

ONE MARYLAND ONE BOOK 2011

READER'S GUIDE



The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian

BY SHERMAN ALEXIE

IMAGINE IF EVERYONE IN MARYLAND READ THE SAME BOOK AT THE SAME TIME

WHAT NEW THINGS WOULD WE HAVE TO TALK ABOUT WITH ONE ANOTHER?

One Maryland One Book, a program of the Maryland Center for the Book at the Maryland Humanities Council, is Maryland's only statewide community reading program. It is designed to bring together diverse people in communities across the state through the shared experience of reading the same book and participating in book-centered discussions and other related programs at public libraries, high schools, colleges and universities, museums, bookstores, and other locations.

The 2011 selection is *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie. *True Diary* is a semi-autobiographical work of fiction that details the life of Arnold Spirit (a.k.a. Junior), a 14-year-old budding cartoonist living on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Washington state. With humor and grace, Alexie's book—a 2007 National Book Award winner—tackles poverty, bullying, friendship, belonging, grief and loss, and family struggle.

The Maryland Humanities Council has at the core of its mission the deep commitment to providing Marylanders with an opportunity to gather and discuss issues important to their lives and communities, believing that a great work of literature provides an excellent springboard to do so. One Maryland One Book is not just about reading or literature. It is also about bringing people together for meaningful dialogue.

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian
By Sherman Alexie
Art by Ellen Forney

30 chapters; 230 pages (excluding Discussion Guide and Interview with Ellen Forney)
Little Brown Trade Paperback, 2009
ISBN 978-0-316-01369-7

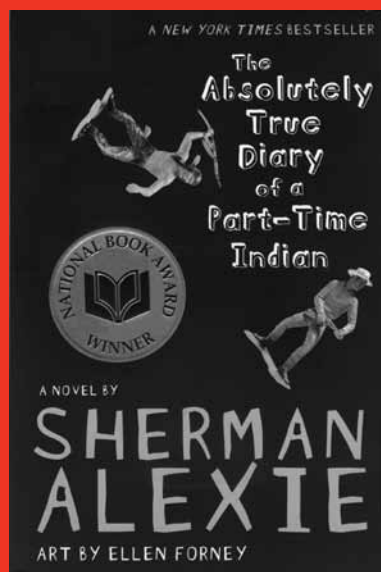
GET THE BOOK

Pick up a copy of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* at your local public library or bookstore and start up a conversation with your family, friends, coworkers, or even the person sitting next to you as you ride the bus or train. This is your chance to take a moment to have a great conversation with an old friend or to make a new one.

JOIN IN

We invite you to join Honorary Chair, Maryland's First Lady Katie O'Malley, and thousands of other Marylanders at one of the many book discussions and related programs happening around the state in September and October. Look for Sherman Alexie at the Baltimore Book Festival on Saturday, September 24 and other venues around the state during late September.

To find One Maryland One Book programs in your area, go to: www.onemarylandonebook.org and click on Calendar.



LETTER FROM HONORARY CHAIRPERSON FIRST LADY KATIE O'MALLEY



On behalf of the State of Maryland I am pleased to invite you to join me and the Maryland Humanities Council for the fourth year of One Maryland One Book, our state's community reading project. You will be one of many thousands who make time in their busy schedules to take part in this annual, shared experience: reading the same book, then coming together to discuss it and how it raises issues important to our daily lives.

This year's selection is *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie. This semi-autobiographical work of fiction offers a window into the life of 14-year-old Arnold Spirit, a budding cartoonist who faces bullying, poverty, alienation, and alcoholism on the reservation. His "diary" injects humor and poignant insight into his struggles as he faces strong opposition to a major life decision. At once rueful and immensely inspiring, *True Diary* offers an engaging opportunity to discuss some of the all-too-easily forgotten challenges in the daily lives of our teenagers.

A program of the Maryland Humanities Council's Maryland Center for the Book, One Maryland One Book is made possible each year through the generosity of our sponsors and community partners. We heartily thank them for their continued support, many of which have been with us since the project launched in 2008. I encourage you to read *True Diary* along with your family, friends, and neighbors around the state, and join in the conversation. Find out how to get involved at www.onemarylandonebook.org.

