

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian: Looking back at the novel

1. Judging after reading...

Chose one of the following topics and **write your essay**
(~ 1/2 page):



- 'Most crucial to Junior's success in Reardan is his personal courage and spirit.' Do you agree?
- '*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is about the search for personal and cultural identity.' Do you agree?
- 'Before Junior can succeed he must first learn to believe in himself.' Do you agree?
- 'Even worse than the crippling poverty that Junior experiences is his low self-esteem in himself and his culture.' Discuss.

- individual answers –

2. The structure of the novel

The novel consists of a diary which mainly covers the span of the protagonist's first year of high school. **Analyze** how the author manages to grab your attention and keep you turning the pages of a book about school life.



For this, **consider** the narrative perspective, the relation between written text and cartoons, content as well as language and style of writing.

Narrative perspective:

- The story is told by a first-person narrator: The reader tends to identify with this sort of narrator. It brings you close to the feelings and opinions of a particular character in the story. The reader gains insights into the most private areas of this narrator and is very closely followed throughout the novel. Due to the focus of information, the reader can more and more relate to the emotions, struggles and perspectives of the narrator while reading.

- In this regard, Junior is an incredibly likeable character and you cannot help but be drawn into his world, cheering him on and admiring his tenacious spirit.

Relation between written text and cartoons:

- Interspersed within the narrative are pictures; cartoons that Junior draws because 'words are too limited' (p. 9). It is an engaging and effective technique while the cartoons assist the readers' understanding of the text. The often irreverent and black humor expressed in the cartoons develops the character of Junior more than would be possible with text alone.

- Further, the use of cartoons has a thematic link to the poverty experienced by Junior and his community. He draws because he 'want[s] the world to pay attention to [him] (p. 9)' and he knows that drawing is the 'only way [he] can become rich and famous' (p. 10). Junior acknowledges that being rich and famous 'might be [his] only real chance to escape the reservation' (p. 10). Therefore, the visual imagery has an added poignancy to it, illustrating both Junior's emotions and feelings, alongside his desire to make something of his life.

Content:

- The *Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is not really just about school life. This novel is a very enjoyable and authentic coming-of-age story about the joys and pains of growing-up young readers can relate to.

- Many issues Junior is dealing with are universal (e.g. questions of belonging / conflicting loyalties, acceptance in peer groups, first love, personal fulfillment in school and sports, ...) and tangible for other teenagers. Junior coming from another social and cultural background doesn't alienate but rather even adds more suspense and curiosity while giving insights into unfamiliar ways of life for European readers.

- The constant action and progress, coming with unexpected turns (e.g. when Roger doesn't fight back, the death of Mary etc.) and the back and forth between two cultures, keeps the reader under its spell.

Language and style of writing:

- The fresh and engaging writing style, alongside the often profane humor make this a book that is sure to appeal to young people.

- The style is humorous and often irreverent, as Junior is at times unflinchingly honest about his emotions and experiences. Though this may be uncomfortable for the reader at times, such as when Junior learns of his sister's death and is concerned because, 'Yep, I had a big erection when I learned of my sister's death' (p. 184), it is this quality that helps making the voice of the protagonist so authentic. The ongoing action of the novel is combined with an exploration of Junior's emotions and feelings.
- The chapters are quite short and the dialogue is snappy and realistic, creating an authentic voice for each of the characters. The protagonist is funny and surprisingly matter-of-fact about his life. Though his story is often sad, he does not invite the reader to feel sympathy for him, instead forcing admiration for his undeniable spirit.

3. What is left at the end? - An evaluation

Alexie's novel belongs to the literary genre of coming-of-age novels. Remember, it focuses on the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist in which character change is extremely important. Having this in mind...



- What has Junior learned during the novel?
- And what has he taught the people around him?

Explain what you understand to be the main message at the end.

individual answers, possible aspects to have mentioned:

- **Belonging, identity and self-esteem:** Junior finds it difficult to feel optimistic about himself and his culture during the novel. Junior is considered to be a traitor by his people and when he gets to Reardan, he is considered inferior for being Indian. His experience is reminiscent of the migrant experience the world over, the feeling of not belonging to either culture or being completely accepted by either culture. He battles to find his individual identity within his cultural identity. Eventually, he realizes that being a Spokane Indian does not mean he cannot be part of other tribes as well.
- **Racism and discrimination:** While Junior is often flippant in his description of the discrimination he encounters, it is clear that this plays a role in his life. The stereotypes about Native Americans have become so ingrained in their society

that he almost believes in them himself. Junior must battle prejudice from both sides as he attempts to be part of both worlds. In the end, he proves all his sceptics wrong when he crosses cultural and social borders.

- **Bullying:** Though there are many young adult novels that deal with issues of bullying, few do so in a way that makes you feel such empathy for the victim and such pleasure when he is able to triumph. Junior is matter-of-fact about his differences, how he was 'born with too much cerebral spinal fluid inside [his] skull' (p. 5) and how this led to a range of physical problems that have him labelled 'a retard about twice a day' and a member of the 'Black-Eye-of-the-Month Club' (p. 8) Despite this, Junior refuses to be a victim and demonstrates resilience and determination to overcome his adversaries.

- **Alcoholism and violence:** The backdrop of this story is the very real plight of Native Americans. Junior's family and friends are troubled by alcoholism, domestic violence and extreme poverty. Junior is torn between school and life on the reservation, and choosing a life with hope for his future as he sees the cycle of poverty that entrapped his parents and threatens to overwhelm him. Numerous deaths occur as a direct result of alcohol and Junior recognizes this is one of the biggest threats to his community.

Sources

pictures: <https://pixabay.com/de/vectors/sch%C3%A4del-kopf-menschliche-m%C3%A4nnlich-2099127/>, <https://pixabay.com/de/illustrations/lernen-denken-schreiben-studium-3222601/>, <https://pixabay.com/de/photos/lupe-lupen-buch-w%C3%B6rterbuch-lookup-389908/>

tasks: adapted from Noone, Kathlee (2010). *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian. Teaching Support Kid*. Chicago: Random House. / Becker-Ross, I. und Porteous-Schwieger, G. (2012). *Sherman Alexie. The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian. Teacher's Manual*. Berlin: Cornelsen Verlag.