

**The Absolutely
True Diary
of a
Part-Time Indian**

Sherman Alexie

Extras online: Reading questions

This book comes with free multiple choice questions to check your basic understanding of the text. You can answer the questions after each chapter or whenever you are ready. Click on an answer and you receive immediate feedback.

With the help of these questions you can be sure that you have understood the plot.

Here are two sample questions:

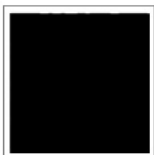
Why did the dentist pull ten of Junior's teeth in one day?

- His parents could only make one appointment.
- The Indian Health Service only pays for one treatment per year.
- The white dentist wanted to punish Junior.

Why did some of the Indian kids call Junior "Orbit"?

- He was very interested in astrology.
- His aunt used to swing him around in a circle when he was younger.
- His head was very big.

Scan this QR code to access the questions:



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Abbreviations

adj. adjective
adv. adverb
derog. derogatory
e.g. for example
esp. especially

infml. informal
p., pp. page, pages
sb. somebody
sl. slang
sth. something

The Black-Eye¹-of-the-Month Club

I was born with water on the brain.

Okay, so that's not exactly true. I was actually born with too much cerebral spinal fluid² inside my skull³. But cerebral spinal fluid is just the doctors' fancy⁴ way of saying brain grease⁵. And
 5 brain grease works inside the lobes⁶ like car grease works inside an engine. It keeps things running smooth and fast. But weirdo me, I was born with too much grease inside my skull, and it got all thick and muddy and disgusting, and it only mucked up⁷ the works⁸. My thinking and breathing and living engine slowed down and
 10 flooded.

My brain was drowning in grease.

But that makes the whole thing sound weirdo and funny, like my brain was a giant French fry, so it seems more serious and poetic and accurate to say, "I was born with water on the brain."

15 Okay, so maybe that's not a very serious way to say it, either. Maybe the whole thing *is* weird and funny.

But jeez⁹, did my mother and father and big sister and grandma and cousins and aunts and uncles think it was funny when the doctors cut open my little skull and sucked out¹⁰ all that extra water
 20 with some tiny vacuum¹¹?

I was only six months old and I was supposed to croak¹² during the surgery¹³. And even if I somehow survived the mini-Hoover¹⁴, I

1 black eye: blaues Auge 2 cerebral brain fluid: colorless liquid that surrounds the brain
 3 skull: Schädel 4 fancy: pretentious 5 grease: Schmiere 6 lobe: part of the brain
 7 to muck up sth. (infml.): etw. vermässeln 8 the works: everything 9 jeez [dʒi:z]
 (infml.): word used to show surprise 10 to suck out: to remove 11 vacuum (cleaner):
 Staubsauger 12 to croak (sl.): to die 13 surgery: operation 14 Hoover: U.S. type of
 vacuum cleaner

was supposed to suffer serious brain damage during the procedure and live the rest of my life as a vegetable¹.

Well, I obviously survived the surgery. I wouldn't be writing this if I didn't, but I have all sorts of physical problems that are directly the result of my brain damage. 5

First of all, I ended up having forty-two teeth. The typical human has thirty-two, right? But I had forty-two.

Ten more than usual.

Ten more than normal.

Ten teeth past human. 10

My teeth got so crowded that I could barely close my mouth. I went to Indian Health Service to get some teeth pulled so I could eat normally, not like some slobbering² vulture³. But the Indian Health Service funded⁴ major dental work only once a year, so I had to have all ten extra teeth pulled *in one day*. 15

And what's more, our white dentist believed that Indians only felt half as much pain as white people did, so he only gave us half the Novocain⁵.

What a bastard⁶, huh?

Indian Health Service also funded eyeglass purchases⁷ only 20 once a year and offered one style: those ugly, thick, black plastic ones.

My brain damage left me nearsighted⁸ in one eye and farsighted⁹ in the other, so my ugly glasses were all lopsided¹⁰ because my eyes were so lopsided. 25

I get headaches because my eyes are, like, enemies, you know, like they used to be married to each other but now hate each other's guts.

And I started wearing glasses when I was three, so I ran around the rez¹¹ looking like a three-year-old Indian *grandpa*. 30

1 vegetable (here, derog.): sb. with mental problems 2 to slobber: sabbern 3 vulture: Geier 4 to fund: to pay for 5 Novocain: drug to numb the area around a tooth 6 bastard (derog.): unpleasant person 7 purchase: sth. that you buy 8 nearsighted: kurzsichtig 9 farsighted: weitsichtig 10 lopsided: unequal 11 rez (infml.): reservation, see pp. 216–219

And, oh, I was skinny. I'd turn sideways and *disappear*.

But my hands and feet were huge. My feet were a size eleven¹ in third grade! With my big feet and pencil body, I looked like a capital *L* walking down the road.

5 And my skull was enormous.
Epic².

My head was so big that little Indian skulls orbited around³ it. Some of the kids called me Orbit. And other kids just called me Globe. The bullies would pick me up, spin me in circles, put their
10 finger down on my skull, and say, "I want to go there."

So obviously, I looked goofy⁴ on the outside, but it was the inside stuff that was the worst.

First of all, I had seizures⁵. At least two a week. So I was damaging my brain on a regular basis. But the thing is, I was having those
15 seizures because I *already* had brain damage, so I was reopening wounds each time I seized.

Yep, whenever I had a seizure, I was *damaging my damage*.

I haven't had a seizure in seven years, but the doctors tell me that I am "susceptible to⁶ seizure activity."

20 *Susceptible to seizure activity*.

Doesn't that just roll off the tongue like poetry?