Thank you for taking part in this very special project.

Sincerely,

Katie O'Malley

Katie O'Malley
First Lady of Maryland

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Author, poet and screenwriter Sherman Alexie was named one of *The New Yorker's* 20 top writers for the 21st century. *The New York Times Book Review* described him as “one of the major lyric voices of our time.” *Men's Journal* called him “the world’s first fast-talking and wisecracking mediagenic American-Indian superstar.”

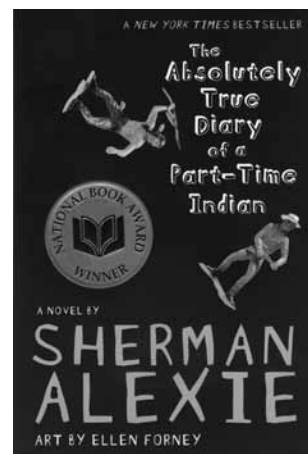
His latest books include *Flight*, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, a 2007 National Book Award winner in Young People’s Literature, and *Face*, his first full collection of poems in nine years. His collection of short stories, *War Dances*, was released in Fall 2009, and was the winner of the PEN Faulkner Award.

Alexie wrote and produced the film, *Smoke Signals*, based on his book, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, which won the

Audience Award and Filmmakers Trophy at the 1998 Sundance Film Festival. In 2002 he made his directorial debut with *The Business of Fancydancing*. He is currently working on a sequel to *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* entitled *Fire with Fire*, and a sequel to *True Diary* entitled *The Magic and Tragic Year of My Broken Thumb*.

Alexie’s stories are driven by a haunting lyricism and naked candor that cut to the heart of the human experience. With his humorous, revealing, and exuberant works of art, he compels audiences to see the world for all of its pitfalls and possibilities.

For more information on Sherman Alexie and his other works, visit www.fallsapart.com.



ABOUT THE BOOK

Junior is a budding cartoonist growing up on the Spokane Indian reservation. Born with a variety of medical problems, he is picked on by everyone but his best friend. Determined to receive a good education, Junior leaves the rez to attend an all-white high school in the neighboring farm town where the only other Indian is the school mascot. Despite being condemned as a traitor to his people and enduring great tragedies, Junior attacks life with wit and humor and discovers a strength inside of himself that he never knew existed.¹

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1 In Chapter Two Junior says (page 13), “It sucks to be poor, and it sucks to feel that you somehow deserve to be poor...and there’s nothing you can do about it. Poverty doesn’t give you strength...poverty only teaches you how to be poor.” Is poverty a cycle? What is it about his circumstances that lead Junior to believe there’s no way to break the cycle? Is it possible to break the cycle of poverty?
- 2 What were your dreams growing up? Did you believe that your dreams were achievable? Why/why not?
- 3 What do you think about “The Unofficial and Unwritten (but you better follow them or you’re going to get beaten twice as hard) Spokane Indian Rules of Fisticuffs” on pages 61-62? Why do you think these “rules” existed?
- 4 Several people in this story were hiding things. Rowdy tried to hide the fact that his father abused him. Penelope hid her bulimia. Arnold tried to hide many things—particularly from his classmates. Why did they try to hide things from their friends and family? What did secrecy accomplish for them? Did the story make you recall a time when you were so concerned about what others might think of you that you changed your behavior or hid something from family or friends?
- 5 On page 118 Junior says, “Traveling between Reardan and Wellpinit...I always felt like a stranger. I was half Indian in one place and half white in the other.” Why does Junior feel this way?
- 6 Name calling is prevalent in Arnold’s “diary.” What are the effects of name calling and bullying on the people who are bullied? The people who are bullying?
- 7 Gordy says (page 132), “Well, life is a constant struggle between being an individual and being a member of the community.” Do you agree? Why/why not?
- 8 Arnold is surprised when he becomes popular at Reardan. What draws people to him?
- 9 On page 217, Arnold lists his “tribes.” Do you consider yourself a member of a tribe or tribes? If so, to which tribes do you belong? Why are your tribes important?
- 10 Is Junior’s life on the “rez” how you imagined life on a Native American reservation would be? Why or why not?
- 11 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 such a keen understanding of his life and circumstances?
- 12 Would you have left the reservation? Why or why not?

