

# ONE MARYLAND ONE BOOK 2011

TEACHER'S GUIDE FOR GRADES 9-12



*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

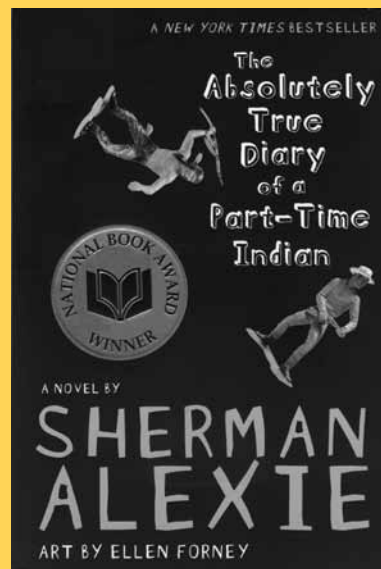
### GET THE BOOK

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](http://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](http://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.”

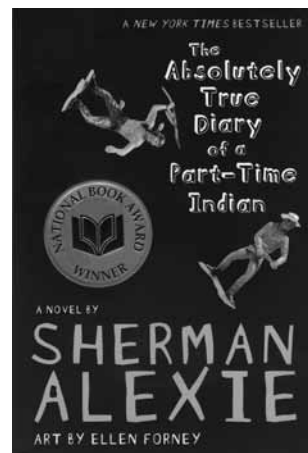
His latest books include *Flight*, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, a 2007 National Book Award winner in Young People’s Literature, and *Face*, his first full collection of poems in nine years. His collection of short stories, *War Dances*, was released in Fall 2009, and was the winner 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](http://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.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> from the back cover

## MARYLAND STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION CORE LEARNING GOALS - ENGLISH

### GOAL 1: READING, REVIEWING AND RESPONDING TO TEXT

The student will demonstrate the ability to respond to a text by employing personal experiences and critical analysis.

**EXPECTATION 1.1** The student will use effective strategies before, during, and after reading, viewing, and listening to self-selected and assigned materials.

**INDICATOR 1.1.1** The student will use pre-reading strategies appropriate to both the text and purpose for reading by surveying the text, accessing prior knowledge, formulating questions, setting purpose(s), and making predictions.

**INDICATOR 1.1.2** The student will use during-reading strategies appropriate to both the text and purpose for reading by visualizing, making connections, and using fix-up strategies such as re-reading, questioning, and summarizing.

**INDICATOR 1.1.3** The student will use after-reading strategies appropriate to both the text and purpose for reading by summarizing, comparing, contrasting, synthesizing, drawing conclusions, and validating the purpose for reading.

**EXPECTATION 1.2** The student will construct, examine, and extend meaning of traditional and contemporary works recognized as having significant literary merit.

**INDICATOR 1.2.1** The student will consider the contributions of plot, character, setting, conflict, and point of view when constructing the meaning of a text.

**INDICATOR 1.2.2** The student will determine how the speaker, organization, sentence structure, word choice, rhythm, and imagery reveal an author’s purpose.

**INDICATOR 1.2.3** The student will explain the effectiveness of stylistic elements in a text that communicate an author’s purpose.

**INDICATOR 1.2.5** The student will extend or further develop meaning by explaining the implications of the text for the reader or contemporary society.

**EXPECTATION 1.3** The student will explain and give evidence to support perceptions about print and non-print works.

**INDICATOR 1.3.1** The student will explain how language and textual devices create meaning.

**INDICATOR 1.3.5** The student will explain how common and universal experiences serve as the source of literary themes that cross time and cultures.

**TEACHER’S NOTE:** In *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Sherman Alexie uses the informal language of a contemporary high school student. The book is filled with slang, colloquialisms, and profanities, particularly name calling such as asshole, dickwad, retard, bastard, and faggot. Many students will be relieved that the story is written using teen vernacular, some will be offended, and some will even giggle with embarrassment. Prepare the students for the descriptive and figurative language they will read, but then let the story stand on its merits. In time, the language will merely be Junior’s vivid depiction of his world.

## BEFORE READING ACTIVITY: BACKGROUND RESEARCH

This activity consists of one day of online research, one day of composition, and one day of presentations. Students are responsible for reviewing their assigned website, determining important information, and recording a minimum of 10 facts to share with the class, thus providing common background knowledge. If possible, group the students in pairs and assign one site to each pair. Below are a few websites that you might have students explore for their research.

