

# Books in a Box

# Reading Guide

Blaine
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Deming
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Ferndale
Island
Lynden
Maple Falls
Point Roberts
Sumas
wcls.org



# **Books in a Box Information**

We hope you will enjoy the convenience of having multiple copies of the same title to share—either with your official book group or with an unofficial friends-and-family group!

Some general information about the kits:

- Kits check out for six weeks.
- Kits are available to reserve, but we cannot guarantee their availability for specific dates.
- One person in the group is responsible for the kits full return.
- Return kits in person at any Whatcom County library

How do I find a list of all your kits?

- ♦ Go to www.wcls.org
- ◆ Click on "catalog"
- In the Subject Keyword Search type "book club kit"

This list includes kits owned by both Whatcom County and Bellingham Library Systems. Please note that the Bellingham kits must be picked up and returned to the Bellingham Library. Whatcom County kits can be reserved and sent to any location for pickup.

## **Suggested Discussion Questions**

- 1. Consider the adjectives, "absolutely true" and "part-time." What concepts appear to be emphasized by the images and the title? Does the cover appear to reference Junior's internal struggle, or a struggle between Junior and the white power structure, or both, or neither?
- 2. By drawing cartoons, Junior feels safe. He draws "because I want to talk to the world. And I want the world to pay attention to me." How do Junior's cartoons (for example, "Who my parents would have been if somebody had paid attention to their dreams" and "white/Indian") show his understanding of the ways that racism has deeply impacted his and his family's lives?
- 3. When Junior is in Reardan (the white town), he is "half Indian," and when he is in Wellpinit (his reservation), he is "half white." "It was like being Indian was my job," he says, "but it was only a part-time job. And it didn't pay well at all." At Reardan High, why does Junior pretend he has more money than he does, even though he knows "lies have short shelf lives"?
- 4. Junior describes his reservation as "located approximately one million miles north of Important and two billion miles west of Happy." Yet when he and Rowdy look down from almost the top of an immense pine, he says, "We could see our entire world. And our entire world, at that moment, was green and golden and perfect." What forces drive the dichotomy of Junior's perceptions of his world and allow him to see the land in apparently disparate ways?
- 5. Cultural outsiders who write young adult fiction tend to romanticize the impoverishment of Indians. Junior is having none of this: "It sucks to be poor, and it sucks to feel that you somehow deserve to be poor. You start believing that you're poor because you're stupid and ugly. And then you start believing that you're stupid and ugly because you're Indian. And because you're Indian you start believing that you're destined to be poor. It's an ugly circle and there's nothing you can do about it. Poverty doesn't give you strength or teach you lessons about perseverance. No, poverty only teaches you how to be poor." How does Junior's direct language address this stereotypical portrayal of Indians? What about his language draws the teen reader into the realities of his life?

- 6. Junior's parents, Rowdy's father, and others in their community are addicted to alcohol, and Junior's white "friend with potential," Penelope, has bulimia. "There are all kinds of addicts, I guess," he says. "We all have pain. And we all look for ways to make the pain go away." Compared to the characters in Jon Hassler's young adult novel, Jemmy (Atheneum, 1980), how does Junior's understanding of addiction transcend ethnicity and class?
- 7. Junior refers to his home reservation as "the rez," a familiar name for the place he was born, the place his friends and relatives for many generations back were born and are buried, and the land to which he is tied that, no matter how bad things get, will now and forever be called "home." What would Junior think of a cultural outsider, such as lan Frazier, who visits a reservation to gather material for a book and then calls his book "On the Rez"?
- 8. At Junior's grandmother's funeral, Junior's mother publicly gives a white billionaire his comeuppance to the delight of the whole community. "And then my mother started laughing," Junior says. "And that set us all off. It was the most glorious noise I'd ever heard. And I realized that, sure, Indians were drunk and sad and displaced and crazy and mean but, dang, we knew how to laugh. When it comes to death, we know that laughter and tears are pretty much the same thing. And so, laughing and crying, we said goodbye to my grandmother. And when we said goodbye to one grandmother, we said goodbye to all of them. Each funeral was a funeral for all of us. We lived and died together." How does this reflect a cultural insider's perspective and how does it disrupt stereotypes about stoic Indians?
- 9. "I'm fourteen years old and I've been to forty-two funerals," Junior says. "That's really the biggest difference between Indians and white people." In the community of Wellpinit, everyone is related, everyone is valued, everyone lives a hardscrabble life, everyone is at risk for early death, and the loss of one person is a loss to the community. Compare Wellpinit to Reardan, whose residents have greater access to social services, health care, and wealth, and people are socially distanced from each other. How does Junior use this blunt, matter-of-fact statement to describe this vast gulf between an impoverished Indian community and a middleclass white town just a few miles away?
- 10. 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 the kind of understanding that they will not get from young adult fiction whose writers do not have this kind of lived experience?
- 11. Cultural markers can be defined as the behaviors, speech patterns, ways of seeing the world, ethics, and principles that identify a person as belonging to a particular culture. When Rowdy and Junior play one-on-one at the end of the book—and they don't keep score—how is their friendship solidified by their deep knowing of who they are and what they come from?