¹ from the back cover

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

We hope that your participation in One Maryland One Book inspires you to keep talking about the many thought-provoking and inspiring topics examined in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. The following list of books and movies might also be of interest. We encourage you to continue your exploration!

BOOKS

The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven - by Sherman Alexie

In this darkly comic collection of interlocked tales, Alexie weaves memory, fantasy, and stark realism to paint a complex portrait of life in and around the Spokane Indian Reservation.

War Dances - by Sherman Alexie

Alexie's latest collection of stories and poems again showcases his famous combination of humor and anger as he explores the precarious balance between self-preservation and life's possibilities.

Bastard Out of Carolina - by Dorothy Allison

Set in the rural South, this tale centers around the Boatwright family, a proud and close-knit clan known for their drinking, fighting, and womanizing.

Counting Coup: A True Story of Basketball and Honor on the Little Big Horn - by Larry Colton

During a 15-month stay on the Crow Reservation, the author, a professional baseball player turned journalist, begins to understand how the conditions of life on the reservation and basketball affect the lives of teens. (Nonfiction)

Eagle Blue: A Team, a Tribe, and a High School Basketball Season in Arctic Alaska - by Michael D'Orso

This true account follows the Fort Yukon Eagles, winners of six consecutive regional championships, through the course of an entire season, from their first day of practice in late November to the Alaska State Championship Tournament in March. (Nonfiction)

The Plague of Doves: A Novel - by Louise Erdrich

The unsolved murder of a farm family haunts the small, white, off-reservation town of Pluto, North Dakota. The vengeance exacted for this crime transforms the lives of Ojibwe people living on the nearby reservation and influences both communities for the next generation.

Sovereign Bones: New Native American Writing Volume II - edited by Eric Gansworth

This collection of original writings focuses on the key role that writers and visual artists play in the struggle of native peoples to retain their individual identities. In personal essays, memoir, and historical reflections, each writer explores the ways in which he or she arrived at their work and how he or she has retained a traditional way of life in that work. (Nonfiction)

The Comanche Empire - by Pekka Hämäläinen

A compelling and original study, this award-winning book uncovers the lost story of the Comanche, one of the most powerful and influential tribes in American history. Hämäläinen challenges the idea of indigenous peoples as victims of European expansion, offering a fresh, new model in Native/European relations. (Nonfiction)

The Kite Runner - by Khaled Hosseini

This poignant novel explores themes of friendship, shame, betrayal and redemption in war-torn Afghanistan.