A History of the Spokane Tribe  
[www.spokanetribe.com](http://www.spokanetribe.com)

Historical Timeline of the Spokane Tribe  
[www.wellpinit.org/timeline](http://www.wellpinit.org/timeline)

History of the Spokane Tribe (lengthy – focus on the last chapter, “Reservation Today”)  
[www.wellpinit.org/Childrenofthesun](http://www.wellpinit.org/Childrenofthesun)

A Spokane Tribe Legend (short, great for students with limited reading comprehension skills)  
[www.wellpinit.wednet.edu/spokanelake](http://www.wellpinit.wednet.edu/spokanelake)

Wellpinit School District Newspaper  
[www.wellpinit.org/theword](http://www.wellpinit.org/theword)

Wellpinit High School Website (identify similarities/differences between your school and Wellpinit High School)  
[www.wellpinit.org/highschool](http://www.wellpinit.org/highschool)

Basic Statistics on the Spokane Reservation  
[www.city-data.com/city/Spokane-Reservation-Washington.html](http://www.city-data.com/city/Spokane-Reservation-Washington.html)

Corporal Punishment in Schools  
[www.cnsnews.com/node/68734](http://www.cnsnews.com/node/68734)  
[www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1915820,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1915820,00.html)

Go to Google Images and use “Spokane Reservation” as a search term. Choose 6-10 images that appear to be important/have some significance and create a caption for each image.  
[www.google.com](http://www.google.com)

Have a group compare and contrast the following: formal/informal language, idiom, jargon, slang, colloquialism, profanity, and expletives.

## MORE ON THE AUTHOR

Sherman Alexie’s Official Website – Biography  
[www.fallsapart.com/biography.html](http://www.fallsapart.com/biography.html)

Video of Sherman Alexie talking about his literary heroes  
[www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/22284](http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/22284)

## CHARACTERS

- **Arnold Spirit, a.k.a. Junior:** narrator and story’s protagonist
- **Oscar:** Junior’s beloved dog
- **Rowdy:** Junior’s best friend
- **Mary (Runs Away) Spirit:** Junior’s basement-dwelling older sister
- **Mr. P:** Junior’s geometry teacher at Wellpinit High School
- **Penelope:** a popular girl at Reardan High School and Junior’s classmate
- **Roger:** a popular athletic upperclassman at Reardan High School
- **Gordy:** the most intelligent boy at Reardan High School
- Arnold’s mother, father and grandmother are also key characters in the story

## THEMES

Poverty, friendship, self-discovery, racism, hope, tolerance, resilience/perseverance

## ASSIGNMENT #1 (PAGES 1-24)

[www.fallsapart.com/audio/PT-Indian.p3.mp3](http://www.fallsapart.com/audio/PT-Indian.p3.mp3) 4:30 minute audio: *Sherman Alexie reading pages 7-10; note: there is profane language in this excerpt. Review before playing for your class.*

### VOCABULARY:

- |                        |                         |                    |
|------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------|
| • lobes (page 1)       | • impediments (page 4)  | • wattle (page 19) |
| • susceptible (page 3) | • brawling (page 17)    | • hucked (page 20) |
| • rez (page 3)         | • hypothermic (page 19) |                    |

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1 As Junior’s challenges are revealed to the reader, have a student(s) record them so there will be a visible list. Discuss which would be the biggest challenge on a daily basis. Why? What does it take to withstand so many challenges?
- 2 Alexie’s descriptive language takes the forefront throughout the first chapter: “brain grease,” “brain drowning in grease,” “supposed to croak during surgery,” “[eyes] used to be married to each other but now hate each other’s guts,” “the world is a series of broken dams and floods, and my cartoons are tiny little lifeboats.” How different would the story be if medical explanations were provided rather than using figurative language?
- 3 Alexie infuses the story with insight into a life of poverty. According to Junior, what is poverty? In this story, why is it so difficult for the Indians on the reservation to get out of poverty?
- 4 Authors make choices throughout the writing of a story. They can include what they want, exclude what they want, create and/or exaggerate what they want, and (to an extent) borrow what they want. Obviously, Rowdy has been chosen to be an important part of Junior’s story. Predict what Rowdy’s role/purpose will be in the story. Find support in the text.
- 5 How is cartooning more than a creative outlet for Junior? Are outlets only important to teens? Why or why not? Support your opinion.

