problems. Despite this difficult upbringing, Alexie excelled academically, reading everything available to him, including auto repair manuals.

In order to better his education, Alexie made the decision to leave the reservation and attend Reardan High School in Reardan. The school was thirty miles off the reservation and Alexie was the only student of Native heritage among mostly white students. He excelled at school and became a star player on the basketball team, which was coincidentally called the Reardan High Indians. Along with the basketball team, Alexie was also class president and a member of the debate team.

His successes in high school won him a scholarship in 1985 to Gonzaga University, a Roman Catholic school in Spokane. Originally Alexie enrolled in the pre-med program at Gonzaga with hopes of becoming a doctor. However, he became squeamish in his anatomy classes. After an unsuccessful try at medicine, Alexie switched to law, but that didn't work out either. The pressure of succeeding in college became too much for Alexie, and he began drinking heavily to cope. Though he was not happy with his choice of career path, Alexie found comfort in literature classes. In 1987 he dropped out of Gonzaga University and enrolled at Washington State University.

At Washington State, Alexie 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. Kuo gave Alexie an anthology entitled *Songs of This Earth on Turtle's Back* by Joseph Bruchac, which changed his life. The book inspired Alexie to start writing. He was inspired from reading works of poetry that were written by other Native Americans. With his new appreciation of poetry, Alexie started work on his first collection, *The Business of Fancydancing: Stories and Poems*, which was published in 1992 through Hanging Loose Press. With the success of his first published work of poetry, 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.

In 2005, Alexie became a founding Board Member of Longhouse Media, a non-profit organization that is committed to teaching filmmaking skills to Native American youth, and to use media for cultural expression and social change. Mr. Alexie has long supported youth programs and initiatives dedicated to uplifting at-risk Native youth.

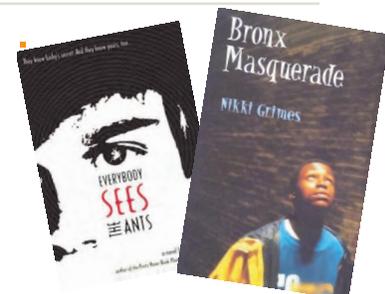
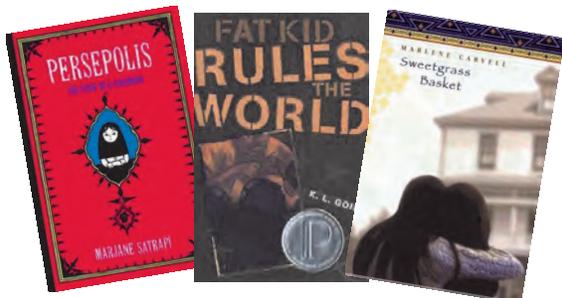
Alexie is married to Diane Tomhave, who is of Hidatsa, Ho-Chunk and Potawatomi heritage. They live in Seattle with their two sons.



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### If you like this Author try . . .

- *Everybody sees the ants* by A. S. King
- *Fat kid rules the world* by K. L. Going
- *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi
- *Looking for Alaska* by John Green
- *Eyes of the emperor* by Graham Salisbury
- *Sweetgrass basket* by Marlene Carvell
- *Athletic shorts* by Chris Crutcher
- *Bronx masquerade* by Nikki Grimes





## What's it all about?

In his first book for young adults, bestselling author Sherman Alexie tells the story of Junior, a budding cartoonist growing up on the Spokane Indian Reservation. Determined to take his future into his own hands, Junior leaves his troubled school on the rez to attend an all-white farm town high school where the only other Indian is the school mascot. Heartbreaking, funny, and beautifully written, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, which is based on the author's own experiences, coupled with poignant drawings by acclaimed artist Ellen Forney, that reflect the character's art, chronicles the contemporary adolescence of one Native American boy as he attempts to break away from the life he was destined to live.

## Discussion Questions

- 1) *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* shows a different side of American Indian life than do many other books. What did you learn about Indians from it?
- 2) Why does Alexie call his book the diary of a “part-time” Indian?
- 3) 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?
- 4) Arnold misses his best friend, Rowdy, after he starts his new school. But Rowdy doesn’t seem to want to join him there. How do Arnold’s and Rowdy’s views of the reservation—and their own lives—differ? What do you think Alexie is trying to show you through those differences?
- 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) 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?
- 9) Alexie uses a racial slur (the “n” word) and stronger language (the “f” word) in a joke on page 64. He repeated the words in a talk at an Illinois high school, and some students walked out. Alexie apologized to anyone he had offended but stood by his use of the words in his novel “because that was what was said. And to blunt the hatred of that insult blunts the incredible obstacles my character had to face,” a newspaper reported. (“Author Defends Using Slur, but Apologizes to Student,” by Melissa Jenco, Daily Herald of Arlington Heights, IL, October 6, 2007.) Do you agree with Alexie that in order to make his point, he had to use words that would offend some people? How do these words relate to the rest of the novels?
- 10) What did you think of Ellen Forney’s pictures for *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*? What is their purpose in the book? Do they provide a mirror for the text, reflecting back only what you read on the page? Or do they expand it? How?
- 11) Arnold falls in love with Penelope, a beautiful white student. In Greek mythology, Penelope married Odysseus, the hero of Homer’s *The Odyssey*. If you’ve read about Penelope in that book or others, how does she resemble the student in this novel?

## WEBSITES TO CHECK OUT

Sherman Alexie’s official website:

[www.fallsapart.com/the-absolutely-true-diary-of-a-part-time-indian/](http://www.fallsapart.com/the-absolutely-true-diary-of-a-part-time-indian/)

One-Minute Book Reviews for *The true diary of a part-time indian* Discussion Questions:

[oneminutebookreviews.wordpress.com/2008/01/16/a-totally-unauthorized-reading-group-guide-to-sherman-alexie%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%98the-absolutely-true-diary-of-a-part-time-indian%E2%80%99/](http://oneminutebookreviews.wordpress.com/2008/01/16/a-totally-unauthorized-reading-group-guide-to-sherman-alexie%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%98the-absolutely-true-diary-of-a-part-time-indian%E2%80%99/)

National Book Foundation interview with Sherman Alexie:

[www.nationalbook.org/nba2007\\_vpl\\_alexie\\_interv.html#UbpNVxXD8y8](http://www.nationalbook.org/nba2007_vpl_alexie_interv.html#UbpNVxXD8y8)

Goodreads’ quotes for *The absolutely true diary of a part-time indian*:

[www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/829330-the-absolutely-true-diary-of-a-part-time-indian](http://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/829330-the-absolutely-true-diary-of-a-part-time-indian)

Goodreads’ trivia and quizzes for *The absolutely true diary of a part-time indian*:

[www.goodreads.com/trivia/work/829330-the-absolutely-true-diary-of-a-part-time-indian](http://www.goodreads.com/trivia/work/829330-the-absolutely-true-diary-of-a-part-time-indian)

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