
KÖNIGS ERLÄUTERUNGEN SPEZIAL

Textanalyse und Interpretation zu

Sherman Alexie

THE ABSOLUTELY TRUE DIARY OF A PART-TIME INDIAN

Patrick Charles

Analyse | Interpretation in englischer Sprache

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Über den Autor dieser Erläuterung:

Patrick Charles wurde 1973 in Bournemouth, Südengland, geboren und studierte englische Literatur an der Universität von Newcastle. 1993 zog er nach Berlin, wo er eine Ausbildung zum Buchhändler machte und zehn Jahre lang als Buchhändler arbeitete. Seit 2004 ist er als freiberuflicher Autor von Schulbüchern und Lernhilfen und als Übersetzer im Kulturbereich tätig. Er lebt mit seiner Familie in Berlin.

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1. FOREWORD – AT A GLANCE

This study guide to Sherman Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is designed to provide an easy-to-use overview. Here is a quick rundown of the most important points.

Part 2 takes a brief look at Sherman Alexie and his career.

- ⇒ p. 9 → Sherman Alexie was born on **October 7 1966** with hydrocephalus in Spokane Reservation, Washington (USA).
- ⇒ p. 11 → In *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* Alexie’s main themes are **racial identity, life on the reservation** and **alcohol abuse**.

Part 3 offers analyses and interpretations of the novel.

The Absolutely True Diary ... – Origins and Sources

- ⇒ p. 22 The book was published in 2007. It was inspired by Sherman Alexie’s own life growing up in Wellpinit (Spokane Reservation).

Summaries

- ⇒ p. 24 The narrator is the 14-year old Arnold “Junior” Spirit, born in Wellpinit, on the reservation of the Spokane Indians. He was born with a serious medical condition. Due to his physical problems, he is often beaten up by other kids on the reservation, but is also protected by his best friend Rowdy. He spends a lot of time at home drawing. With the help of his teacher he wants to change his life by moving to another, better school in the town of Reardan – a school full of white kids. Junior is very lonely at Reardan, and he also has problems with life on the reservation. His friend Rowdy refuses to talk to him anymore and rejects him as a traitor. He becomes friends

with Roger, an athletic kid, Gordy, the cleverest boy in the school, and the pretty but troubled Penelope. Junior's sister Mary and his grandma die in accidents related to alcohol. Junior becomes part of the Reardan basketball team: the team loses against the Wellpinit team and Junior's best friend Rowdy. In the rematch Junior's team wins. Junior and Rowdy begin to mend their friendship with a brief and insulting e-mail exchange.

Structure

The Absolutely True Diary is a novel (fiction) claiming to be an autobiography (non-fiction) which is, in fact, deeply autobiographical. It is narrated in the first person and in a chronologically linear form: the narrator, Arnold "Junior" Spirit, is looking back on this period in his life and telling it to us, the readers. ⇨ p. 39

Characters

This novel has a very simple character system (organised according to their location), in that everything revolves around Junior, the first person narrator:

Arnold "Junior" Spirit

- narrator and 14-year old Indian ⇨ p. 53
- lives with his **family** in the "rez" Wellpinit ⇨ p. 55
- leaves the reservation for a new "white" school in Reardan

Rowdy

- Arnold's best friend in the reservation ⇨ p. 58
- plays basketball against Junior's Reardan team

⇒ p. 61 **Penelope, Gordy and Roger**
→ friends at the new school in Reardan

⇒ p. 61 **Coach and other people**

Themes

⇒ p. 65 The themes are often interconnected and none of them stands independently. The three thematic groups – **identity, positivity and life on a reservation** – each include several individual themes – identity, for example, covers bullying (defending one's identity), race and tribalism.

Style and Language

⇒ p. 104 The book is written in an **unusually chatty, loose and direct style**, with a healthy dose of vulgarity and slang. This chapter looks at some ways in which Sherman Alexie uses language to reinforce themes and messages.