## ASSIGNMENT #2 (PAGES 25-53)

### VOCABULARY:

- minions (page 30)
- mafioso (page 32)
- corporal punishment

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1 Why does Arnold reference Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde? Is it an apt analogy?
- 2 Which is more vivid, the picture at the bottom of page 31 or the written description? Explain.
- 3 On page 35 Mr. P says, “We were supposed to kill the Indian to save the child.” What is most surprising about these early teaching strategies with students on the reservation? Why would corporal punishment be used in schools?
- 4 Mr. P provides insight into Junior’s sister. Is it surprising that a teacher knows something a family member does not?
- 5 How can one’s best friend become one’s worst enemy as quickly as Rowdy became Junior’s? Why can’t Rowdy support Junior’s choice?

## ASSIGNMENT #3 (PAGES 54-81)

### VOCABULARY:

- pummeled (page 55)
- translucent (page 56)
- alpha (page 68)
- mutilated (page 55)
- fisticuffs (page 61)
- vintage (page 72)
- crucified (page 55)
- combine (page 67)
- naïve (page 79)

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1 The chapter titles in this novel are also descriptive. Who are the “monsters” in the chapter that starts on page 54?
- 2 Grandmother shares her view about why Roger didn’t fight back (page 68). Is there any validity in that explanation for boys today?
- 3 From whom does Junior gain support for the journey he’s undertaking? Could he make the move if no one supported him? Why or why not?
- 4 Explain the irony in the Halloween chapter beginning on page 77. How does irony enhance this chapter? Defend your response.
- 5 Put yourself in Arnold’s shoes; which is worse, continuing to feel like “...a stranger in a strange land” (page 81) at Reardan or “Like a slug burning to death from salty spit” on his own reservation (page 79)?

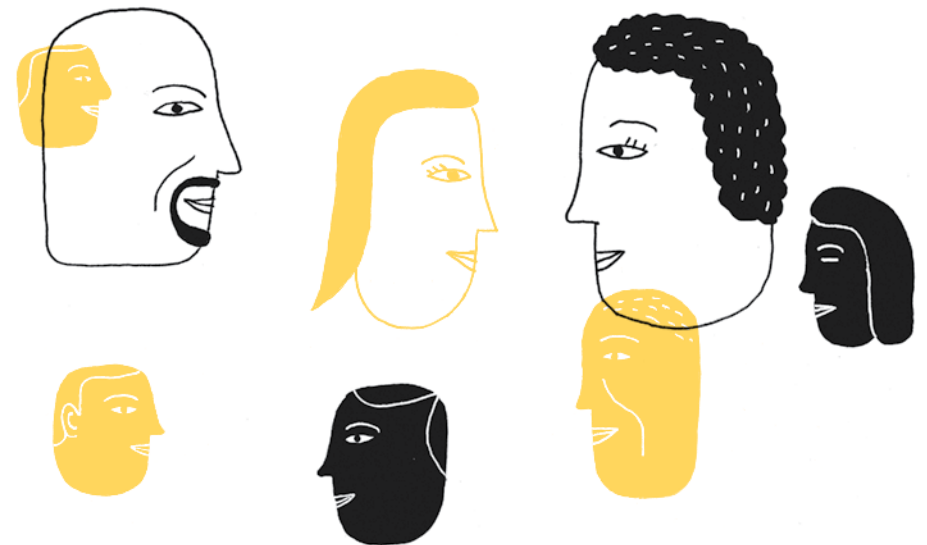
## ASSIGNMENT #4 (PAGES 82-103)

### VOCABULARY:

- nada (page 82)
- nomadic (page 90)
- pathetic (page 95)
- articulate (page 84)
- tautologies (page 92)
- secede (page 100)
- pyrotechnic (page 85)
- illiterate (page 92)

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1 Junior obviously has much to gain from being friends with Gordy. Does Gordy have anything to gain from being Junior’s friend?
- 2 What does it take to leave what is familiar and move toward hope? Did Junior’s sister Mary move toward hope when she ran away? Or did she just want to get away from the reservation? Why marry someone if she just wanted to leave the rez? Support your response.
- 3 Most of Arnold’s cartoons are single frames. He could have created one for the multi-frame cartoon strip on page 88. Why does Alexie choose one over the other? Study the cartoon carefully. Interpret the details that are included (i.e., the anxiety sweat drops, the cough cough, the exhaust fog, the clank clunk clatter, the slouching figure in Friday’s frame).
- 4 Mary sends Arnold an email. Why would Alexie choose to keep her character in the plot line since she’s run away from the reservation?
- 5 Explain how the Thanksgiving chapter (page 101) initially appears to include irony, but then includes an action that Junior finds worthy of thanks.