Questions courtesy of the Official Sherman Alexie site www.fallsapart.com.

#### **Author Bio: Sherman Alexie**

Source: Contemporary Literary Criticism-Select, Gale, 2008.

Alexie, a Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian, is one of the most prominent Native American writers of his

generation. In his critically acclaimed poetry and fiction, he tells of the hardships and joys of contemporary life on an Indian reservation. Alexie's works are celebrated for their detailed descriptions of the psychology and environment of the reservation; the humor and wit that are displayed in the face of the intense poverty and the ravages of alcohol abuse that are part of reservation life; and their broad, universal messages of hope and perseverance.

Born in 1966 on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Wellpinit, Washington, Alexie was raised in an environment often characterized by depression, poverty, and alcohol abuse. Alexie's mother supported the family by selling her hand-sewn quilts and working at the Wellpinit Trading Post, while his father, an alcoholic, was often absent from the house. Alexie was an exemplary student in elementary school—he read every book in the Wellpinit school library—and in high school. In 1985 he was admitted to Gonzaga University in Spokane. There, under intense pressure to succeed,



he began abusing alcohol. Eventually he transferred to Washington State University and began writing poetry and short fiction. A selection of his work was published in Hanging Loose magazine in 1990. This early success provided Alexie with the will and incentive to quit drinking and to devote himself to building a career as a writer. In 1991 Alexie was awarded a Washington State Arts Commission poetry fellowship, and in 1992 he won a poetry fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. He continues to live on the Spokane Reservation in Wellpinit, Washington. Reflecting on his life experiences, Alexie asserted in The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven (1993): "[Indians] have a way of surviving. But it's almost like Indians can easily survive the big stuff. Mass murder, loss of language and land rights. It's the small things that hurt the most. The white waitress who wouldn't take an order, Tonto, the Washington Redskins."

#### Reviews

#### **Publishers Weekly**

\* The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian
Sherman Alexie. illus. by Ellen Forney. Little. Brown, \$16.99 (256p) ISBN 978-0-316-01368-0

Screenwriter, novelist and poet, Alexie bounds into YA with what might be a Native American equivalent of Angela's Ashes, a coming-of-age story so well-observed that its very rootedness in one specific culture is also what lends it universality, and so emotionally honest that the humor almost always proves painful. Presented as the diary of hydrocephalic 14-year-old cartoonist and Spokane Indian Arnold Spirit Jr., the novel revolves around Junior's desperate hope of escaping the reservation. As he says of his drawings, "I think the world is a series of broken dams and floods, and my cartoons are tiny little lifeboats." He transfers to a public school 22 miles away in a rich farm town where the only other Indian is the team mascot. Although his parents support his decision, everyone else on the rez sees him as a traitor, an apple ("red on the outside and white on the inside"), while at school most teachers and students project stereotypes onto him: "I was half Indian in one place and half white in the other." Readers begin to understand Junior's determination as, over the course of the school year, alcoholism and selfdestructive behaviors lead to the deaths of close relatives. Unlike protagonists in many YA novels who reclaim or retain ethnic ties in order to find their true selves, Junior must separate from his tribe in order to preserve his identity. Jazzy syntax and Forney's witty cartoons examining Indian versus White attire and behavior transmute despair into dark humor; Alexie's no-holds-barred jokes have the effect of throwing the seriousness of his themes into high relief. Ages 14-up. (Sept.)

"Sure to resonate and lift spirits of all ages for years to come." (USA Today)

"This is a gem of a book....may be [Sherman Alexie's] best work yet." (New York Times )

"Nimbly blends sharp with unapologetic emotion....fluid narration deftly mingles raw feelings with funny, sardonic insight." ((starred review) *Kirkus Reviews* )

"Deftly taps into the human desire to stand out while fitting in." (BookPage )

"[Alexie] has created an endearing teen protagonist in his own likeness and placed him in the here and now." (Minneapolis Star Tribune )

### Suggested Reading—Nonfiction

(see also www.whatcomreads.org)

Almanac of the Dead, by Leslie Marmon Silko.

Bead on an Anthill: A Lakota Childhood, by Delphine Red Shirt.

Custer Died For Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto, Vine Deloria, Jr.

Ledgerbook of Thomas Blue Eagle,. By Jewel Grutman, Adam Cvijanovic, Gaye Matthaei.

The Mud People: Testimonios, Chronicles and Remembrances, by Patrisia Gonzales.

How the Indians Lost Their Land by Stuart Banne.

Now that the Buffalo's Gone by Alvin M. Joseph.

Blood Struggle by Charles Wilkinson.

Out of Poverty By Paul Polak.

Just Generosity by Ronald J. Sider.

Ending Poverty in America by John Edwards.

# **Native American Fiction—Popular Authors**

Sherman Alexie Thomas Berger Roseanne Bittner Jane Bonander Robert J. Conley Kathleen Eagle Cassie Edwards Louise Erdrich Michael W. Gear Tony Hillerman Linda Hogan
Craig Lesley
N. Scott Momaday
Scott O'Dell
Louis Owens
Susan Power
Leslie Marmon Silko
James Alexander Thom
James Welch
Stephanie Grace Whitson