⇒ p. 113 The *Diary* is filled with **illustrations**. The drawings in the book are often integral parts of the storytelling, serving much more than a decorative purpose.

Interpretation

⇒ p. 123 The book is interesting for a number of reasons and offers a number of different ways to approach studying it. This chapter looks at a few of them, from issues of genre (Young Adult fiction, autobiography) to literary context (multiculturalism and colonial literature).

2.1 Biography

2. SHERMAN ALEXIE: LIFE & WORKS

2.1 Biography

YEAR	PLACE	EVENT	AGE
1966	Wellpinit, Spokane Reservation, Washington (USA)	Sherman Alexie was born on October 7 with hydrocephalus. His father was from the Couer d'Alene tribe, and his mother was of mixed ancestry: Colville, Choctaw, Spokane and European-American. Alexie was one of six children.	
1966–1980	Spokane Reservation, Washington	Alexie grew up on the Spokane Reservation in Washington State. His father was an alcoholic and his mother worked multiple jobs to support the family. Alexie was an excellent student at school and became a passionate reader.	0–14
1980–1985	Reardan, Washington	He left school on the reservation to attend high school, where he became an outstanding pupil and a star basketball player.	14–19
1985	Gonzaga University, Spokane	He won a scholarship for Gonzaga University (medical science, then law), but he developed a drinking problem which led him to leave the university.	19
1987	Pullman	In 1987, he went on to study creative writing at Washington State University, where he met and was taught by the Chinese-American poet Alex Kuo (*1941), who became a great inspiration for the young Alexie.	21
1992	New York	Publication of his first collection of short stories and poems, <i>The Business of Fancydancing</i> . National Endowment for the Arts Poetry Fellowship.	26



Sherman Alexie
(* 1966)
© picture alliance/
AP Photo

2.2 Contemporary Background

2.2 Contemporary Background

Sherman Alexie describes his fiction as “reservation realism” – he is describing, as realistically as possible, the modern-day lives of Native Americans on the reservations in the USA. His subject matter – modern Indian life – is very unlike the simplistic clichés most of us are used to seeing in fiction or films. He is not a journalist, but the large part autobiography plays in his writing means that his work as a writer is very much concerned with the contemporary state of life for Native Americans, and very specifically with the Spokane reservation in the Pacific Northwest of the USA.

SUMMARY

Indian versus Native American

Sherman Alexie has made it clear in interviews that he prefers the term “Indian” to “Native American”. This is a little off-putting for many people these days. The term Indian is inaccurate – it is based on a mistake (European explorers having thought that they had found the east coast of India when they landed in America). Increasingly in recent years, the term has been seen as racist. Native Americans (Canadians use the term First Nations) is a more politically correct and technically accurate term, and is nowadays the most commonly used and widely accepted way to refer to the indigenous peoples of the Americas.

Alexie, however, dislikes what he sees as liberal guilt and uses the word Indian to describe himself and his culture:

2.2 Contemporary Background

Alexie refers to himself as an Indian and says, only half in jest, that he only uses the term native American, which he considers a guilty liberal expression, in “mixed company”.¹

Both terms are used in this book. Because Alexie uses the term Indian throughout *The Absolutely True Diary*, it is used most often here in the text.

Life on the reservations

Alexie’s anger at
the world

Sherman Alexie has been accused of being too angry and negative – *Time* magazine famously described him as being “septic with unappeasable anger”² – and this **anger comes from his environment** and his experiences growing up Indian in a racist society. His anger at the world, and that of most Native Americans, comes largely from experience of life on Indian reservations.

A reservation is the legal designation for an area of land managed by a Native American tribe under the US Bureau of Indian Affairs, rather than the US federal government. Tribal sovereignty covers many aspects of life, including land use, planning and zoning and economic development, including tourism and casinos, which have proliferated on tribal lands.