Their Eyes Were Watching God - by Zora Neale Hurston

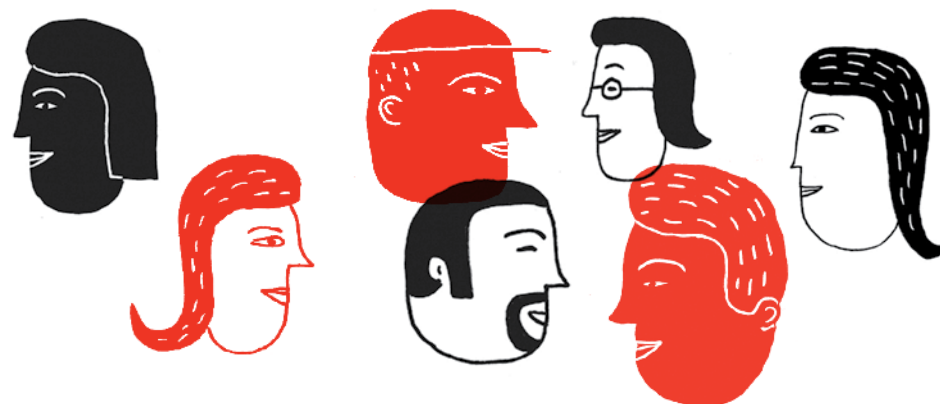
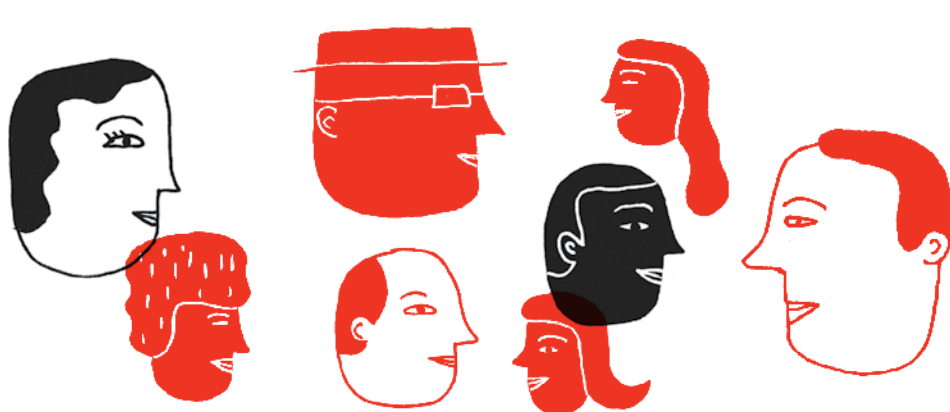
An African-American woman searches for a fulfilling relationship through two loveless marriages and finally finds it in Tea Cake, an itinerant laborer and gambler.

Everything You Know About Indians Is Wrong - by Paul Chaat Smith

In his journey from fighting activist in the American Indian Movement of the 1970s to federal employee, Smith tells us he has discovered at least two things: there is no one true representation of the American Indian experience and even the best of intentions sometimes end in catastrophe. *Everything You Know About Indians Is Wrong* is a highly entertaining and, at times, searing critique of the deeply disputed role of American Indians in the United States. (Nonfiction)

Black Boy - by Richard Wright

Wright's unforgettable and eloquent autobiography of growing up in the Jim Crow South offers an unsurpassed portrait of the struggles against ingrained racism and poverty.



FOR TEEN READERS

King of the Mild Frontier: An Ill-Advised Autobiography - by Chris Crutcher

Chris Crutcher, author of young adult novels such as *Ironman* and *Whale Talk*, as well as short stories, tells of growing up in Cascade, Idaho, and becoming a writer. (Nonfiction)

Fat Kid Rules the World - by K. L. Going

Seventeen-year-old Troy, overweight and depressed, gets a new perspective on life when Curt, a homeless teen who is a genius on guitar, asks Troy to be the drummer in a rock band.

Hoops - by Walter Dean Myers

A teenage basketball player is befriended by a former professional player who was forced to quit because of scandal and hopes to prevent other young athletes from repeating his mistake.

Mexican Whiteboy - by Matt de la Peña

Sixteen-year-old Danny searches for his identity amidst the confusion of being half-Mexican and half-white while spending a summer with his cousin and new friends.

Holes - by Louis Sachar

Stanley Yelnats is sent to a hellish correctional camp in the Texas desert where he finds his first real friend, a treasure, and a new sense of himself.

Jolted: Newton Starker's Rules for Survival - by Arthur Slade

Newton Starker enrolls at the eccentric Jerry Potts Academy of Higher Learning and Survival in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, so that he can avoid the curse that befell his ancestors.