I also had a stutter and a lisp. Or maybe I should say I had a st-st-st-st-stutter and a lisssssssthtththp.

You wouldn't think there is anything life threatening about
25 speech impediments⁷, but let me tell you, there is nothing more dangerous than being a kid with a stutter and a lisp.

A five-year-old is cute when he lisps and stutters. Heck, most of the big-time kid actors stuttered and lisped their way to stardom.

And jeez, you're still fairly cute when you're a stuttering and
30 liping six-, seven-, and eight-year-old, but it's all over when you turn nine and ten.

1 size 11: U.S. shoe size equal to Euro size 44 2 epic (here): very big 3 to orbit around sth.: to circle around sth. 4 goofy: silly 5 seizure [ˈsiːzər]: Anfall 6 to be susceptible [səˈseptəbəl] to sth.: für etw. anfällig sein 7 speech impediment: Sprachfehler

After that, your stutter and lisp turn you into a retard¹.

And if you're fourteen years old, like me, and you're still stuttering and lisping, then you become the biggest retard in the world.

Everybody on the rez calls me a retard about twice a day. They call me retard when they are pantsing² me or stuffing my head in the toilet or just smacking me³ upside the head. 5

I'm not even writing down this story the way I actually talk, because I'd have to fill it with stutters and lisps, and then you'd be wondering why you're reading a story written by *such a retard*.

Do you know what happens to retards on the rez? 10

We get beat up.

At least once a month.

Yep, I belong to the Black-Eye-of-the-Month Club.

Sure I want to go outside. Every kid wants to go outside. But it's safer to stay at home. So I mostly hang out alone in my bedroom and read books and draw cartoons. 15

Here's one of me:



1 retard (derog.): stupid or mentally slow person 2 to pants sb.: to pull down sb.'s trousers in public 3 to smack sb.: to hit sb.

About the author

Sherman Alexie is a Native American writer and filmmaker whose work about the lives and struggles of American Indians has brought him international recognition.

Alexie was born on October 7, 1966, and grew up on the Spokane Indian Reservation with his four siblings. His father was from the Coeur d'Alene tribe and his mother from the Spokane tribe. Both of his parents were alcoholics, but his mother managed to quit drinking later in life. In his short story



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“Superman and Me,” Alexie summarizes his childhood as follows: “We were poor by most standards, but one of my parents usually managed to find some minimum-wage job or another, which made us middle-class by reservation standards. I had a brother and three sisters. We lived on a combination of irregular paychecks, hope, fear and government surplus food.”

Alexie was born with hydrocephalus, a life-threatening condition caused by too much fluid in the brain and had to be operated on when he was only six months old. The operation was risky and could have left him with mental disabilities, but he survived, and the surgery had no affect on his ability to learn. However, he suffered severe side-effects during his childhood.

Because he was so sickly as a child, Alexie became an avid reader, teaching himself how to read with the help of a Superman comic before moving on to all kinds of books, from car repair manuals to literature, which he got from his father’s extensive library. Alexie remembers: “[My father] bought his books by the pound at Dutch’s Pawn Shop, Goodwill, Salvation Army and Value Village [...]. Our

house was filled with books. They were stacked in crazy piles in the bathroom, bedrooms and living room.”

Alexie first went to the tribal school on the reservation but after the eighth grade he transferred to a high school in the small town of Reardan, Washington, twenty-two miles from the reservation. He was the only Native American student there and became class president, a basketball star, and later an honor student. As is quite easy to see, his young adult novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is based heavily on his own firsthand experiences and is semi-autobiographical.

After high school, Alexie earned a scholarship to Spokane’s Gonzaga University, which he attended for two years. It was during his time there that he started drinking heavily. He left Gonzaga University and enrolled in Washington State University. According to Alexie, a creative writing course at WSU inspired him to become a writer. He managed to quit drinking in 1992 when his first collection of poetry, *The Business of Fancysdancing: Stories and Poems*, was published.

Since then Alexie has published a number of other collections of poetry such as *Water Flowing Home* (1996) and *The Man Who Loves Salmon* (1998), collections of short stories such as *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993) and novels including *Reservation Blues* (1995) and *Indian Killer* (1996). His memoir *You Don’t Have to Say You Love Me* was released in 2017. In 1998, Alexie created his first film, *Smoke Signals*, with a production team and cast mostly made up of Indians.

Background information

Indian reservations

An Indian reservation is an area of land reserved for and managed by a Native American tribe. Reservations vary greatly in size, from *rancherías*¹ of less than one acre² to the huge Navajo Nation of more than 17 million acres. Today, there are around 300 reservations in the United States.

The Indian reservation system was created in 1851 when the U.S. Congress passed the Indian Appropriations Act, which provided money to be used for moving Indian tribes onto reservations. Some of the tribes agreed to move onto the reservations but many more were brutally forced to leave their native lands. The objective of the new reservation system was to reduce conflict between white settlers and Native Americans. With the Indian tribes now under strict government control, the white settlers could take over Indian land without any fear of attacks.

The U.S. government promised to care for the tribes in their new homelands and to supply them with food and other things they needed, but the Indians soon found out that the whites kept few of their promises. Shortly before his death, Red Cloud, one of the most important Lakota chiefs of the 19th century, summarized his experience in dealing with the U.S. government as follows: “They made us many promises, more than I can remember. But they never kept but one; they promised to take our land, and they took it.”³

► Scan the **QR code** on p. 223 and find out more about how Native Americans lost their land.

¹ *ranchería*: a small Indian settlement ² one acre = 4046,86 square meters

³ Coleman, *Voices of Wounded Knee*, 2002, p. 130