Casinos and gambling in general are outlawed in many American states, with the major exceptions being Nevada on the West Coast (with Las Vegas, the most famous gambling city in the world), and New Jersey on the East Coast (where

1 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/jan/04/artsfeatures.fiction>

2 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/jan/04/artsfeatures.fiction>

2.3 Notes on Other Important Works

2.3 Notes on Other Important Works

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian (2007) was Alexie's first novel for a Young Adult audience, but he had achieved success with others before its publication.

SUMMARY

Novels

NOVEL	PUBLICATION YEAR
<i>Reservation Blues</i>	1995
<i>Indian Killer</i>	1996
<i>The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian</i>	2007
<i>Flight</i>	2007

Alexie's first novel ***Reservation Blues*** is a story about an all-Indian blues rock band. It included characters from his debut collection of short stories, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*.

Novels: Small part of Alexie's bibliography

Indian Killer: A murder-mystery about a serial killer in Seattle who scalps white male victims, Alexie himself describes this as a "feel-good novel about interracial murder"⁶.

Short story collections

Alexie came to the attention of a wider public with his poems and short stories – the novels make up a much smaller part of his literary work. His most famous collection remains his debut, *The Lone*

Wider attention

⁶ <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/01/18/magazine/an-indian-without-reservations.html>

3. ANALYSES AND INTERPRETATIONS

3.1 Origins and Sources

SUMMARY

The Absolutely True Diary is both a novel and an autobiography. It was inspired by Sherman Alexie's own life and uses many real aspects of his biography. It is very much concerned with the real lives of normal Native Americans living on reservations in modern-day America, and like all of Alexie's work, it deals with uncomfortable, painful and confrontational themes like poverty, racism and alcohol abuse.

The book was published in 2007. Alexie had never before written a book for a Young Adult audience, and it was also his first to use a first-person perspective.

Autobiography
to fiction

He had begun writing a **memoir of his family**, and the part of his own life which is dealt with in *The Absolutely True Diary* – the year he spent at an all-white high school in Reardan – formed a large section of this memoir. But, he says in an interview, “it didn't fit whatsoever, thematically”⁷. He had about 450 manuscript pages which told a story, but which he couldn't use in the project he wanted to concentrate on. Coincidentally, he received a telephone call from an editor for Young Adult fiction asking him if he would be interested in **writing a YA book**. He had done most of the work already: the major change which needed to be made was only to

7 <http://www.slj.com/2007/08/interviews/under-cover/song-of-myself-interview-with-sherman-alexie-under-cover/>

3.2 Summaries

3.2 Summaries

SUMMARY

What follows in this section are brief chapter-by-chapter summaries of the novel’s 30 chapters. Most of the chapters are accompanied by illustrations, which are listed and briefly described in a later chapter in this study guide. The chapters in *The Absolutely True Diary* are titled, not numbered.

The Black-Eye-of-the-Month Club (p. 11)

Introduction

The narrator introduces himself (but not yet with his name, which is Arnold “Junior” Spirit). He is 14 years old and was born in Wellpinit, on the Native American reservation (“rez”) of the Spokane Indians.

He was born with a serious medical condition commonly known as “water on the brain” (medical term: hydrocephalus), ten teeth too many, terrible eyesight, seizures, a stutter and a lisp.

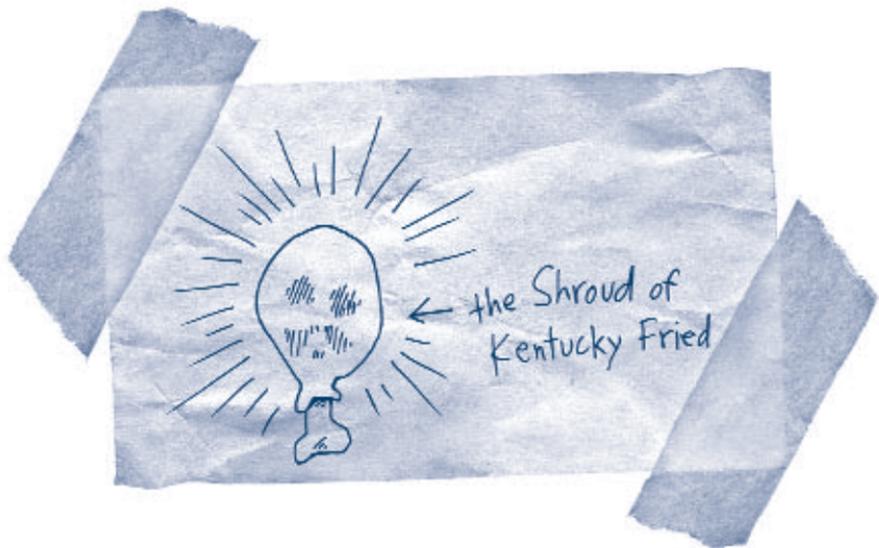
Due to his physical problems, he is often beaten up by other kids on the reservation (which is what the chapter title refers to). He spends a lot of time at home drawing. He is a gifted cartoonist: he sees drawing as a universal language.