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn - by Betty Smith

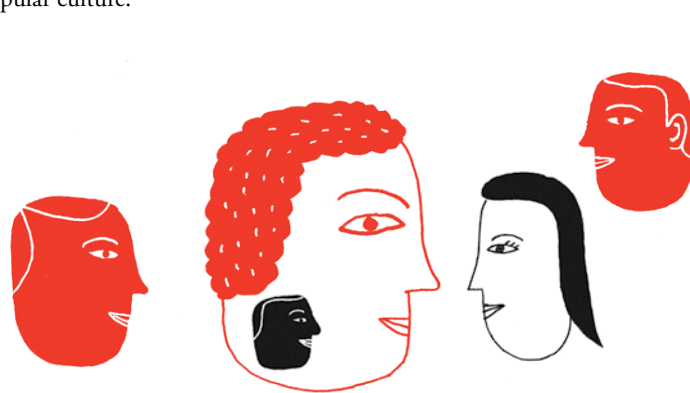
The story of young, sensitive, and idealistic Francie Nolan and her bittersweet formative years in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn has enchanted and inspired millions of readers for more than sixty years.

Chameleon - by Charles R. Smith, Jr.

The summer before starting high school in inner-city Los Angeles, 14-year-old Shawn grapples with the complicated bonds of friends and family and the reality of street gang violence.

American Born Chinese - by Gene Luen Yang

This award-winning graphic novel presents three interrelated stories about the problems of young Chinese Americans trying to participate in popular culture.



MOVIES

Trail of Tears: A Native American Documentary Collection (2010, 262 min.)

This compilation includes four award-winning documentaries: *Native American Healing in the 21st Century*, *Black Indians: An American Story*, *Trail of Tears: Cherokee Legacy*, and *Our Spirits Don't Speak English: Indian Boarding School*.

The Business of Fancysiding (2002, 103 min.) - Written and Directed by Sherman Alexie

While in college, best friends from the Spokane Reservation Aristotle and Seymour took different paths. Aristotle went back to "the rez," while Seymour began a new life for himself as an openly gay poet. Sixteen years later, the two are reunited, but mutual feelings of hurt and resentment stand in the way of their friendship.

Incident at Oglala: The Leonard Peltier Story (1992, 90 min.) - Directed by Michael Apted

In 1975, armed FBI agents illegally entered the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, and a Native American and two FBI agents were killed. Leonard Peltier, a man of Chippewa and Sioux heritage, was jailed for these deaths and remains a prisoner to this day. Producer Robert Redford and director Michael Apted's scorching study questions the equality of justice and whether or not the FBI framed Peltier.

Smoke Signals (1998, 89 min.) - Directed by Chris Eyre, written by Sherman Alexie

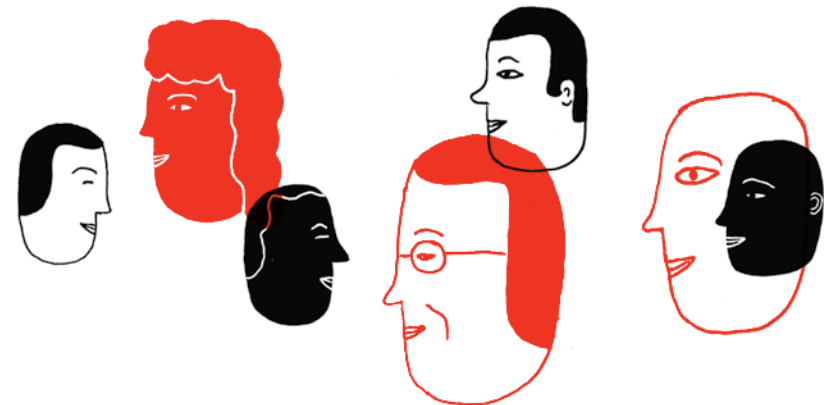
Winner of the Audience Award at the Sundance Film Festival, this coming-of-age tale, based on Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, follows Victor and Thomas, two young Coeur d'Alene men who confront issues of identity and family while on a journey to collect the remains of Victor's father.

We Shall Remain (PBS, 2009, 394 min.) - Directed by Chris Eyre and Sharon Grimberg

Benjamin Bratt narrates this epic documentary that dismantles both stereotypes and historical inaccuracies through stories of heartbreak, betrayal, inspiration, and salvation from Native American history.

Hoop Dreams (1994, 170 min.) - Directed by Steve James

Two ordinary inner-city kids dare to dream the impossible—professional basketball glory—in this epic chronicle of hope and faith. Filmed over a five-year period, *Hoop Dreams* follows young Arthur Agee and William Gates as they navigate the complex, competitive world of scholastic athletics while striving to overcome the intense pressures of family life and the realities of their Chicago streets.