## ASSIGNMENT #5 (PAGES 104-129)

### VOCABULARY:

- scintillating (page 106)
- ecstatic (page 123)
- ancillary (page 112)
- theoreticians (page 128)

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1 Again, keeping in mind that everything included in a novel has been chosen by the author for a purpose, why include the rather gross, descriptive imagery of, “I finish, flush, wash my hands, and then stare in the mirror and start popping zits”(page 105). Popping zits? Is that image necessary? Why or why not?
- 2 Penelope and Arnold are an unexpected and unusual couple. Why would Penelope become (somewhat) attached to Arnold? To annoy her father? To make a nice boy visible? So he'd keep her bulimia a secret?
- 3 On page 112 Arnold writes, “And Indian boys weren't supposed to dream like that. And white girls from a small town weren't suppose to dream big either.” Why in our era of student rights and increased minority opportunities would young adults like Arnold and Penelope not be able to reach for the sky?
- 4 Arnold learns so much about himself and others throughout this novel. What was his “aha” moment that explained why his sister could have “...met a guy and married him five minutes later”(page 109)? Does his epiphany make sense to you?
- 5 On page 129 Arnold says, “If you let people into your life a little bit, they can be pretty damn amazing.” Explain how he came to this conclusion.

## ASSIGNMENT #6 (PAGES 130-158)

### VOCABULARY:

- repressed (page 130)
- intimidate (page 140)
- eccentric (page 153)
- sentimental (page 132)
- taunted (page 145)
- shamans (page 155)

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1 Words of wisdom, self-revelations, and lessons learned continue throughout the novel. Identify them as you read them. For example, page 132, “...life is a constant struggle between being an individual and being a member of the community.” Page 136, “You have to dream big to get big.” Page 148, “The quality of a man's life is in direct proportion to his commitment to excellence, regardless of his chosen field of endeavor.” Page 153, “I've learned that the worst thing a parent can do is ignore their children.”
- 2 Why does Arnold persist in calling Rowdy his best friend and try to regain Rowdy's trust and friendship?
- 3 Reardan's basketball coach loved to use military metaphors. Since Arnold was such a good shooter, coach called Arnold his “Weapon of Mass Destruction.” Create metaphors (of any type—military, general, etc.) for the following characters: Rowdy, Gordy, Penelope, and Mary.

## ASSIGNMENT #7 (PAGES 159-196)

### VOCABULARY:

- wake (page 159)
- yucker (page 180)
- demoralize (page 192)
- anthropologist (page 164)
- egomaniac (page 182)
- adrenaline (page 193)
- mulled (page 165)
- metaphorically (page 185)

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1 How does the death of a beloved family member (like Arnold's grandmother) impact a family beyond a wake or celebration of his/her life?
- 2 Why does Junior appear to get along with the white people at Reardan, but appear to have so little tolerance for the white man who materializes at his grandmother's wake?
- 3 Review how Junior made it through all the death and change he faced and avoided feeling like killing himself and those around him. Would his method be effective for you? If not, what would you or others you know do (or have done) to make it through life's turbulent times?
- 4 Explain Junior's justification for realizing that the Reardan basketball team and not the Wellpinit team was Goliath.
- 5 Consider Arnold's attitude and connections with others. Which of these is most important in helping him overcome adversity?