Why Chicken Means So Much to Me (p. 17)

Being poor

The narrator talks about being poor, and about how poverty leads to hunger, and about what poverty has done to his parents and their own dreams. The family’s favourite meal, when they can afford it, is Kentucky Fried Chicken. But hunger is not the worst thing about poverty: his dog Oscar recently became ill and the family couldn’t afford the medical bills. His dad shoots the dog to put it out of its misery because that is cheaper than taking him to the vet. This

3.2 Summaries



p. 18
© Ellen Forney

chapter also includes a picture of how Junior imagines his parents would be if they had been able to follow their dreams.

Revenge Is My Middle Name (p. 25)

In this chapter we get to know Rowdy, Junior's best friend, and learn (especially at the end of the chapter) about how important they are to one another. Rowdy is a tough and aggressive kid. His father is a violent alcoholic who beats his wife and son.

Rowdy, Junior's best friend

Rowdy persuades Junior to go to the powwow with him, where Junior gets beaten up by the Andruss Brothers (three 30-year old men). Junior and Rowdy take revenge by shaving off the Andruss' eyebrows and cutting their braids while they're asleep.

3.3 Structure

3.3 Structure

The Absolutely True Diary is a novel (fiction) claiming to be an autobiography (non-fiction) which is, in fact, deeply autobiographical. It is narrated in the first person and in a chronologically linear form (meaning that it follows events in the order in which they happened) from a point in time after the events described: that is, the narrator, Arnold “Junior” Spirit, is looking back on this period in his life and telling it to us, the readers.

SUMMARY

This simple and direct structure is reflected in the chatty and informal tone and use of language, very effectively organising the content in small units which have **differing functions**. The novel is divided into **30 chapters**, generally very short, not numbered or otherwise organised, but each with its own title. The titles are sometimes references to literature, music or film and often don’t provide any obvious clue as to the content of the chapter. This structure illustrates the lively, witty and multi-layered personality and intellect of the narrator, Arnold “Junior” Spirit.

Simple structure with small units

The chapters also do different things. Some move the plot along by describing events and interactions with other characters: others are focussed entirely on themes, and don’t move the plot along at all, instead providing greater insight into the narrator’s feelings and growth; and others contain anecdotes or memories which give us a deeper background for our **understanding of the narrator**, his life and his view of the world. One even contains nothing but a cartoon drawing of his end of year report card. Those in which the most “action” occurs are also not always the most significant

3.4 Characters

3.4 Characters

The characters can be very easily organised according to their location (Wellpinit, Reardan and the couple of extras). This novel has a very simple character system, in that everything revolves around Junior, the first person narrator.

Arnold “Junior” Spirit

- narrator and 14-year old Indian
- lives with his family in the “rez” (in the town of Wellpinit)
- leaves the reservation for a new “white” school in Reardan

Rowdy

- Arnold’s best friend in the reservation
- plays basketball against Junior’s Reardan team

Penelope, Gordy and Roger

- friends at the new school in Reardan

Other people: Arnold’s family (father, mother, Mary and grandmother), Eugene (friend of father), Bobby, Gerald (kills Junior’s grandmother), the Andruss Brothers John, Jim and Joe (bully Junior) and Arnold’s teachers in Wellpinit and Reardan.

