

Teaching the Book

How does Arnold Spirit, Jr. become a part-time Indian and live to write about it? Sherman Alexie’s hilarious and poignant coming of age novel speaks not just for his protagonist but also for every young person struggling with an evolving identity. The award-winning novel provides the opportunity for students to analyze character growth through hip but profound text and comic illustrations. Activities engage students in researching Alexie’s Spokane Indian tribe, writing a blog of their opinions about the book, and creating personal narrative comics.

Theme Focus: Identity

Comprehension Focus: Analyze Character

Language Focus: Accurate Adjectives

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Novelist, poet, and screenwriter Sherman Alexie grew up on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Wellpinit, Washington. His writing often focuses on the connections between physical places and the stories that occur in them. Alexie’s semi-autobiographical young adult novel, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, won the National Book Award for Young People’s Literature.

Alexie is also an acclaimed author of adult fiction. He is the winner of the 2010 PEN/Faulkner Award, 2001 PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in the Short Story, and a Special Citation for the 1994 PEN/Hemingway Award for Best First Fiction. *Smoke Signals*, the film he wrote and co-produced, won the Audience Award and Filmmakers Trophy at the 1998 Sundance Film Festival.

Alexie currently lives with his family in Seattle. For more information about Sherman Alexie and his writing, visit <http://www.fallsapart.com/>.

BOOK STATS

Grade Level Equivalent: 9–12

Ages: 13+

Lexile Measure®: 600L

Pages: 230

Genre: Realistic Fiction, Humor

Subject/Theme: Identity, Native Americans, Tolerance, Acceptance

Common Core State Standards	Reading	Writing	Listening & Speaking	Language
Grade 9–10	RL.9–10.1, RL.9–10.2, RL.9–10.3, RL.9–10.4	W.9–10.1, W.9–10.7	SL.9–10.1, SL.9–10.4, SL.9–10.5	L.9–10.4, L.9–10.5
Grade 11–12	RL.11–12.1, RL.11–12.3, RL.11–12.4, RL.11–12.6	W.11–12.1, W.11–12.3, W.11–12.7	SL.11–12.1, SL.11–12.4, SL.11–12.5	L.11–12.4, L.11–12.5

OVERVIEW

Book Summary

Arnold, aka Junior, introduces his hardscrabble life on the Spokane Indian reservation in the first chapter called The Black-Eye-of-the-Month Club. Through his “absolutely true” diary, Arnold describes his impediments and vulnerabilities, the biggest of which is living on a reservation where he is a zero with a zero future. A pivotal conversation with a teacher spurs Arnold to make a daring life choice—to attend an all-white school miles from the reservation.

His rocky start there, riddled with stereotypes and misunderstandings, slowly develops into surprising friendships and successes in academics and basketball. Meanwhile, his family life is shattered by deaths, poverty, and alcoholism. Through it all, Arnold survives with a new confidence in himself and hope for the future.

Heartbreaking, funny, and beautifully written, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is based on Sherman Alexie’s own experiences growing up on the reservation. The text is coupled with poignant drawings by acclaimed artist Ellen Forney; together, they chronicle the contemporary adolescence of one Native American boy as he attempts to break away from the life he was destined to live.

Contains mature content. You may want to preview before reading aloud.

Get Ready to Read

Pre-Reading Activities

Author's Viewpoint Introduce students to the book by projecting the drawing from page 57 on a whiteboard or screen. The drawing captures the author's part-humorous, part-serious viewpoint about his semi-autobiographical character, Arnold Spirit, Jr. The left side of the drawing shows the white kids that Arnold meets at a white school; the right side of the drawing shows himself as the Indian kid from the reservation. Both sides of the drawing are exaggerated stereotypes of both kinds of students.

Ask students to compare parts of the drawing and react to what they see. Is the author being humorous or serious, or both? What does he mean by the following descriptions? Do students agree with the comments?

White	Indian
bright future	vanishing past
positive role models	family history of diabetes and cancer
hope	bone-crushing reality
Air Jordans	tennis shoes from supermarket

Preview and Predict Discuss with students the title and cover of the book. Prompt them with these questions: What do the two figures on the cover depict? What does the word *diary* tell you about how the story is told? What might the title mean?