## ASSIGNMENT #8 (PAGES 197-239)

### VOCABULARY:

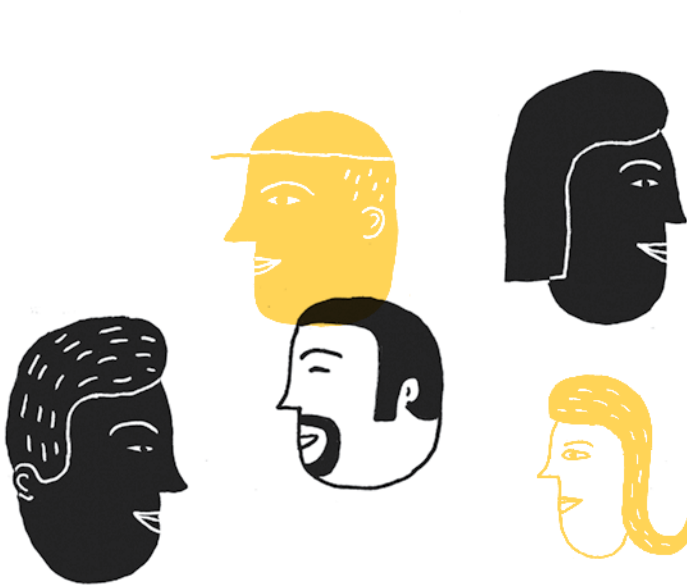
- vulnerable (page 203)
- rhetorical (page 203)
- mock-surprise (page 229)

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1 Drinking and drunkenness is referenced throughout the novel. Even Arnold's loving, supportive father wastes family money to go on drinking binges. Apply your understanding of the Spokane Indians' history to examine reasons behind this destructive behavior.
- 2 Rewrite pages 197-198. Express the same attitude without the profanity and homophobic name-calling.
- 3 Laughter frequently hides emotion. What emotion was Arnold hiding with laughter when he was in the car with his father (page 204)? What other emotions does laughter often hide? Provide specific examples.
- 4 Choices, choices, choices. Why would the author choose to have Junior's sister Mary die since there have already been multiple deaths in the story?
- 5 Would the ending of the novel have meant the same thing if the last sentence weren't included? Why or why not?

## EXTENSION:

- 1 Personalize Junior's experience at Reardan by debating whether Junior would be ostracized or assimilated into your school community. Divide students into six to eight groups. Assign each group a side in the debate, regardless of students' personal opinions. After a 15-minute group discussion, one student from each group represents that stand on the panel. After a 20-30 minute debate, the audience will determine which side presented a stronger case.
- 2 Choose one theme of the story. In a 500-word essay, explain why it is a theme. Include details and supporting quotes to identify the importance of this theme to the novel.
- 3 Select a supporting character from the novel (Rowdy, Penelope, Coach, Grandmother, Mr. P, Gordy, or Mary) and complete the following tasks:
  - A Create a list of at least four important quotes from the text (with page numbers) that reveal something about the character you selected. Consider the following:
    - what others think of the character
    - what the character believes
    - how the character behaves
  - B Write a diary entry for this character based on an important event in the novel. Include at least one of the quotes you selected in the diary entry. Write no fewer than 10 sentences and no more than 15 (excluding the quote). Try to assume her or his voice. You may add details that are not in the text, but anything you add must be consistent with what is in the book.
  - C List words or phrases of your own that summarize your understanding of your chosen character. Consider the following:
    - attitudes
    - behaviors
    - conflicts/problems
    - thematic significance



Then organize the descriptive words/phrases listed for your character to create an aesthetically-pleasing word cloud. Use <http://www.wordle.net>.

OR draw a symbol that you think best represents the uniqueness of your chosen supporting character. Label the symbol with the character's name and create a caption that explains why this symbol is uniquely appropriate for this person.

OR emulate the author and illustrator's work by creating a cartoon or illustration that reveals irony. The best result will likely be if you select something to depict from your personal experience.

- Images should fill at least two thirds of an 8-1/2x11" sheet of unlined paper.
  - Work should be neatly drafted and legible in color or black-and-white.
  - Include some text as a label, caption or conversation bubble (or all three).
  - Text may use language that is true to your experience, but keep in mind your audience (your classmates and teacher). If you are uncertain about the appropriateness of your subject or language, see the teacher.
  - Be able to explain the irony and its relevance in your life.
- 4 Since Sherman Alexie was first known for his poetry, share his poem, "Good Hair." (<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/22091>) What does this poem reveal about Indian culture? Is the speaker an Indian or a person of another race/culture? Why is this piece considered a poem?



## NOTES

This guide was created by S.P. Mundy with additional content provided by Jennifer N. Martin. Portions have been reprinted with permission from Hachette Publishing.

One Maryland One Book is sponsored by the Bank of America Charitable Foundation and the Institute of Museum and Library Services, LSTA grant funds, through the Division of Library Development & Services, Maryland State Department of Education, with additional support from Constellation Energy, the Verizon Foundation and M&T Bank.

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](http://www.mdhc.org).



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