Arnold “Junior” Spirit

Born on November 5 1992 in Wellpinit on the Spokane Indian reservation, Junior is the **narrator and central figure** of the novel. The

SUMMARY

3.4 Characters

p. 22
© Ellen Forney

Who **MY PARENTS** WOULD HAVE BEEN
IF SOMEBODY HAD PAID ATTENTION
TO THEIR DREAMS:



3.5 Themes

3.5 Themes

Given the title of the book, two themes should be immediately apparent: race (“part-time Indian”) and identity (“diary” – and “part-time Indian”). These major themes are approached from different angles, and each includes a number of subsidiary themes which are also extremely important in the book. The centre of the book is Junior’s growth during the year he spends at high school in Reardan, and the themes all reflect this central focus by concentrating on the circumstances of his life before, during and at the end of this year, as well as his growing ability to process and adapt to these circumstances.

SUMMARY

Race and **identity**, the major themes are approached from different angles – for example, the theme of race is not limited to the most obvious kinds of white American racism directed at Native Americans, but includes Indian-on-Indian racism, the complex issues of a white-idolising preferential racism, and the objectifying “well-intentioned” racism of the cultural tourist. And the theme of identity concerns not just questions like ‘Who am I?’, but also relationships between the individual and the community, and how identity can be constructed in the face of adversity.

“Who am I?”

While these two themes are dominant, the book also explores **several other important and relevant themes**, none of which are independent of the others: as is often the case with a text, one passage can contain material of relevance to multiple themes. Without the theme of **poverty**, the theme of **hope** would be less relevant:

3.5 Themes

p. 127
© Ellen Forney

3.6 Style and Language

3.6 Style and Language

SUMMARY

The *Diary* is written in a conversational, informal style. The tone is friendly, witty and honest. The narrator, Arnold “Junior” Spirit, is telling his story as if he were talking directly to the reader. The style and use of language is as candid and unflinching as the content.

The Absolutely True Diary was not Sherman Alexie’s first novel, but it was his **first for a young audience**. He was already an experienced writer who had worked in various formats – short fiction, novels, screenplays and poetry. In his work he tends to use a style which is direct and immediate, without being simplistic. His poetry is also written in a voice which is more like the way people talk, without the use of unusual or unnecessarily complex language.

The *Diary* is written in a conversational, informal style. The tone is friendly, witty and honest. The narrator, Arnold “Junior” Spirit, is telling his story as if he were talking directly to the reader. The style and use of language is as **candid** and unflinching as the content.

Candour (*noun*)

Candour is the quality of saying what you think, openly and honestly (*adjective*: candid). More than simply being truthful and not telling lies, and different from just being blunt and insensitive, candour is a personality trait which requires a degree of self-confidence and self-knowledge.

Conversational,
informal style

3.7 Approaches to Interpretation

book an authority and a significance, from the physical problems Junior suffers (Alexie was also born with the same physical and medical conditions he describes at the beginning of the book) to the rampant alcoholism on the reservation.

Many writers draw on elements from their own lives and observations in their work. But this book is a very unusual example of a mixture of two genres – autobiography and fiction – taken to an extreme. Alexie’s work as a writer, in his stories, novels, films and poetry, is focussed exclusively on “reservation realism”. He wants to challenge the traditional kitsch or racist presentation of Native Americans which have dominated in American culture: either the noble warriors of *Dances With Wolves* or the simplistic racial stereotypes of sports teams’ “Redskin” mascots. He challenges these objectifying representations with a more complex presentation of the modern, real issues facing Indian communities.

The book can be looked at and studied as fiction, which it is, but it also allows for deeper examination of the elastic boundaries of genres, and it demands that the reader look past the closed world of fiction to understand more about the realities it depicts.