Vocabulary

Accurate Adjectives Tell students that the author uses well-chosen words to describe the characters and situations in the book. These words precisely express how a character feels or acts and helps to explain the nature of a situation. Accurate adjectives can also describe something with irony. The vocabulary list contains some of these accurate adjectives from the book. Ask students to look for clues in the text to figure out word meanings or to check dictionary definitions. Support them in understanding the use of irony in the text.

Use **Resource #1: Vocabulary Cards** on page 7 and distribute copies to students. Ask them to write down the definitions of the words as they read them in the book.

- susceptible (p. 3)
- impending (p. 70)
- vulnerable (p. 92)
- judgmental (p. 155)
- inseparable (p. 24)
- articulate (p. 84)
- repressed (p. 130)
- scintillating (p. 227)



BIG QUESTION

Critical Thinking Ask students to think about this question as they read and be ready to answer it when they have finished the book. Write the question on chart paper or have students write it in their reading journals.

What was the most important thing Arnold learned by the end of the book?

STORIA ENRICHMENTS

To assess and enhance students' comprehension, this Storia eBook contains a Reading Challenge Quiz.

As You Read

Reading the Book

Modeled Reading Read aloud the first two pages of the book, asking students to follow along. Then ask them these questions: What do you know about the narrator so far? Where do you think he lives? What is his attitude toward being Indian and how Indians

are treated? What is his attitude toward himself? Do you think everything he says is “absolutely true?”

Independent Reading Assign students to read the book independently. Remind them to keep the big question in mind as they read and use sticky notes to write down important things that Arnold learns throughout the book.

Comprehension Focus

Analyze Character *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is a novel about a young protagonist who breaks away from the “bone-crushing reality” of life on the reservation and moves toward the hope of a better life. Help students identify how the author expresses this character change through key dialogue in the book. Remind students that a reader can get to know a character by paying attention to how he speaks, thinks, and acts. These pieces of evidence are clues to the character’s traits, or key qualities of his personality.

Use the graphic organizer on **Resource #2: Analyze Character** to model for students how to use Arnold’s words as text evidence to analyze his character. Project the page on a whiteboard or screen and pass out copies to students.

Model: We’re going to think deeply about things that Arnold, the narrator, says in the story and what they tell about his character. The first quote is from page 16. Arnold is describing his social standing among the Indians on the Spokane reservation. He says, “I am zero on the rez. And if you subtract zero from zero, you still have zero.” Arnold’s words tell me that his life on the reservation has given him a low opinion of himself because he is the loser that everyone picks on. He’s beaten up, ridiculed, and—in his own words—“poor, small, and weak.”

Have students fill in the rest of the organizer, analyzing the remaining quotes to see what they reveal about Arnold’s character and how he has changed. Discuss students’ answers as a group and encourage them to support their answers with other evidence from the text.

After You Read

Questions to Discuss

Lead students in a discussion of these focus story elements.

1. Identity What does the author mean by the following quotation? “Life is a constant struggle between being an individual and being a member of a community.” How does that describe what Arnold goes through? How does it describe what most teenagers go through? (*Sample answers: Arnold knows he doesn’t fit in with the people from the reservation and that he might ruin his life there; but he feels guilty about being only a “part-time Indian.” Most teenagers want to fit in but secretly feel that they don’t . . . whether in their family, at school, or even with friends.*)

2. Analyze Character Ask students to look at the drawing of “My Final Freshman Year Report Card” on page 214. What does it reflect about Arnold’s character at the end of the book? How is it different from his character in the “White/Indian” drawing on

WORDS TO KNOW

Accurate Adjectives

Ask students to refer to the definitions they wrote on their vocabulary cards to answer the following questions.

1. At the beginning of the book, how were Junior and Rowdy **inseparable**?
2. The narrator calls himself **articulate** on page 84. What does he really mean?
3. How was Junior **vulnerable** on the reservation? How was he vulnerable when he went to Reardan?
4. Why did Arnold think the Reardan kids sometimes acted like **repressed** middle-age business dudes?
5. How does the narrator use **scintillating** ironically to describe his conversation with Rowdy?