MOVIES (cont.)

In the White Man's Image (PBS *The American Experience* series, 1992, 60 min.)

- Directed by Christine Lesiak

Native Americans tell the wrenching story of a social experiment gone horribly wrong at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, where Native American students were entered into a relentless assimilation program, aimed to eradicate all traces of Native American culture.

The Exiles (1961, 72 min.) - Directed by Kent Mackenzie

The Exiles chronicles one night in the lives of young Native American men and women living in the Bunker Hill district of Los Angeles. Based entirely on interviews with the participants and their friends, the film follows a group of exiles—transplants from Southwest reservations—as they flirt, drink, party, fight, and dance.

Rabbit Proof Fence (2002, 94 min.) - Directed by Phillip Noyce

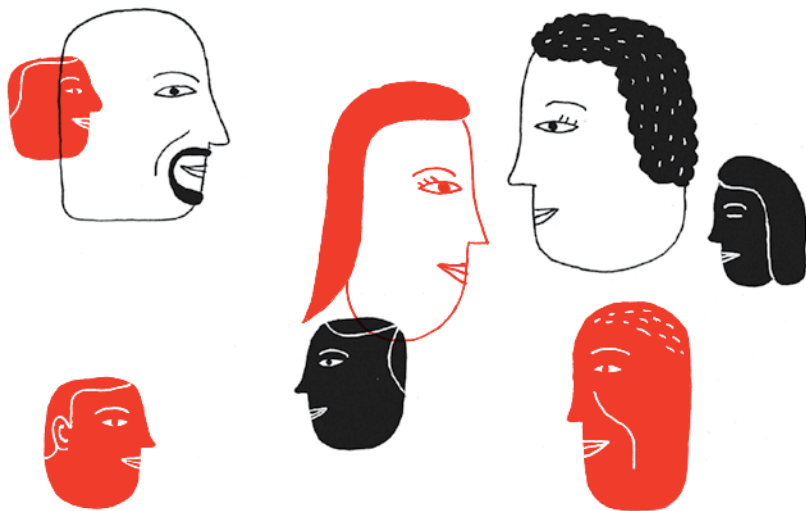
At a time when it was Australian government policy to train aboriginal children as domestic workers and integrate them into white society, young Molly Craig decides to lead her little sister and cousin in a daring escape from their internment camp. Molly and the girls, part of what would become known as Australia's "Stolen Generations," must then elude the authorities on a dangerous 1,500-mile adventure along the rabbit-proof fence that bisects the continent and will lead them home.

Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee (HBO Films, 2007, 133 min.) - Directed by Yves Simoneau

Inspired by Dee Brown's acclaimed bestseller, the film begins powerfully with the Sioux triumph over General Custer at Little Big Horn. The action centers on the struggles of three characters: Charles Eastman, a young, Dartmouth-educated Sioux doctor; Sitting Bull, the proud Lakota chief who refuses to submit to US government policies designed to strip his people of their identity, dignity, and sacred land; and Senator Henry Dawes, one of the men responsible for the government policy on Indian affairs.

Finding Forrester (2001, 136 min.) - Directed by Gus Van Sant

Jamal Wallace is an inner-city kid from the Bronx whose skill at basketball and writing comes to the attention of a prestigious New York prep school when he scores highly on his standardized tests. Befriended by fellow student Claire and helped along by Pulitzer prize-winning author and recluse William Forrester, Jamal pursues his dreams both on and off the court in the face of prejudice and a heavy academic load at his new school.



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One Maryland One Book is coordinated by the Maryland Center for the Book, a program of the Maryland Humanities Council, in partnership with Barnes & Noble and Enoch Pratt Free Library.

The Maryland Humanities Council is an educational, 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization whose mission is to stimulate and promote informed dialogue and civic engagement on issues critical to Marylanders via the humanities. To learn more, visit www.mdhc.org.



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