Young Adult fiction

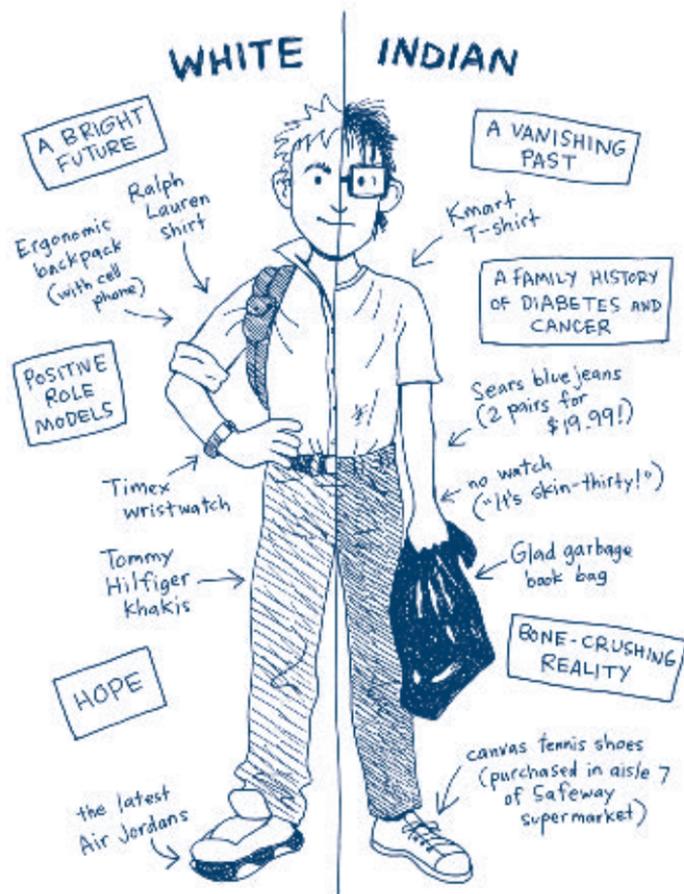
Young Adult fiction (YA) is a term which was created to allow greater differentiation than just “books for grownups” and “children’s books”. It generally refers to books aimed at readers aged 12 to 18. YA fiction is not tied to any specific genre – it can cover love stories, comedies, science fiction, even crime thrillers and horror.

What differentiates it is that it talks about issues relevant to the age group – what we can generally group together as “**growing pains**” – and that it does this in a way which doesn’t dismiss, belittle, ridicule or invalidate these issues related to growing up. Because

Not tied to any
specific genre

3.7 Approaches to Interpretation

p. 67
© Ellen Forney



4. CRITICAL RECEPTION

The *Absolutely True Diary* was successful almost immediately and it also provoked a lot of controversy across the USA, as libraries and parents and concerned citizens reacted very badly to the elements of sexuality and violence in what was obviously a “children’s book”.

SUMMARY

The book was published in 2007, and it was Sherman Alexie’s first book specifically for a “Young Adult” audience (a marketing term used in publishing, which basically means teenagers). Although it is a novel, it has very strong autobiographical elements, which are strengthened by the novel being written from the first person perspective.

This was not something Alexie felt comfortable with. In an interview he gave to the National Book Organization¹⁴, he talks about how his original version of the novel was written from a third person perspective. The autobiographical nature of the character of Junior and the story itself made him afraid, because **he was afraid of his own history**. Overcoming this fear was a big challenge for the author, but he felt that it was necessary to re-approach the book, as a third person perspective created too much emotional distance.

The *Absolutely True Diary* was successful almost immediately, both commercially and critically, and it also provoked a lot of controversy across the USA, as libraries and parents and concerned citizens reacted very badly to the elements of sexuality and vio-

Controversy
across the USA

¹⁴ http://www.nationalbook.org/nba2007_ypl_alexie_interv.html

5. MATERIALS

Alcoholism

There is a lot of research being conducted on Native American reservations and their social and health problems. Most of it is academic – conducted by scientists for an audience of scientists – and only occasionally makes mainstream news. One widespread point on which everyone agrees, however, is that alcohol and drug abuse is much higher amongst Native American youth on reservations than it is in other demographic groups in the USA. The reasons for this terrible situation are controversial and complex, but the facts speak for themselves.