Ask students to ask and answer more questions about the vocabulary words, applying them to the novel or to their own lives.

page 57. (Sample answers: Arnold is beginning to see himself as a smart person—I know because he uses Esq. and PhD after his name which means he wants to get a lot of education. Unlike the “White/Indian” cartoon, in this one he’s not comparing himself to stereotypes . . . he’s just himself and pretty happy about who he is.)

3. Accurate Adjectives What adjectives would you use to describe Arnold by the end of the book. (Answers will vary, but should be supported by text evidence.)

Questions to Share

Encourage students to share their responses with a partner or small group.

1. Text-to-Self Do you think that people label you with a stereotype? What is unfair about the stereotype?

2. Text-to-World Is this book just about Indians or Native Americans . . . or do you think it’s about other people in American society?

3. Text-to-Text What other books have you read in which a young protagonist had to struggle with living in two worlds—one at home and one at school or the wider world?

Content Area Connections

History/Geography Spokane Tribe Tell students that Sherman Alexie, the author, grew up on the Spokane Tribe Reservation. Encourage them to research the tribe and reservation land by visiting the Spokane tribe website at <http://bit.ly/UpCSJp>. Ask them to report on the geography, culture, history, or current life of the Spokane tribe.

Sociology Your Tribes Ask students to turn to page 217 to reread Arnold’s list of tribes that he belongs to—in addition to being a member of the Spokane Indian tribe. Then challenge students to create their own list of tribes that they belong to—using the author’s imaginative criteria for tribes. Then ask them to star the five tribes they belong to that are most important to them.

Language Arts Sports Broadcast or News Article Two action-packed scenes from the book are the basketball games between Reardan and Wellpinit. Ask students to choose one of the games and create an oral sports broadcast of the game or a newspaper article about the game. Have them use technology to either make an audio recording of their broadcast or a formatted digital newspaper article.

Extension Activities

Reading/Writing Connection

Book Blog Would you recommend *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* to other readers? Ask students to answer that question, supporting their opinions with reasons based on text evidence. Encourage students to participate in a classroom book blog, either online (if technology is in place) or on a classroom bulletin board. Suggest that they begin their review by giving the book a star rating (one through five), stating their opinion, and backing it up with at least three text-based reasons.

Don't forget the



BIG QUESTION

Critical Thinking Give each student an opportunity to answer the big question. Encourage students to support their answers with details and evidence from the text. Tell them there is more than one right answer.

What was the most important thing Arnold learned by the end of the book?

Arts Comic Suggest that interested students choose one of Ellen Fornay’s illustrations as a model for their own drawing. The artist uses many different styles throughout the book. Some that students might enjoy using as a model are: the annotated portrait of Mr. P on page 29, the book cover and excerpt on page 91, and the six-frame comic on page 120.

BIG ACTIVITY

Narrative Comic Ask students to study the comic on page 88 titled “Junior Gets to School.” Ask them to describe the way the comic is structured, its topic or theme, and how the theme is communicated. Make copies of the printable **Big Activity: Narrative Comic** and distribute to students. Challenge them to draw their own comic and tell a narrative about their life such as school, home, and friends.

READ MORE AND LEARN MORE

Use these books and other resources to expand your students' study of the book or theme.

Theme Connections



Absolutely, Positively Not

David LaRochelle

Ages: 14+

Lexile Measure: 730L

Grades: 9–12

Pages: 224

Sixteen-year-old Steven DeNarski is pretty much like most guys his age, except for the fact that he secretly loves square dancing, and may have a slight crush on his male health teacher. But Steven is sure he isn't gay. Absolutely, positively sure! He even checks out some weird old book from the library that will supposedly help him feel more attracted to girls. But none of it quite works. Could he possibly be, uh, not straight? And if so, should he tell anyone?

Available as a **Storia eBook**



Eight Grade Superzero

Olugbemisola Rhuday-Perkovich

Ages: 12–15

Lexile Measure: 640L

Grades: 7–10

Pages: 336

After barfing on the principal's shoes on the first day of school, Reggie "Pukey" McKnight earns a nickname and becomes an outcast at the same time. But after he begins volunteering at a local homeless shelter, his whole worldview changes. As he gains confidence in himself and his ability to be a voice for the community, he decides to run for student council. Will anyone vote for Pukey?