“Alcoholism mortality rates are 514 percent higher than the general population.”²²

“Native Americans may be more vulnerable to the risks associated with drinking because of other issues, including a lack of access to health care, safe housing and clean water.”²³

American Indian/Native Americans report more binge drinking episodes per month and higher alcohol consumption per episode than other groups.²⁴

Trauma hit Philip Archambault, member of the Hunkpapa Lakota Sioux, early and often. His mother died three weeks after his birth. After seven years in an orphanage, he was taken in by an abusive, alcoholic couple on the Standing Rock Sioux reservation that spans North and South Dakota.

“They gave me my first glass of beer when I was about seven or eight.”

By age 12, he had a drinking problem.²⁵

22 <https://assets.aspeninstitute.org/content/uploads/files/content/images/Fast%20Facts.pdf>

23 https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2016/02/12/your-assumptions-about-native-americans-and-alcohol-are-wrong/?utm_term=.c76c3063a795

24 <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/pdf/other/su6001.pdf>

25 <https://www.centerforhealthjournalism.org/fellowships/projects/native-americans-strive-health-against-alcohol-chaos-and-trauma>

Task 3**

Write a characterisation of one of the characters who has an influence on Junior's life, describing how they affect him and whether you think this influence is positive or negative.

Model answer:

The basketball coach

The basketball coach at the high school in Reardan – who is only ever called Coach – is a very important figure in Junior's life and growth.

He is introduced in the chapter Reindeer Games (p. 142). There is also a cartoon of him (p. 143) which tells us a lot about him – he is a no-nonsense sports guy, he's not vain, and he's really small. Nobody questions his authority, but he's not a bully or mean like many of the other teachers we see in the book. He makes it clear to his students: "You play with dignity and respect and I'll treat you with dignity and respect" (p. 144.17–18).

Coach remembers having seen Junior playing for Wellpinit, and remembers that he was a good shooter. He sees that Junior is tough – not huge and strong like Roger, but he has heart and determination and skill. He respects Junior's perseverance and talent and selects him to play on the team.

The support and trust Coach has for Junior is a big factor in his growing self-confidence and strength as an individual. Coach understands Junior and encourages him to use his fear, pain and anger to make him play better (see p. 151.11–14). After Junior is injured during the first basketball game, Coach visits him in hospital and tells him how impressed he is by Junior's commitment to being excellent (p. 155).

Coach is a very important and positive figure in Junior's life because he sees the strength and ambition within the boy, and provides him with encouragement and support. He doesn't treat Junior badly, like so many of the other teachers do, or give him a "victim bonus" because he's poor and comes from the reservation. Instead, he sees him as an individual, recognises his good qualities, and does all he can to encourage and develop these good qualities.

Important and positive figure

Task 4**

What is the significance of the word "nomad", and why do you think Rowdy uses it to describe Junior?

Model answer:

At the end of the book, Rowdy and Junior reconcile and become friends again. It has been very hard for Rowdy to accept that Junior has "left" him by leaving the reservation to go to school at Reardan. Rowdy understands that this means that Junior's future lies beyond the reservation. And Rowdy also knows that he will never be able to leave the reservation. When Junior asks Rowdy to come to Reardan with him, Rowdy tells him he is nomadic (p. 232).

Rowdy explains what he means: traditionally, the Indian tribes were nomadic. They moved around, following the seasons and their livestock, looking for food and water. They kept moving to stay alive. Rowdy says that no one on the reservation is like this anymore: none of them are nomads. They sit still and die slowly in poverty and despair. Only Junior has managed to get away, has begun to move to stay alive – to live like a nomad, to "keep moving all over the world in search of food and water and grazing land" (p. 232.29–31).

Lives like the traditional tribes

The food and water he refers to there are now symbolic – he means that Junior is moving to find the things which are important