Available as a **Storia eBook**



Geronimo

Joseph Bruchac

Ages: 12–15

Lexile Measure: 900L

Grades: 7–10

Pages: 368

Guided Reading Level: Y

As the Apaches are taken by train from their homes in Arizona to a reservation in Florida, Little Foot, the fictional 10-year-old narrator, describes his trip across the American South, what it's like to be imprisoned in various forts, and how the Apaches split apart in the years following their relocation. Little Foot also tells the story of his grandfather, Geronimo, the great leader of the Apaches, from his fight against Mexico to his conflicts with the US Army to his time as a prisoner of war. Available as a **Storia eBook**



A Corner of the Universe

Ann M. Martin

Ages: 12–15

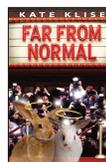
Lexile Measure: 750L

Guided Reading Level: Y

Grades: 6–8

Pages: 224

Hattie, a shy 11-year-old, has lived a quiet life in the small town of Millerton. All that changes in the summer of 1960, when her uncle Adam comes to stay in her parents' boarding house. Hattie soon realizes that Adam is not quite normal—in fact, he might be pretty sick. When tragedy strikes, Hattie is forced to face some hard truths. Available as a **Storia eBook**



Far From Normal

Kate Klise

Ages: 11–14

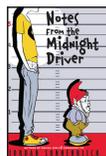
Lexile Measure: 690L

Guided Reading Level: R

Grades: 6–9

Pages: 256

Charles writes an article about his eccentric family on his 14th birthday, and it is featured on the cover of a national magazine! He is thrilled—until he gets sued for criticizing a chain of discount stores. After tense negotiations, Charles and his family become spokespeople for the discount chain. But the more famous they get, the more unbearable their lives become. Will Charles's family ever get back to a normal—well, their version of normal—life? Available as a **Storia eBook**



Notes from the Midnight Driver

Jordan Sonnenblick

Ages: 13–15

Lexile Measure: 930L

Guided Reading Level: V

Grades: 7–10

Pages: 288

Alex's parents are separated, and being 16 isn't easy, especially when it comes to girls. Alex gets in trouble with the law and has to do community service at a senior center. There, he is assigned to Solomon Lewis, a "difficult" senior with a lot of advice for Alex. The two learn to deal with their pasts and each other in ways that are humorous, entertaining, and life-changing. Available as a **Storia eBook**



Sellout

Ebony Joy Wilkins

Ages: 14+

Lexile Measure: 720L

Grades: 9–12

Pages: 272

Being nearly the only African American in her suburban school doesn't bother NaTasha, but it sure bothers Tilly, her spitfire grandmother from Harlem. When Tilly decides NaTasha needs to get back to her roots, NaTasha is thrown into an unfamiliar world. While Tilly and NaTasha volunteer at Amber's Place, a crisis center for troubled girls in the Bronx, NaTasha discovers that these rough, self-assured girls aren't the only ones struggling to find the right path. Available as a **Storia eBook**

To find PDF versions of the Storia teacher guides and links to purchase the related books, visit <http://teacher.scholastic.com/ereading-resources/>.

susceptible (p. 3)

inseparable (p. 24)

impending (p. 70)

articulate (p. 84)

vulnerable (p. 92)

repressed (p. 130)

judgmental (p. 155)

scintillating (p. 227)

Name: _____ Date: _____

RESOURCE #2: Analyze Character

Read each quotation and then explain what it tells us about Arnold at each point in the story.

Quote	What It Tells About Arnold
"I am zero on the rez. And if you subtract zero from zero, you still have zero." (p. 16)	
"Reardan was the opposite of the rez. It was the opposite of my family. It was the opposite of me. I didn't deserve to be there. I knew it; all of those kids knew it." (p. 56)	
"I was half Indian in one place and half white in the other. It was like being Indian was my job, but it was only a part-time job." (p. 118)	
I wanted to live up to expectations. I guess that's what it comes down to. The power of expectations. And as they expected more of me, I expected more of myself." (p. 180)	
"I realized that I might be a lonely Indian boy, but I was not alone in my loneliness. There were millions of other Americans who had left their birthplaces in search of a dream." (p. 217)	
How has Arnold changed?	